

# Sex/Text: Internet Sex Chatting and “Vernacular Masculinity” in Hong Kong

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**Abstract.** This work-in-progress examines the highly popular practice of internet-based ‘sex chatting’ and through it, attempts to theorize the rapidly changing forms, norms, and values of sex as a result of the digital revolution. Internet-based ‘sex chat’ refers to the casual exchange of vernacular views about sexual beliefs, rumours and behavior. Sociological, popular culture, and gender studies have suggested that internet-based social chatting about sex is an informal social practice pursued mainly by men, and as such, the chat room or forum is considered a space for the ongoing construction of particular modes of masculinity. This study is grounded in a detailed empirical study of three highly popular internet chat sites in Hong Kong, a city known to have a vibrant culture of internet forum chatting, and hopes to reframe our theoretical and political understanding of sexual values shaped by a profoundly quotidian source of meaning-making.

**Keywords:** Internet chatting, Sexuality, Masculinity, Creativity, Hong Kong

## 1. Introduction

The overall aim of this work-in-progress is to theorize the conception of contemporary sexual values through an empirical ethnographic analysis of internet social chatting made by social actors who engage in ‘sex chat’. Internet-based ‘sex chat’ refers to the casual exchange of vernacular views about sexual beliefs, rumours and behavior, conducted either synchronously or asynchronously, in a monitored or unmonitored environment set by the webmaster. The chatting can arise from any initiation made by the chatters themselves, or it can be driven by social controversies and moral panics about sex. The chatting often involves written text and visual icons that are generated by the users, often forming its own universe of linguistic and visual slangs, metaphors, tones and registers. Sociological literature suggests that social chatting about sex is an informal social practice – on the internet or not – pursued mainly by men (if on the internet, at least self-identified as such). Critical popular culture studies regards this lack of formality as socially significant, because it affords the particular practice of ‘sex chat’ in the first place, while actually constituting the very character of the content of the chatting, as well as that of the chatters. Meanwhile, gender studies regards the ‘maleness’ of sex chatting as something originating from a general cultural permissiveness that often positions men to be more outspoken than women in the public pursuit of explicit sexual conversation. At any rate, the chat room or forum where sex chatting takes place is a predominantly male space. To be more precise, it is a space for the ongoing construction of particular modes of masculinity.

Little is known about the sexual values that mediate ‘sex chat’, nor the nature of masculinity constructed through the chatting practice, the particularities of the chat space, and the broader social milieu out of which the sex chat discourse emerges. A theorization of the conception of sexual values through investigating internet sex chatting is necessary as a response to rapidly changing forms, norms, and values of sex as a result of the digital revolution. Yet the digitalization of virtually all walks of life, especially in human communication, is itself a result of the changing contour of the consumer society that emphasizes creative interaction, social efficiency, instant gratification, and even the ideals of the ‘democratization’ of everyday life. At the same time, this digital life, as well as the consumerist ideology that underlines it, have not gone unnoticed by the regulators of culture. The intense social and legal scrutiny of the diabolical space where sex and the internet mix, is by now commonplace.

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This project, which is in progress (background review as well as some empirical work), grounds the theoretical examination of contemporary sexual values in the electronic age in a detailed empirical study of three highly popular internet chat sites in Hong Kong: the *Hong Kong Discussion Forum* (香港討論區), the *Hong Kong Golden Forum* (香港高登討論區) and *3boys2girls.com* (3男2女). The first two sites are well-known to be visited mainly by adults, while the last one mostly by teenagers and youth. All three chat sites were ranked as top sites in Hong Kong by Alexa (2009).

