

tors." *The daily beast*, 2009 edited

ig evidence from the scene of a dig-
4.

d J. Icove, Richard Baker, Wayne
tronic crime needs assessment for
ngton D.C.: National Institute of

f child pornography on the Inter-
, Combating Child Pornography on

uayle, E. "Typology of paedophile
74 (2001):97-107.

graphy an Internet crime. New York:

Manual §2G2.2.

erley Mitchell. *Child pornography*
imes: Findings from the national on-
D.C.: National Center for Missing
ssed November 11, 2009. [http://](http://tions/NC144.pdf)

Mitchell, and Michele Ybarra. "On-
realities and implications for pre-
chologist 63 (2008):111-128.

erly Mitchell. *Trends in the arrests of*
nes Against Children Research Cen-
.
http://unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/N-JOV2_

On the Erotic Highway: A Participant-Observer Approach to Researching Users of a Prostitute Review Website

Christine Milrod

Introduction

Yes, there are new, sexy signs of life on The Erotic Highway! Do you have a lust for life, but are lost on the Erotic Highway? Are you running at full speed but don't know what sexy offramp to take? Well, wonder no more. The Love Goddess is here with her extra special GPS road map of The Erotic Highway—Great, Positive, and very Sexual. I will point you in the most sensual direction, no matter what your issue might be. The Love Goddess is a licensed sex therapist with a very, very erotic streak ... and a deep knowledge of huMANly nature. So post your questions! The answers will inform, titillate and inspire you to head straight down the Erotic Highway! It's always the Journey, not the Destination, From Love Goddess to YOU!

This chapter considers the methodological issues in using a discussion board on an international prostitute review site as a participant-observer of male prostitution clients. The autoethnographic material draws on the author's five-year experience as a licensed psychotherapist and sexologist providing answers to "hobbyists" and "providers," i.e., prostitution clients and sex workers who

post and read on a discussion board dedicated to general human sexuality issues, relationship problems and sexual medicine queries. The ethical and legal concerns of interacting with users engaged in illicit sexual activities are highlighted in describing the diffuse boundaries between private and public spaces on the Internet, the expected reinforcement of community norms and standards, and the role of the researcher seen by users as a bona fide member of the online prostitution community, despite its potential legal conflict.

In early 2006, I received an email signed by staff@theeroticreview.com. The otherwise nameless sender stated that he was the administrator of The Erotic Review or TER, a website dedicated to customer reviews of escorts and providers of sexual services advertising online. "Staff" had been referred to me by someone who had suggested that I would be the perfect professional to answer a few questions concerning male sexuality via email. As a licensed psychotherapist and sexologist with a client population comprised of both buyers and sellers of commercial sex, I was aware of the website through several of my female therapy clients and the impact these explicit reviews had on their working lives; in fact, I had viewed the site multiple times at their urging, for no other reason than to understand issues such as dealing with stigma, law enforcement and interpersonal situations facing providers and their clients. Not knowing quite what to make of the email, I politely responded that the sender was welcome to book a consultation with me in order to obtain the requested information. To my surprise, the reply that came back contained a more detailed request and an offer of participating on TER as an unpaid moderator on one of the site's more than 40 discussion boards. The discussion board of interest was named "The Erotic Highway" and had previously been monitored rather infrequently by an assortment of volunteer moderators. The content was cobbled together mainly of some user-submitted erotic poetry and brief threads with no categorized topics and several weeks between postings. It had languished for a few years and was more or less declared "dead" by moderators and members alike. Now the idea was to resurrect the board by placing a moderator who could tackle a variety of questions and comments concerning human sexuality, eroticism, and psychosexual issues and generally keep the discussions flowing by contributing pithy and stimulating commentary as needed.

My initial response was to decline; after all, a state licensed psychotherapist is not ethically or legally permitted to participate in illicit activities such as promoting prostitution or even proactively recommend that clients engage in the solicitation of remunerated sexual activities. Moreover, I was not going to be compensated in any way; instead, I would have to monitor a discussion board at all odd hours on a daily basis at my own expense. There was also another crux; due to the ethical quandary of associating with a site that in effect promotes prostitution, there would be no possibility of advertising openly or

7 ·
otherwise promote my clinical drawbacks and after go I began to consider the potential issues in prostitution by pro of the proverbial fence, but bbers daily would offer insight Navigating this ethical mine: the emotional consequence from the empathic counselor with an interest in sociology and largely invisible group door prostitution—would l an understanding of their a ishing on these very discussic sibility to create a level of trus at large, which in turn could in the distance, but they loo And so from May 9, 2006, to the anonymous pro bono m

Prostitution and The

The World Wide Web h tomers can share consumer communicate their experien this development, there ha prostitution and its actors (Holt, Blevins and Kuhns 200 of the dominant themes em sexual services with provide Consistent with this view, pro more positive reviews; in fa edly provide "the girlfriend e Both customers and provide encounters that replicate asp contain conventional sex acts 2012; Sanders 2008). Bernst technology, an increase worl gration have fueled the diver calize and target their services

ed to general human sexuality is-
ine queries. The ethical and legal
n illicit sexual activities are high-
between private and public spaces
community norms and standards,
is a bona fide member of the on-
tential legal conflict.

ry staff@theeroticreview.com. The
he administrator of The Erotic Re-
views of escorts and providers of
I been referred to me by someone
professional to answer a few ques-
a licensed psychotherapist and sex-
th buyers and sellers of commercial
il of my female therapy clients and
working lives; in fact, I had viewed
other reason than to understand is-
ent and interpersonal situations fac-
quite what to make of the email, I
me to book a consultation with me
To my surprise, the reply that came
in offer of participating on TER as
ore than 40 discussion boards. The
Erotic Highway” and had previously
sortment of volunteer moderators.
some user-submitted erotic poetry
and several weeks between postings.
ore or less declared “dead” by mod-
; to resurrect the board by placing a
estions and comments concerning
al issues and generally keep the dis-
stimulating commentary as needed.
ill, a state licensed psychotherapist
ticipate in illicit activities such as
recommend that clients engage in
ities. Moreover, I was not going to
uld have to monitor a discussion
y own expense. There was also an
associating with a site that in effect
possibility of advertising openly or

otherwise promote my clinical practice. But after some reflection on these ob-
vious drawbacks and after going online and viewing the board in its present state,
I began to consider the potential advantages. I had become familiar with some
issues in prostitution by providing psychotherapy to individuals on both sides
of the proverbial fence, but monitoring a board and interacting with its mem-
bers daily would offer insights far beyond any occasional psychotherapy sessions.
Navigating this ethical minefield online in order to help those who experienced
the emotional consequences of commercial sex would not be that different
from the empathic counseling provided in the therapy room. For a sexologist
with an interest in sociological deviance, access to a rather hidden population
and largely invisible group of men—in this case, clients of heterosexual in-
door prostitution—would be quite unprecedented. The opportunity to gain
an understanding of their activities, their motives and the community flour-
ishing on these very discussion boards became difficult to resist. Here was a pos-
sibility to create a level of trust between me and the online sex-buying community
at large, which in turn could lead to legitimate research. These were only goals
in the distance, but they loomed large and prompted me to accept the position.
And so from May 9, 2006, to July 17, 2011, I was the “Love Goddess” or “LG”—
the anonymous pro bono moderator of The Erotic Highway on TER.

Prostitution and The GFE

The World Wide Web has evolved into a global marketplace where cus-
tomers can share consumer information about providers of sexual services,
communicate their experiences and network with other peers. In tandem with
this development, there has been an increase in research of Internet-based
prostitution and its actors (e.g., Castle and Lee 2008; Holt and Blevins 2007;
Holt, Blevins and Kuhns 2008; Huff 2011; Pettinger 2011; Sanders 2008). One
of the dominant themes emerging from these studies is that paying more for
sexual services with providers in an indoor setting is safer and more pleasant.
Consistent with this view, prostitutes who appear to enjoy the sexual act are given
more positive reviews; in fact, those who receive the highest ratings report-
edly provide “the girlfriend experience,” or GFE (Holt and Blevins 2007, 347).
Both customers and providers have increasingly used the term GFE to refer to
encounters that replicate aspects of non-remunerative relationships and also
contain conventional sex acts (see Milrod and Monto 2012; Milrod and Weitzer
2012; Sanders 2008). Bernstein (2007a, 2007b) has argued that information
technology, an increase worldwide in temporary employment, and global mi-
gration have fueled the diversification of sexual labor in which providers spe-
cialize and target their services to specific types of customers. The relational services

offered by providers offer a “bounded authenticity” within an “emotionally bounded erotic exchange” (2007a, 197). Like other commercially packaged leisure activities, affection and emotion are available for sale and for purchase. Further, Bernstein has claimed that one example of bounded authenticity with its limitations is the increasingly popular GFE (2007a, 194).

There is some evidence that online discussion boards and review websites focusing on GFE provide a degree of normative regulation among clients that mirror aspects of conventional heterosexual courtship. Sanders (2008, 61) has proposed that there exists “a collective pressure” on the Web that standardizes client conduct and puts morality in focus among men who buy commercial sex. Reviews are often filtered through the criteria of the website moderators as well as the moral code of reviewers and providers alike. Prospective customers considering the purchase of sex are exposed to a set of fairly stringent standards concerning appropriate conduct. The regulation of online behavior appears to influence reviews of the sexual experiences, which may result in greater trust between clients and providers during consensual sessions. Review sites reinforce the necessity of safe sex and condom use. Client misconduct revealed in reviews or in chat rooms is subject to immediate and forceful disapproval posted in response to the offender. The official policy of some review sites rejects child prostitution, derogatory discussions of providers and paraphilic sexual activities. Finally, middle-class clients are loath to purchasing outdoor sex because they perceive this market as violent and dangerous, associating the exploitation of outdoor prostitutes with pimping or trafficking (Milrod and Monto, 2012; Monto and Milrod, 2013; Sanders 2008).

The Erotic Review Website

The practice of posting online reviews of prostitutes dates back to the mid-to-late 1990s when reviews of prostitutes’ physical attributes and sexual performance started appearing on message bulletin boards such as *alt.sex.prostitution* (ASP) and the World Sex Guide (WSG), now both defunct. The reviews were in the form of message postings and there were no review databases tied to the sites. The originators of these initial message boards were peer-to-peer groups of computer-literate male clients of female prostitutes. One such group solicited Los Angeles-based computer programmer David Elms to write code that would support a database search program. In 1999, the first fully searchable database was incorporated into a dedicated prostitute review website named TheEroticReview.com and posted on the Web. In tandem with this development, sex providers began promoting their services on proprietary web pages, thereby supporting the expansion of TER and additional review websites dedicated to prostitution worldwide.

The Erotic Review sites in the United States are managed by David Bernstein’s company and the sites have managed to evade the potential of being updated information by members who access them. The website receives more than 100 million hits and contains more than 100,000 reviews. More than 10% of those who log into TER write reviews, and about 1% also post reviews to their target audience. The website is based in New York, Los Angeles, or Europe. Special Media and Erotic License laws worldwide prohibit prostitution laws worldwide. The website has a discussion board that

Registration for the website generates a password with the exception of sexually explicit details; in lieu of paying two new reviews eventually are routed through the review site. Notably, the site, and aliases for TER administrators eventually connect. The frequently asked questions, the website tips on provider etiquette about the fees charged. Members called “holmes and maraderie. Information on the benefits of joining the database program, feedback in mouth,” in addition to performance criteria. Ra

authenticity" within an "emotionally available for sale and for purchase. A couple of bounded authenticity with E (2007a, 194).

on boards and review websites focus on regulation among clients that mirror popular. Sanders (2008, 61) has proposed a web that standardizes client conduct by buying commercial sex. Reviews are moderated by moderators as well as the moral voice of customers considering the purgent standards concerning appropriate behavior. It appears to influence reviews of greater trust between clients and sites. Rules reinforced in the necessity of safe sex are included in reviews or in chat rooms is posted in response to the offender. Child prostitution, derogatory activities. Finally, middle-class clients they perceive this market as violent outdoor prostitutes with pimping (O and Milrod, 2013; Sanders 2008).

prostitutes dates back to the mid-19th century physical attributes and sexual performance on boards such as *alt.sex.prostitution* which are now both defunct. The reviews were moderated by no review databases tied to the site. The boards were peer-to-peer groups moderated by prostitutes. One such group sponsored by summer David Elms to write code for the site. In 1999, the first fully searchable prostitute review website named *alt.sex.prostitution*. In tandem with this development, the rise of proprietary web pages, thereby leading to additional review websites dedicated to

The Erotic Review.com or TER is ranked among the top 4,000 most visited websites in the United States (Alexa.com 2015). Until 2004, the site was owned and managed by David Elms, the eponymous "Staff." It was later sold to a Dutch company and the servers relocated to the Netherlands in 2009, presumably to evade the potential of prosecution by state or federal authorities. According to daily updated information found on the site, TER has over 1,000,000 registered members who access the site strictly under anonymous usernames and passwords. The website receives between 250,000–300,000 unique Internet visitors daily and contains more than 1,100,000 reviews including the names and contact information of over 100,000 providers of sexual services. Less than 10% of those who log into TER write and post actual reviews of the providers. Of those reviewers, about 1% also post messages to over 60 discussion boards sorted by interest and target audience. The regional boards are listed according to U.S. metropolitan cities, e.g., New York, Los Angeles, Houston, or wider international areas such as Asia or Europe. Special interest boards include Sports Talk, Politics and Religion, Media and Erotic Literature, Legal Corner (dedicated to various aspects of prostitution laws worldwide) and The Erotic Highway, the psychosexual advice/discussion board that was moderated by the "Love Goddess" during 2006–2011.