The study examines the following three main questions:

- What are the main recurring themes in the ‘sex chatting’ conducted within the three internet chat sites over a period of six consecutive months?
- What are the specificities of the ‘language’ used by the chatters, including written and visual slangs, metaphors, tones, and registers, that seek to reconstitute the meaning of ‘sex’ (e.g. terminologies, behavior, relations of sex) as a function of the chatting (as opposed to the normative conceptions of sex in society)?
- How do the themes and language of ‘sex chat’ contribute to the construction of a ‘vernacular masculine culture’ specific to Hong Kong? Vernacular masculinity is defined in this project as a casual ‘lad culture’ characterized by a continuing curiosity toward all things bodily and sexual, a non-contemplative, even unrefined sensibility, and a ‘social cool’ built not on class distinctions or educational attainment, but on street knowledge and popular taste. Like a colloquial language, this masculinity speaks the idiom of the curious, the obscene and even the vulgar.

This study adopts ‘netnographic methods’ for a critical qualitative study of sex chatting. While there exists a huge body of research on the internet and CMC, only some of this work is qualitative research, and of this, an even smaller portion is ethnographic research (Garcia et al, 2009). Traditional ethnographic studies are firmly situated in the ‘offline’ social world. Yet drawing on the tools adopted by cultural studies in conducting ethnography, with a commitment ‘to be truer to lived realities of people’ (Saukko, 2003, 56; see also Gray, 2003), netnography is, simply, a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets, 2002; Langer & Beckman, 2005). In our study, six university male research helpers have been employed and trained to perform participant observation in three internet chat sites mentioned above (two researcher helpers for each selected chat sites). The period of observation and participating in the chatting has begun in August 2011, and will last for 6 months. The average amount of time for engaging with the chat sites will be about 10 hours per week.

## **2. A Review of Relevant Scholarship**

In what follows, I offer a preliminary review of the contour of relevant scholarship, which will help ground this study. In the final paper to be written for this study, there will be further elaboration of the literature review.

### **2.1 Internet Studies meet Sexuality Studies**

Needless to say, the intersection of sex and the internet has been of great interest to academic researchers, let alone policy and legal analysts. On the one hand, positivistic and causality-oriented researchers have focused on the potential harmful effects of the sex/internet dyad. Terms like ‘cyberaddiction’ (Orleans, 1997), ‘deviant sex-on-the-net’ (Comish & Nerenberg, 1997), ‘online predators’ (Wolak et al, 2008), and ‘cyber-pedophilia’ (Taylor & Quayle, 2003) frame the debate of the ‘dark side’ of the internet. But on the other hand, liberal and postmodern writers see creative freedom, the autonomy of voice, and identity struggle and revitalization as the liberating potentials offered through the conjunction of sex with the internet. ‘Sex-positive’ researchers draw the linkage between the ‘eroticization of everyday life’ and the democratization of (gender and sexual) culture, resulting in a new ‘sexual citizenship’ (e.g. Berlant, 2008; Gillis, 2004; Lumby, 1997; McNair, 2002; Warner, 1999, 2002). Sociologist Ken Plummer (2003) coins the term ‘intimate citizenship’ to emphasize the pluralistic and participatory character of sexual lives in late modern times. More broadly, David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (2003) designate the term

'post-subcultural studies' to refer to popular oppositional practices, including those of internet subcultural practices.

## **2.2 Language and Culture: Research on Internet Chat**

An important aspect of research on the language practices of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is in the area of speech-writing comparison (Merchant, 2001). CMC, which includes instant messaging like ICQ and MSN messenger, online chatrooms and forums, arises in one extreme as the ephemeral and synchronous form of speech involving face-to-face interaction, and in the other as the permanent and asynchronous form of linguistic expression. These tendencies carry different patterns, rules and registers. Fung & Carter (2007) show a conceptual representation of CMC language by a graphical representation in terms of the acoustic-graphical medium and the interactive-edited continuum. They suggest that online chats lie along the interactive-edited continuum, where the chatting take place synchronously with one other or multiple participants, but less synchronously than spoken discourse in that every message has to be composed by typing before it could be sent or posted, and the sequencing of the messaging is governed by hardware regulations and constraints (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003). IRC (Internet Relay Chat) is like a transcription of spoken communication and a hybrid of the speech and written mediums.