Registration for members is free and requires only a username and self-generated password. The main website content can be accessed at no charge, with the exception of provider review scores, session cost information and the sexually explicit details of a review. A monthly fee is charged to access these details; in lieu of payment, the site accepts the submission and publication of two new reviews every 30 days for continuing VIP access. Membership payments are routed through a third party online merchant service that purportedly keeps the buyer's legal name and address occluded from the administrators of the review site. Nevertheless, any content posted on TER is copyrighted by the site, and aliases can be "flipped," meaning that there are internal mechanisms for TER administrators to examine IP-addresses at their discretion and eventually connect posters to legal identities if needed.

The frequently asked questions (FAQ) on the site state that in addition to reviews, the website offers "how to meet and greet" guides for first time clients; tips on provider etiquette; advice on how to avoid legal entrapment; information about the fees charged; sexual advice; and erotic stories, among other items. Members called "hobbyists" log in to TER for information, support, and camaraderie. Information on policies and samples of provider reviews explains the benefits of joining the site as a member. The search engine, the nucleus of the database program, features such explicit search functions as "lick pussy" and "cum in mouth," in addition to a 10-point scale for provider appearance and performance criteria. Ratings range from 1, i.e. *I was really scared* (appearance)

and *A total rip-off* (performance), to 10, i.e. *She was one in a million* (appearance) and *It was one in a million* (performance). The review itself is split into General Details, accessible to all members, and Juicy Details, which can be read only by paying members. In contrast to the General Details, which offer the reviewer's overall description of the provider and the encounter, the Juicy Details describe the sexual encounter from beginning to end in explicit terms, acronyms and slang particular to the review site vernacular such as BBBJ (Bareback Blow Job), DATY (Dining at the Y) or YMMV (Your Mileage May Vary).

The purpose of the national and regional discussion groups is ostensibly to post messages and to initiate discussions about prostitution in general and provider/hobbyist issues in particular. Both hobbyists and providers participate in discussion threads moderated by anonymous associates of the Dutch parent company. There are thousands of pages with discussion threads ranging from political issues to solicitations of opinions on various non-prostitution matters. A significant portion of space on the various boards is taken up by discussions of ethical practices in hobbyist-provider relations. Many discussions revolve around efforts to reduce the societal stigma attached to engaging in the hobby. Topics frequently include hobbyists who admit to falling in love with providers and who attempt to create relationships that go beyond the fee-for-service arrangement, as well as personal life stories that drive clients to seek advice from providers who are seen as relationship experts of sorts. Many posters also seek medical information or the advice of other members on how to manage health conditions affecting their sexual function. Unprotected sex, activities with trafficking victims, minors or extreme sexual practices are frowned upon and efforts to eliminate words such as whore or john from prostitution discourse are common; in addition, hobbyists who write disparagingly of providers are often met with collective disapproval from other hobbyists. Verbal decorum in discussion threads often borders on displays of ostentatious chivalry toward providers and can polarize posters to the point of moderators closing down entire threads. Hobbyists who come to the verbal rescue of providers have been given the term "White Knight" and are sometimes ridiculed by rebellious factions of members determined to prevent the discussion boards from becoming dominated by providers. These minor skirmishes and virtual turf wars are not entirely without purpose or rationale: Discussion board postings as well as reviews are filtered through the criteria of the website moderators as well as the moral code of hobbyists and providers alike. This regulation of online behavior appears to influence discussions of sexuality where the discourse reflects a clear acceptance toward sex as a commodity but a rejection of values that denigrate sex workers and objectify them beyond their consensual participation in the online community. Finally, there are no TER discussion boards

dedicated to outdoor pricing actual names of identities are rapidly shut down by absolute anonymity and action of any kind. This principle of "fair use" excerpts from its discussions or mainstream media hobbyist username has led to tension or conflict.

The Erotic Highway

Shortly after the Love vited members of TER tety of questions appeared from concerns with anatomical credentials and performer questions required strayed into a more personal and not an impostor position eventually disagree with expected to reply truthfully of any legal names was struck the site. It was also a first in which "discreditable] without stigma, and in wmal identity" (Sharp and becoming a member of anonymity in equal meas

But despite the erudite that had very little to do v or ambiguity—in order to ise that paying for sexual se in any way. Several resea groups dedicated to a cor identities and provide int selves" online rather than can be directly challenged reveal sensitive informati

he was one in a million (appearance). The review itself is split into Juicy Details, which can be read in general Details, which offer the real encounter, the Juicy Details do not end in explicit terms, acronyms or slang such as BBBJ (Bareback Blow or Mileage May Vary).

Discussion groups is ostensibly to avoid prostitution in general and hobbyists and providers participate in discussions with associates of the Dutch par with discussion threads ranging from discussions on various non-prostitution to various boards is taken up by provider relations. Many discussions deal with the societal stigma attached to engaging with providers who admit to falling in love relationships that go beyond the fee-for-service stories that drive clients to seek relationship experts of sorts. Many discussions offer advice of other members on how to handle sexual function. Unprotected sex, or extreme sexual practices are discussed such as whore or john from providers, hobbyists who write disparaging comments or disapproval from other hobbyists. Discussions on displays of ostentatious wealth lead to the point of moderators to come to the verbal rescue of providers and are sometimes ridiculed to prevent the discussion boards from seeing minor skirmishes and virtual arguments. Discussion board post rules are the criteria of the website moderators and providers alike. This regulation of discussions of sexuality where the discussion is as a commodity but a rejection of prostitution if they go beyond their consensual boundaries. There are no TER discussion boards

dedicated to outdoor prostitution activities. Any discussion threads containing actual names of identifiable street locations or posted addresses of providers are rapidly shut down by the moderators, in accordance with TER's policy of absolute anonymity and desire to protect the site and its members from legal action of any kind. This aim notwithstanding, TER appears to observe the principle of "fair use" and has never prosecuted journalists or challenged excerpts from its discussion boards that have been published in academic articles or mainstream media. For the purposes of this chapter, however, any hobbyist username has been modified or deleted to avoid potential identification or conflict.

The Erotic Highway—First Stop

Shortly after the Love Goddess (LG) posted her welcome message and invited members of TER to submit their issues to the discussion board, a variety of questions appeared from both hobbyists and providers. These ranged from concerns with anatomical issues and physical functions, to LG's professional credentials and personal experience with sex work, if any. While the former questions required straightforward sexual medicine responses, the latter strayed into a more personal space—as if ascertaining that LG was "the real thing" and not an impostor posing as a professional, or worse, a traitor who would eventually disagree with community norms. In this vetting scenario, LG was expected to reply truthfully while still maintaining anonymity, since the use of any legal names was strictly prohibited and grounds for being banned from the site. It was also a first exercise in building trust with a virtual community in which "discreditable practices are accepted as the norm and are entirely without stigma, and in which one may participate without threat to one's normal identity" (Sharp and Earle 2003, 39). There was an immediate sense of becoming a member of a secret society that required self-disclosure and anonymity in equal measures, not to mention loyalty to "the cause."

But despite the erudite tone of the postings set by a sophisticated discourse that had very little to do with prostitution per se, there could be no argument or ambiguity—in order to remain on the site, one had to agree with the premise that paying for sexual services was not immoral, dysfunctional or pathological in any way. Several researchers have noted that the benefit of anonymity in groups dedicated to a common goal allows for people to reveal more of their identities and provide intimately personal information or express their "true selves" online rather than in face-to-face contact where opinions and conduct can be directly challenged by one's social group. In fact, some may choose to reveal sensitive information about physical conditions or ask questions re-

garding intimate health issues online rather than going to a medical facility. Occluded by their usernames and visual anonymity, in a community among likeminded men and women, posting members often feel at liberty to act like "strangers on a train"—free to disclose details to those who would never interact with their spouses, colleagues or friends outside the virtual community (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimmons 2002; Gies 2008; Joinson 2005). Meanwhile, LG had a considerably more difficult path to tread in terms of initial self-presentation within the community. Any professional therapist dealing with pointed and potentially invasive questions has to balance self-disclosure with offering enough information that will build a trusting alliance with the one seeking information and help. But LG's answer on the board meant more than just establishing therapeutic competence. In the most basic vernacular, LG had to build "street cred in talking the talk without having walked the walk." There was no luxury of lurking, playing with identities, or hiding behind multiple usernames, and no opportunity to deflect or provide flippant answers—those options belonged to those who used the board for recreation, not to the professional who was intended to provide helpful and accurate information.

Orgad (2005, 56) has remarked that there is also a temporal aspect to establishing trust during online communications between researchers and informants and that timely responses are highly central in establishing a trustworthy online presence. Being prompt with replies demonstrates serious engagement and commitment to the community and its members. Thus, less than an hour after the question appeared, LG issued the following response to the inquisitive poster who wanted her sex work credentials:

As a professional therapist, I don't agree with the premise that "one must face and experience those situations personally to be able to guide." If that were the case, we wouldn't have any male gynecologists or female urologists, just as an example. How can a male obstetrician (or a female nulliparous such) "know" what it's like to give birth? How can we treat murderers, rapists and other criminals psychotherapeutically without ever having committed the same acts? ... When we work with clients therapeutically, empathy and understanding of the client's particular emotional processes carry much greater weight than if we the therapists have performed the same actions. In addition, when we work with the same client population over and over again, we gain knowledge of both "process and content." [W]e eventually learn the outside mechanics of their actions, but also the meaning behind them. In this case, it is entirely possible to provide "dynamite responses" [*sic*] without having charged a fee for sexual acts. What my profession de-

mands from me is that I ti
jections with internal hone
yourself), in order to under
and providers.

Patrolling the Erotic Hig

The development of networked
can bridge virtual and AFK (awa
mation of social bonds that are l
For the commodified sex industr
organize their activities within v
by their socioeconomic status, e
cohort. Some members of these
that extend to real-world meetin
with the contemporary version c
of the Good Old Boy networks
duced as "a nostalgic resurrectio
cess to and use of prostitutes" (c
friendly camaraderie or discussio
cally male-dominated discussion
board as well as Sports Talk were
ful flame-throwing and abusive c
ment among the male members
posting comments and thereby ir

In response to the harsh clima
site, TER administrators created
"gentlemanly" hobbyists. There,
interact with one another and also
communicating with more chivalrou
the hobbyists aged 60 and above
where LG was in control of both f
generate a detailed answer from l
scholarly material. Comments pe
would often extend the thread ar
tary from members, frequently of
also participate, often disclosing
well as their private lives. The leve
bers often validated each other's ex
months of the board's existence, c

going to a medical facility. I, in a community among us, feel at liberty to act like those who would never inside the virtual community (08; Joinson 2005). Meaning to tread in terms of initial professional therapist dealing with us to balance self-disclosure and trusting alliance with the one on the board meant more than the most basic vernacular, LG had not been walking the walk." There is nothing behind multiple user-participant answers—those options, not to the professional information.

So as a temporal aspect to establish a relationship between researchers and clients is central in establishing a relationship, this applies demonstrates serious and its members. Thus, less than the following response to credentials:

My premise that "one must be able to guide." If gynecologists or female obstetrician (or a female give birth? How can we psychotherapeutically ... When we work with the client's partner weight than if we the

In addition, when we find over again, we gain eventually learn the out-learning behind them. In "namite responses" [sic] What my profession de-

mands from me is that I treat my countertransference and my projections with internal honesty and avoidance of "bad faith" (lying to yourself), in order to understand and empathize with both hobbyists and providers.