Another feature of IRC is its visual nature, so much so that Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2003) in their study of teenager's online discourse describe it as 'inherently visual' (714). The usage and combination of written and iconic languages, attachments of pictures, photographs and video clips, or URL linkages to other websites or sources, which would also be visual, all trespass conventional language practices. With the use of visual cues, the combination of written and spoken practices, together with many other online features such as anonymity and cross-geographical participation, online chat has become a new communicative environment where participants adapt and create corresponsive and creative registers which would bring upon cultural innovation, especially among youth who tend to be the dominant participants of online chatrooms.

Closer to the cultural studies approach to conceptualizing the online chat discourse is the work done by sociolinguists, who examine linguistic practices as something embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts. Subrahmanyam et al (2006), for instance, explore identity presentation and sexual exploration in online teen chatrooms, and found that the teens' self-sexualization (through sexual themes and the use of obscene language) was shaped by the specificities of the degree of monitoring in the chat environment. Krolokke (2003) studies gender performance in IRC language, arguing that the loose and fragmented nature of communication in IRC appeals to its users and invites participants to engage in interesting language play while simultaneously perpetuating binary gender constructions. In the same vein that emphasizes users' agency, Miner (2000) reviews Mark Caldwell's work on 'rudeness' to point out that online chatters, while mostly attempting to be polite, do employ what is known as 'flaming' to protect themselves when agitated by other participants ('flaming' is when one person attacks another with insulting and obscene language). Further, McArthur (2009) examines subcultural discourse style performed by 'geeks' who affiliate in self-assigned chatrooms to demonstrate an expansive repertoire of subcultural reconceptualization of the internet world. These studies point to the necessity to read chatroom language as socially molded and embodied, therefore linking the online and offline social milieux in the process of meaning-making.

## **2.3 Feminist Studies of the Internet**

There is no shortage of feminist theorizing as well as empirical work on how the internet culture reshapes gendered lives and politics. Here, three aspects of feminist internet research are noteworthy. First, the emergence of the internet in the 1990s drew a remnant of feminist debate inherited from the ideological divide of the 1970s and 1980s over the social control of women. In other words, the early response to cyberculture rehashed much of the debate between 'anti-porn' and 'pro-sex' feminists. Signs of this rehashing can be found in the continuing focus on the harmful effects of pornography, harassment, pedophilia, and other bodily-objectifying practices (e.g. Bowring, 2005; Jenkins, 2001; Russell, 1993). Second, from the late 1990s to the present, feminist scholarship in communication and cultural studies has embarked on ever more complex inquiries on how the internet revolution has profoundly changed the construction of embodiment, eroticism, identity performativity, and cyberactivism for girls and women. Here, researchers chart a political framework

that tends to celebrate diversity and difference on the internet as a precondition for (Third Wave) female empowerment (e.g. Blair et al, 2009; Chandler, 2002; Hawthorne & Klein, 1999). Karen Ross's (2010) new book, *Gendered Media: Women, Men, and Identity Politics*, contains a critical review of feminist internet research to date. Third, feminist research of the internet has expanded to include the problem of racial and ethnic difference (e.g. Gajjala, 2003; Lee & Wong, 2003; Springer, 1993) and 'transnational' feminist intervention (e.g. Desai, 2009; Hunt, 2003).

## 2.4 Cyber-masculinity

Central to our study is the investigation of 'vernacular masculinity' as something unique to sex chat culture on the internet. Since R. W. Connell's (2005) theory of 'hegemonic masculinity' which has been extremely influential in the field of gender studies for more than a decade, research on masculinity seems to have reached a point of saturation. More and more work have shifted the focus to uncover diverse forms of *counter-hegemonic* masculinity, without abandoning the power relations still inhered in the male-dominated social world (Beasley, 2008; Demetriou, 2001; Moller, 2007; Sheff, 2006).