Patrolling the Erotic Highway

The development of networked environments such as online discussion boards can bridge virtual and AFK (away from keyboard) worlds by facilitating the formation of social bonds that are fused both by topic and geographical location. For the commodified sex industry, this means that buyers and sellers of sex can organize their activities within very specific subcultural communities, defined by their socioeconomic status, educational background and even generational cohort. Some members of these networks have formed friendships or cliques that extend to real-world meetings and parties (Kolar and Atchison 2013, 185), with the contemporary version of these homosocial bonds faintly reminiscent of the Good Old Boy networks in men's clubs or fraternal lodges and reproduced as "a nostalgic resurrection of gender privilege, justifying men's free access to and use of prostitutes" (Månsson 2006, 91). But there was no air of friendly camaraderie or discussion of prostitution on some of the more specifically male-dominated discussion boards. In particular, the Politics and Religion board as well as Sports Talk were unmoderated at the time; crude insults, forceful flame-throwing and abusive comments created a distinctly hostile environment among the male members and kept the majority of the providers from posting comments and thereby interacting with their clients on those boards.

In response to the harsh climate of these more opinion-driven parts of the site, TER administrators created a "60 and Over" board for more mature and "gentlemanly" hobbyists. There, senior and elderly members could safely interact with one another and also respond to providers who felt safe in communicating with more chivalrous and considerate clients. A good portion of the hobbyists aged 60 and above would often migrate to the Erotic Highway, where LG was in control of both format and content. A posted question would generate a detailed answer from LG, sometimes with references to studies or scholarly material. Comments posted by other than the original poster (OP) would often extend the thread and generate further philosophical commentary from members, frequently of a personal, reflective nature. Providers would also participate, often disclosing very intimate details from their working as well as their private lives. The level of discourse was generally high and members often validated each other's extensive commentaries. Within the first three months of the board's existence, one member posted the following comment,

in response to LG's request to keep the Erotic Highway focused on psychosexual issues, maintain a respectful tenor on the board, and above all, a willingness to share feelings and help the various participants:

I do view our lives as walking or traveling down paths or highways. Sometimes, we will travel with people for a long time, others will be a chance meeting and never to see each other again. What we do is something that almost 100% of the people dream and fantasize about. But it takes brave or foolish souls, depending on how you look at it, to do what we do, on both sides. But the emotional toll can be great. For most of us, we can't talk to our partners, significant others, best friends about our troubles we may encounter from time to time. I've made friends with several girls in the years I've enjoyed the "hobby." And with these friendships comes trust where you can open up with what's on your mind. Many people aren't quite lucky and there are still thousands of people out there, wishing to have what we have here.... Maybe one of these days what is only chatted in specialty sites like TER, will become more visible and a little bit more mainstream. It may not be in our lifetime but I think there will be a point in time where there's no social stigma in paying for sex. Or maybe society will evolve where there's no money needed and we can all have sex when we want to and not have to hide our urges, wants and desires.

As the months went on, the Erotic Highway earned its distinctive profile as a reliable provider of sex education, professional and peer counseling, as well as a source of links to articles concerning psychosexual issues. LG was free to moderate the board without any discernible involvement of TER administrators or owners of the site. Several of the moderators on the other discussion boards at the time were hobbyists with a minimum one-year posting history; they too were serving TER as volunteers in exchange for free membership and full access to the site. These men would congregate on the "Moderators Only" forum, where a collegial and friendly water-cooler atmosphere was the norm. The "mods" would assist one another in monitoring legally compromising or offensive threads, share jokes of a general, non-sexual nature and in general act as loyal supporters of the site. Until TER hired a paid female administrator responsible for the entire site, LG was the only woman who moderated a board. But despite the friendly and often intimate conversations on the mod board, a secret identity was the order of the day, with the exception of LG who was seen as a "professional" with public contact information known to moderators and TER administration alike. Neither the mods nor the female chief administrator with the explicit alias "FoxyFuckPants" (FFP) would otherwise

disclose any personal details that would tie them to the site. However, over the years, the moderators had no knowledge of the location of the TER, particularly after the founder sold his interest in the site. Located to servers in the Netherlands, the majority of users did not know the geographical location of the site. The desire to remain anonymous shows that while those who had a vested interest in the site, the registered users were aware of the compromising nature of the site, the registered users hid where their identities, hidden by little else than pseudonyms, to avoid law enforcement or public disclosure.

Bassett and Riordan (2002, 234) have cautioned that a virtual space in which human acts and interactions occur is a locus open to social forces beyond the control of the community members. They assert that the "suspension of disbelief" is the feeling of safety within the community. This is a safe haven where those who feel impinged upon by the opprobrium of others and the stigma of the do-gooders can find and experience the support of others in a protective environment. This only requires a username and password for access, and there are no specific measures taken to protect the users' own culturally produced texts. The site has created a virtual space, including the years of discussion threads and user profiles, as searchable information, preserved for future reference.

Barnes (2004, 206) has suggested that virtual spaces can create an illusion of privacy, in front of their computer screens or mobile device screens, a vast public space that the online environment cannot enforce the strict policy of not responding to the site's private message (PM) system, those who have no other recourse but to use the discussion board. The sense of safety and anonymity did prompt some users to take precautionary measures, such as creating separate usernames. Users would sometimes use an alias that reflected their interests or even use the same name as they had for legitimate groups or musical fan sites. A simple search of usernames, which on a few occasions would result in spouses or partners finding out about their love lives and posting anguished messages on the board. Therefore, the "policing" occasionally involved shutting down threads revolved less around ru-

Highway focused on psychosexual board, and above all, a willing-participants:

own paths or highways. Sometimes, others will be a chance. What we do is something I fantasize about. But it takes when you look at it, to do what the toll can be great. For most significant others, best friends from time to time. I've made me enjoyed the "hobby." And you can open up with what's lucky and there are still thoughts what we have here.... Maybe specialty sites like TER, will be mainstream. It may not be a point in time where there's maybe society will evolve where I have sex when we want to find desires.

It earned its distinctive profile as a personal and peer counseling, as well as psychosexual issues. LG was free to involve the involvement of TER administrators on the other discussion forum. A minimum one-year posting history; a change for free membership and a private message on the "Moderators Only" cooler atmosphere was the norm. Monitoring legally compromising or non-sexual nature and in general acted as a paid female administrator re-woman who moderated a board. Conversations on the mod board, with the exception of LG who was the only person with information known to moderators nor the female chief administrator "kPants" (FFP) would otherwise

disclose any personal details that would tie them to a verifiable identity. Moreover, the moderators had no knowledge of the identities of the legal owners of TER, particularly after the founder sold his interest. Until the site was relocated to servers in the Netherlands, the majority of moderators, including LG, did not know the geographical location of those responsible for the technical operation of the site. The desire to remain completely protected by anonymity shows that while those who had a vested interest in TER understood the legally compromising nature of the site, the registered members perceived it as a place where their identities, hidden by little else than usernames, would be safe from law enforcement or public disclosure.

Bassett and Riordan (2002, 234) have cautioned that the Internet is not simply a virtual space in which human acts and their actors can be experienced; it is a locus open to social forces beyond the control exercised among the community members. They assert that the "suspension of disbelief" contributes to the feeling of safety within the community. The utopian "parochial space" exists as a safe haven where those who feel impinged on by legal constraints, the opprobrium of others and the stigma of the dominant culture can find refuge and experience the support of others in a protected world. In the case of TER, this only requires a username and password for posting messages; meanwhile, there are no specific measures taken to protect the threads, which stand as their own culturally produced texts. The site has chosen to retain all written material, including the years of discussion threads generated by LG and the other members as searchable information, preserved and accessible to the public.

Barnes (2004, 206) has suggested that volleys of messages in discussion threads can create an illusion of privacy, mainly because the participants in front of their computer screens or mobile devices are not able to experience the vast public space that the online environment confers upon them. Because LG enforced the strict policy of not responding to questions posed through the site's private message (PM) system, those who wanted counsel and advice had no other recourse but to use the discussion board for help. The illusion of safety and anonymity did prompt some users to depart from self-imposed cautionary measures, such as creating separate usernames strictly for TER. Members would sometimes use an alias that reflected their geographical location, or even use the same name as they had for legitimate associations such as gardening groups or musical fan sites. A simple search engine would reveal these usernames, which on a few occasions would result in consequences such as spouses or partners finding out about their loved one's extra-relational activities and posting anguished messages on the board under the member's account. Therefore, the "policing" occasionally undertaken by LG in terms of shutting down threads revolved less around rude or inappropriate behavior

and became much more about protecting the naïve or guileless members who treated the board as a confidential space and who really did have something to lose in their standing as otherwise law abiding members of society.

From Participant to Observer

The electronic word draws on interpersonal interactions that differ from face-to-face communication in several ways. Rather than depending on visual transmission of race, class or gender, the public personae of participants in discussion groups can be communicated through nicknames that contain allusions to socioeconomic factors, personality traits or cohort commonalities. Beddows (2008, 131) has suggested that the social and cultural significance of usernames should not be underestimated; moreover, the illusory wall of safety and privacy behind such seemingly superficial pseudonyms can also encourage poster disclosures of an intensely private nature. As LG's service to the board became a fixture, posters could depend on empathic and personalized answers to their queries within a matter of hours. This further encouraged members to go beyond their screen names and mine their emotions for very intimate reflections of both personal and existential qualities.

In reading detailed descriptions of their life situations, LG noted that hobbyists on the Erotic Highway appeared to be mostly White, middle-aged, and clearly above average in both income and educational status. Their online identities were sometimes further emphasized in formal diction, correct spelling and the ability to express some complexity in their thoughts. Care was taken not to be confused with "johns" or present the image of a callous, "cheap" client who engaged in commodified sexual interactions only for simple, uncomplicated sexual satisfaction. A pattern of specific topics began to emerge, some of which became so frequent that they earned their own pithy subject lines. One such cluster of postings were soon named by LG as "Help, I've fallen for a provider and can't get up," illustrated in this rather commonly posted scenario:

I met my regular provider about 3 months ago and since we first met, I have seen her at least once a week for 2-4 hour sessions at a time. I don't believe in "love at first sight," but this is the closest thing to it. I have found myself bringing her gifts, which I have never done before nor have I ever wanted to be with a provider for longer than one hour. The strange thing is that we don't always have sex; sometimes we'll just lay there and hold each other, chat and give each other little "pecks" every now and then. She is very intelligent and we love to talk. I tried to break it off with her about three weeks ago when I told her my feel-

ings. Her response was "I see her and that's four days before I get me an email to a wedge between [under the radar] are regulars and as the "hectic" time, has a series I have tried to other escorts to the first one was and one was waiting about my she is a prostitute through a divorce if my wife four realize that parting else that but sometimes say that if we seeing an escort her, the deeper

In response to the short, race and putative reply used humor, urging the OP to re-

Don't sacrifice hour ... that's y

I suspect the paquiddick fallacy; be the provider feelings. If not, Humpty Dump a great statesman.

naïve or guileless members who really did have something to members of society.

al interactions that differ from rather than depending on visual public personae of participants in though nicknames that contain all-traits or cohort commonalities. social and cultural significance of recover, the illusory wall of safety pseudonyms can also encourage nature. As LG's service to the l on empathic and personalized hours. This further encouraged and mine their emotions for very potential qualities.

the situations, LG noted that hob-normally White, middle-aged, and ational status. Their online iden-normal diction, correct spelling and air thoughts. Care was taken not ge of a callous, "cheap" client who ily for simple, uncomplicated sex-egan to emerge, some of which wn pithy subject lines. One such s "Help, I've fallen for a provider mmonly posted scenario:

hs ago and since we first met, 1-4 hour sessions at a time. I his is the closest thing to it. I rich I have never done before iber for longer than one hour. ys have sex; sometimes we'll id give each other little "pecks" ent and we love to talk. I tried s ago when I told her my feel-

ings. Her response was "my life is too hectic for anything serious right now," but she also said she was disappointed. I was no longer going to see her and that she wanted to continue seeing me. I lasted all of about four days before scheduling another "date" with her. Last week we had a minor issue that was resolved fairly quickly and afterwards she sent me an email telling me she was sorry and she hoped it wouldn't put a wedge between us. Since I have been seeing her, she has gone UTR [under the radar], but she does still see other guys, some of whom are regulars and have been seeing her a lot longer than I have. As far as the "hectic" excuse, there is validity to that, as she is in school full time, has a semi full-time job, has a three-year-old child and escorts. I have tried to not contact her, but it just doesn't work. I even saw two other escorts to see if that would change anything. The results were mixed; the first one was a complete failure mechanically on my part. The second one was very cute and we had a great time, but I just kept thinking about my regular the whole time. I keep trying to tell myself that she is a prostitute and I should run but I just can't seem to. I am going through a divorce that is not related to her and have no children, but if my wife found out, "I'd be living in a van down by the river." I fully realize that payment is for time and companionship only and anything else that happens is a choice between two or more consenting adults, but sometimes that's what I am paying her for!! I could almost jokingly say that if we don't start having more sex, I'm going to have to start seeing an escort. LOL. I really don't know what to do, the more I see her, the deeper I fall ... Somebody please slap me back into reality!!!