Let us briefly review the range of studies on masculinity in cyberspace. Sociological literature indicates that the internet in general and online chat rooms and discussion groups in particular are in many ways male-dominated. Lori Kendall's (2002) calls the online forum she studies a 'virtual pub', ostensibly a space of leisure and revelry; its participants are mostly male computer professionals and students who fit their mudding in between periods of studying or debugging. Cultural research, however, adds that this maleness, while dominant, is often subjected to playful experimentation, especially by *both* teenage boys and girls (e.g. Josselson, 1994; Marcia, 1993; Valkenburg et al, 2005). Still many researchers remind us that despite the potentiality for reappropriating gender and sexuality on the internet, the prevailing hegemonic gender discourse of normative masculinity and femininity tends to still be heavily embedded within the online world (e.g. Marino, 2006). Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008) confirms 'gendered and (hetero)sexist conduct in CM seems to reproduce offline behaviours such as male interactional domination, sexual harassment, and even virtual rape (253) (see also Cherny, 1994; Clerc, 1996; Herring, 1994, 2000; Soukup, 1999). Others suggest that teenage boys' construction and defense of their hegemonic masculinity centered on homophobia, in which 'fag talk and fag imitations serve as a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other through joking relationships' (Pascoe, 2005, 330).

Other important studies of cyber-masculinity include: sociological studies of masculinity among men who pay for sex in cyberspace (e.g. Earle & Sharp, 2007); of the self-conscious construction of masculinity found in internet personal ads (Aoun, 2008); and of the performance of masculinity online as avatars that often diverge from the conventional muscular physique (e.g. Christensen, 2002). Moreover, a significant body of work has focused on the construction of gay masculinity in virtual spaces.

There has been no ethnographic research of masculinity in Hong Kong. The handful of existing work that looks at the construction of Chinese masculinity appears in cinema studies (e.g. Enns, 2000; Lo, 1996; Shu, 2003) and media consumption studies (e.g. Lin & Tong, 2007; Young & Moon, 2005). Our study will be the first of its kind to take an in-depth look at the specific forms of local masculinity articulated through a popular and seemingly enduring pastime.

## 3. Conclusion

Cultural studies has long been attentive to the complex interpenetrations of agency, power, and the social imaginary. The cultural study of sex in cyberspace is important as a way of unpacking what William Simon (1996) calls 'a crisis of paradigms' whereby 'despite sexual overload, there is considerable uncertainty about what we mean by sex or sexuality' (Attwood, 2006, 79). 'Sex chat' offers a powerful site of investigation of a series of cultural contradictions that seem to reign in the cyberworld: ideas and speech that are communicated publicly among strangers, yet experienced as something intimately related to our bodies and private sexual subjectivity; an act of presentation and representation that is produced as quickly as it is consumed; a way of constructing and deconstructing identity in the flowing time-space of the internet; an encounter that is afforded by the conjoinment of bodily and technological imaginations, yet flesh, speech, and technology seem autonomous from one another. These are the conditions for the creation of a strange but fascinating gender

performance, especially the performance of ‘vernacular masculinity’. Thus, reading cyber-speech, gender, and ‘diverse eroticisms’ (Attwood, 2006) as inter-implicated entities is a complex interpretive task. This study attempts to open up such a model of analysis through grounded internet-based ethnography of highly popular chat sites, where a rarely studied form of masculinity may be emerging in Hong Kong.

Once again, the aim of this study is thus to reframe our theoretical and political understanding of sexual values shaped by a profoundly quotidian source of meaning-making. The practice of ‘sex chat’ among (self-identified) adult men and teenage boys, it is suggested here, offers a window into Hong Kong’s changing gender culture. The increasingly varied internet experiences – as a result of commercial innovations as well as government regulations – are remaking our sexual discourse. Ultimately, it is hoped that the study of ‘vernacular masculine culture’ can reshape the direction of gender studies in Hong Kong, placing less emphasis on well-worn ideological modes of construction of maleness (e.g. through the family, schools, sports, business environment and the media) and more on the fluid flow and interaction of sexual speech constituted out of freely unscripted lines of imagination.

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