Teddy K

In response to this poster who subtly communicated his generational cohort, race and putatively his socioeconomic status through his username, LG's reply used humor, jocosse vernacular and friendly concern in equal parts, while urging the OP to remain reasonable and seek professional counseling:

Don't sacrifice your political convictions for the convenience of the hour ... that's your official quote, Teddy.

I suspect that if someone is going to slap you out of your Chapaquiddick fawg, it won't be me or your fellow board members ... it'll be the provider herself. And blessed may she be, if she is true to her feelings. If not, well, then she'll bleed you dry, you'll lay crushed like Humpty Dumpty ... and then rise, just like yer altah ego, and become a great statesman of those who lived through the Perilous Provider

Plague. My advice to you is this: don't see other escorts, it simply won't work. Nope. Keep seeing her exclusively. Of course, you know it's on her own terms, but just keep doing it ... until you hit bottom and start floating back up again. Of course, I thought it was supposed to be Mary Jo floating in the water, not you! In all seriousness, however, you DO have a firm grip on the parameters of the situation. But going through a divorce makes us all vulnerable to all sorts of feelings. Regardless of who instigated the divorce, it's a loss of a relationship, and any such loss makes us run for emotional safety, no matter how illusory. And sex mixed with emotions just feels so good, doesn't it? Particularly if our regular relationship has been in the dumps for some time, no? This fixation is in the middle of its most epidemic stage, both emotionally and certainly from a neurotransmitter point of view. You've got a serious bug, my friend. Three months—your dopamine receptors are screaming and jumping. The whole roller-coaster ride feels very good for your brain, and it's going to trick you over and over again, until habituation sets in. Now, the boring reality, which may fall on deaf neurotransmitters, but here goes anyway: Yep, she is a provider. It's her job to entice you to come back, over and over again. If she does her job a little too well AND her subject is emotionally vulnerable, this will be the annoying side effect. I say annoying for her, not for you. This means that she will actually have to invest some thought and effort into managing YOUR feelings in the relationship. That's extra work for her, and seeing that she's already warned you of her "hectic" situation, I doubt she's ready for a man in the middle of a divorce ... a man who now is paying her for sex, but of course would turn into a non-paying boyfriend, if mutual love holds true and for real. I'm assuming she's an independent; if you two were separated by a pimp or a madam, perhaps things would not have progressed in such an "intimate" and rapid fashion. And yes, of course she will want to continue seeing you ... as long as you're paying. Maybe you should ask her to be with you for free because she also likes you so much, and then see what she says. That one is always a good reality check. Kind of brings it back to the core issue—time and companionship for money. Since you've been seeing her, she's gone UTR? Nice, she probably can afford it for the time being, what with you popping up the cash for up to four-hour sessions at a time. I don't mean to seem crass, but dear Ted, this is a BUSINESS, first and foremost.... [M]y other advice to you is to talk things over with a good therapist or counselor. I suspect there are other issues making

you emotion
mitment, but
mental well-
of those care
how to be go
is indispensa
a provider fo
Kennedy cur.

Another TER r
LG never responde
on the board:

Well, I foll
liked bunnies
Google it late
screwing, dri
can't sleep a w
never snored

I'm not su
make to all o
Your answers
sense of caring
self personally
the questions
First, because
and also your
cal therapist v
tell you what a
do everyday o
your probably
for your kindn
certainly deser
lucky, to have
sharing your t
I'm not sure tl
ship. She is an
continues to g
again and forg

the other escorts, it simply
 vely. Of course, you know
 it ... until you hit bottom
 , I thought it was supposed
 u! In all seriousness, how-
 neters of the situation. But
 erable to all sorts of feel-
 orce, it's a loss of a rela-
 n for emotional safety, no
 motions just feels so good,
 ship has been in the dumps
 middle of its most epidemic
 n a neurotransmitter point
 end. Three months—your
 umping. The whole roller-
 s, and it's going to trick you
 ts in. Now, the boring real-
 tters, but here goes anyway:
 ice you to come back, over
 le too well AND her subject
 e annoying side effect. I say
 as that she will actually have
 managing YOUR feelings in
 er, and seeing that she's al-
 on, I doubt she's ready for a
 n who now is paying her for
 -paying boyfriend, if mutual
 ing she's an independent; if
 adam, perhaps things would
 ?" and rapid fashion. And yes,
 ing you ... as long as you're
 with you for free because she
 at she says. That one is always
 back to the core issue—time
 you've been seeing her, she's
 rd it for the time being, what
 four-hour sessions at a time.
 ed, this is a BUSINESS, first
 you is to talk things over with
 : there are other issues making

you emotionally vulnerable as well. It needn't be a long-term com-
 mitment, but heck, some of those provider dollars could go toward your
 mental well-being while going through a tough time. Focusing some
 of those caretaking and loving emotions toward yourself and learning
 how to be good and kind to yourself, purely on your own, is a skill which
 is indispensable in situations like these. Splitting up is tough. Seeing
 a provider for some fun shouldn't be. Haven't you suffered enough
 Kennedy curses?

Love Goddess

Another TER member offered this private note of gratitude in a PM to which
 LG never responded, per the ironclad rule of keeping all replies to members posted
 on the board:

Well, I followed your advice and we hopped in the sack and screwed
 liked bunnies in heat, if that's possible. Do bunnies go in heat? I'll
 Google it later. So now after being in bed all day, screwing napping,
 screwing, drinking some water, eating and screwing some more, I
 can't sleep a wink and she is downstairs snoring her ass off. Funny she
 never snored all the other nights we slept together and didn't screw.

I'm not sure that you really understand the contribution that you
 make to all of the people that write to you and ask you for advice.
 Your answers/replies are always so well thought out and one gets a
 sense of caring and understanding when you read your responses. My-
 self personally, I'm not sure that I could have gone anywhere and asked
 the questions I asked of you and felt any level of comfort in doing so.
 First, because you're so involved with what it is we do on these boards,
 and also your knowledge of the industry, I'm not certain that a typi-
 cal therapist would have had the insight that you have. I also want to
 tell you what a great human being you are for the personal giving you
 do everyday on these boards and God only knows all the other souls
 your probably helping as well. Perhaps some day you will be rewarded
 for your kindness and thoughtfulness in your personal life as well. You
 certainly deserve it. We are very blessed and certainly at the very least
 lucky, to have you on our team. Personally, I want to thank you for
 sharing your thoughts with me. If I didn't get that advice from you,
 I'm not sure that I could have or would have continued the relation-
 ship. She is an amazing woman and I'm hoping that our relationship
 continues to grow closer and closer. Maybe one day I'll be married
 again and forget these last 16 years of bachelorhood. Here's to hop-

ing. So tomorrow, when I'm groggy as hell, crabby from a lack of sleep and sore from too much exercise, I will raise a glass in the air and send a thank you out for all you have done for us.

Thank You.

From a legal or ethical perspective, it may seem unprofessional for a psychotherapist to offer advice that encourages rather than deters someone from engaging in illegal acts. An individual who agrees with the abolitionist paradigm of prostitution would most likely not be able to moderate a board on a provider review site, probably because the discourse in a setting where posters feel comfortable enough to disclose the affective components of transactional sex would eventually fall flat on ideologically deaf ears. On the other hand, having the ability to create a therapeutic alliance with individuals whose life philosophies are radically different is considered a skill and a necessity among mental health clinicians. For LG, the principle of harm reduction—a set of strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with buying and selling sexual services—became a clear justification for moderating the board.

Concurrent with the proliferation of provider review sites and online discussion boards, a growing number of scholars had also begun to explore the various contexts, modes of engagement, and roles of the participants in commercial sex. They noted a substantial variation in the way prostitution is organized and experienced by providers and clients (see Bernstein 2007a, 2007b; Huff 2011; Pettinger 2011; Sanders 2008). Their studies began to challenge some of the myths surrounding prostitution and also those who characterized prostitution from a monolithic perspective (Weitzer 2010, 26). Liberal advocates of sex work turned their attention to the global transformations of the economic culture, and how these changes began to influence paid sex. The Girlfriend Experience (GFE) rapidly became part of Internet prostitution vernacular, appearing as shorthand for clients and providers engaging like bona fide lovers performing emotional and physical labor to stimulate one another (Bernstein, 2007b, 126). The Erotic Highway board was replete with queries from both hobbyists and providers concerning the various aspects of GFE—everything from where to put the “donation envelope,” to the complexity of an unexpected emotional attachment between client and provider. It was also seemingly populated by the type of indoor client described in Bernstein's paradigm.

Hubbard (1999, 232) has called to attention the issues in researching a stigmatized population such as sex workers and contends that any risk of exploitation has to be minimized by an approach that empowers the subject. In order to build trust and avoid “academic voyeurism” it is necessary to produce knowledge that reduces stigma and recognizes sex providers as legitimate in

dividuals engaged in gainful what is most useful in terms increased understanding of considering the potential could be applied, as clients less sympathy and unders every discussion board or laments of being misunderstood in transactional sex. Links circulated, discussed and had touched on the over and the portrayal of victim paradigm (Weitzer 2010, “who is involved in the h

After three years of LC the Erotic Highway board, moderators, administrators and discussion boards, the open questions. For LG, it was an alliance that had been built as a supporter of the abolition threads that revealed representing an illegal, ill-vivance, it was also an unobtainable data from a high

The TER Study

Until recently, the message forums or message boards were the principal form of communication (Kuhns and Kuhns 2008; Sanders 2008). The distance from the target audience, particularly for researchers (Ingesson, 2004, 49). In addition, anonymous data do not jibe with research participants communicating online could provoke negative reactions from discussion board participants

bby from a lack of sleep
glass in the air and send

n unprofessional for a psy-
r than deters someone from
ith the abolitionist paradigm
derate a board on a provider
ting where posters feel com-
ts of transactional sex would
the other hand, having the
uals whose life philosophies
ecessity among mental health
ion—a set of strategies and
ociated with buying and sell-
for moderating the board.
review sites and online dis-
ad also begun to explore the
s of the participants in com-
n the way prostitution is or-
(see Bernstein 2007a, 2007b;
r studies began to challenge
also those who characterized
tzer 2010, 26). Liberal adv-
global transformations of the
o influence paid sex. The Girl-
Internet prostitution vernac-
viders engaging like bona fide
o stimulate one another (Bern-
was replete with queries from
rious aspects of GFE—every-
,” to the complexity of an un-
provider. It was also seemingly
l in Bernstein’s paradigm.
he issues in researching a stig-
contends that any risk of ex-
that empowers the subject. In
ism” it is necessary to produce
sex providers as legitimate in-

dividuals engaged in gainful work. The research method of choice is guided by what is most useful in terms of gathering data that ultimately will generate an increased understanding of marginalized or poorly accessed populations. When considering the potential of researching prostitution clients, the same criteria could be applied, as clients are no less stigmatized and frequently receive even less sympathy and understanding than sex workers. In the case of TER, almost every discussion board on the site contains client-generated threads filled with laments of being misunderstood, maligned and stigmatized for participating in transactional sex. Links to mainstream media articles condemning clients are circulated, discussed and universally deplored. On the Erotic Highway, a few had touched on the overt dissonance between their relations with providers and the portrayal of victim and perpetrator inherent in the prostitution oppression paradigm (Weitzer 2010, 15). Others simply wanted answers to the perennial “who is involved in the hobby and what is the GFE?”

After three years of LG’s daily interaction with TER members, not only on the Erotic Highway board but also in frequent communication with moderators, administrators and occasionally posters on the national and regional discussion boards, the opportunity had now presented itself to answer those very questions. For LG, it was a leap of faith and trust in an uncommon but sturdy alliance that had been built between the participants and someone perceived as a supporter of the hobbyist community—a bond constructed from discussion threads that revealed intent, opinions and philosophies in a virtual space representing an illegal, illicit and discreditable activity. For a researcher of deviance, it was also an unprecedented opportunity to gather previously inaccessible data from a highly elusive population—the TER hobbyists.

The TER Study

Until recently, the majority of prostitution studies using Internet discussion forums or message boards as the environment of interest employed “lurking” as the principal form of observation (e.g., Holt and Blevins 2007; Holt, Blevins and Kuhns 2008; Sanders 2005). The opportunity to maintain a comfortable distance from the target population and become “a fly on the wall” is tempting, particularly for researchers who engage in ethnographic research (Sveningsson, 2004, 49). In addition, content analyses and other methods of sampling anonymous data do not pose the same ethical dilemmas as interacting directly with research participants. Sanders, who conducted a study of female sex workers communicating online, decided against disclosing her identity because it could provoke negative reactions, particularly when it became apparent that discussion board participants were aware of being monitored by law enforcement