

and other outsiders. For LG, lurking was not an option and the methodological concerns of conducting a survey directly with TER members became very obvious. In contrast to quantitative studies with captive populations where arrested prostitution clients in diversion programs were encouraged to complete extensive questionnaires provided by unfamiliar researchers (see Monto 2000), the prospective participants were completely free to participate in or ignore the study. They were also highly familiar with the researcher's online persona and the scope of her particular discussion board. For better or for worse, they had formed an opinion of LG and based their participation on their feelings and attitudes toward her. In addition, the recruiting notice for the study, posted on all TER regional discussion boards during a 30-day period (September–October 2009), contained a genuine plea for helping LG to complete her dissertation and earn a doctorate. Clearly, a self-selecting sample such as one obtained partially by courtesy toward the investigator cannot remotely be considered representative or random. Moreover, LG's anonymity and identity would no longer be an option, as the IRB-approved informed consent preceding the online survey contained the legal names of LG and her faculty advisor, the address of the learning institution supporting the study, telephone numbers and other immediate contact information.

But there were still some barriers to instantly accessing the survey instrument. In order for potential participants to access the questionnaire on a commercial survey hosting site, a PM request sent to LG from the participant's TER message account was required. This was mainly to prevent the possibility of providers or other individuals who were not TER members from accessing the study. LG would then check the username against the TER database to make sure that a) the user had at least one review posted, and b) was not a female provider. A response PM with a link was sent to the qualified participant who then accessed the survey by clicking on the provided link to the survey site. During the completion of the survey, each participant read the questions displayed on his computer screen and then placed the cursor on buttons corresponding to his chosen answers. Some questions also required typing responses into single textboxes. As soon as each survey was completed and the participant had exited the site, responses were immediately registered by the survey software. To every extent possible, the survey was anonymous; no IP-addresses were visible to the researcher and as an additional measure against calculated or less spontaneous responses, there was no possibility of returning to complete the survey once interrupted by deliberately or accidentally shutting down the webpage.

The majority of the variables in the 104-item questionnaire were measured by using single response items. The simple frequency measures of demographic

interest were the survey participation, income, area of residence, elicited descriptive single or multiple behaviors, feelings and opinions. These items were derived from hypotheses previously never been administered. The hypotheses predicted the behaviors expected that there would be a high level of GFE, i.e., act like girlfriends would engage in penile-vaginal and other sexual behaviors, mainly of non-remunerative relationships. It was expected that there would be emotional attachment to and willingness to give additional money or

The Hobbyist

After 30 days of keeping 600 participants drawn from the hobbyists who participated previously in PMs sent direct messages of gratitude, encouragement and feedback over their own academic advising the presumably young providers were analyzed, a conclusion emerged. The majority of participants were male (97.3%) and married (79.1%). The mean age was 30.5 (80.5%), with a mean annual income of \$18,271.8 ($SD = 182,718$). Almost half (48.7%) worked through the Internet for their primary income, followed by hotel workers (82.7%). Penile-vaginal intercourse was the most common sexual activity (39.9%), followed by fellatio (81.8%) and masturbation (81.8%). Over 45% of the providers. The most frequent

option and the methodology. TER members became very captive populations where researchers were encouraged to complete the survey (see Monto 2000), free to participate in or ignore the researcher's online persona. For better or for worse, they participated on their feelings. A notice for the study, posted in a 30-day period (September–October) to complete her dissertation and a link such as one obtained partially from the researcher's email, would not be considered representative and identity would no longer be present preceding the online survey. The researcher, the address of the researcher, the phone numbers and other immediate

accessing the survey instrument, the questionnaire on a comment to LG from the participant's email, mainly to prevent the possibility of not TER members from accessing the TER database. The survey review posted, and b) was not a link was sent to the qualified parking on the provided link to the survey, each participant read the survey and then placed the cursor on the survey. Some questions also required a response as each survey was completed. Responses were immediately registered. If possible, the survey was anonymous; if not, it was an additional measure against returning. There was no possibility of returning the survey by deliberately or accidentally

Some questionnaire were measured. Frequency measures of demographic

interest were the survey participants' age, ethnic background, education, employment, income, area of residence, sexual orientation. Many questions solicited descriptive single or multiple-item responses concerning the respondents' behaviors, feelings and opinions of providers in general and the GFE in particular. These items were developed by LG specifically for the survey and had previously never been administered to other client populations. In addition to exploring the demographic and attitudinal data of the respondents, three hypotheses predicted the behavioral characteristics of the client sample: It was expected that there would be a preference for providers who would offer the GFE, i.e., act like girlfriends and not like prostitutes; it was expected that clients would engage in penile-vaginal coitus with providers more frequently than in other sexual behaviors, mainly because clients would want to replicate aspects of non-remunerative relationships that include conventional sex acts; and, it was expected that there would be a positive correlation between the degree of emotional attachment to an "all-time favorite" (ATF) provider and hobbyists giving additional money or material goods to those specific providers.

The Hobbyist

After 30 days of keeping the survey open, LG issued a thank you to over 600 participants drawn from the various discussion boards. Many of the hobbyists who participated provided post-survey feedback, comments and suggestions in PMs sent directly to LG. Several messages were expressions of gratitude, encouragement and personal sharing; senior members often reflected over their own academic careers and adopted a slightly avuncular tone, advising the presumably younger LG to continue the research and, above all, to keep the discussion board alive. When the final 584 completed questionnaires were analyzed, a composite of the average discussion board participant emerged. The majority of respondents were listed as White (84.9%), heterosexual (97.3%) and married (62.5%). Most had completed a bachelor's or graduate degree (79.1%). The majority of participants were employed full-time (80.5%), with a mean annual income of \$141,510 ($M = 141,510$, $Mdn = 100,000$, $SD = 182,718$). Almost half the sample (48.8%) had solicited a sex worker through the Internet for their first experience. The vast majority had met sex workers in hotels or motels (94.5%), and/or at the worker's incall location (82.7%). Penile-vaginal coitus with condom was the most frequent activity (39.9%), followed by fellatio without condom (32.6%). The vast majority of respondents (81.8%) would find providers by reading reviews on provider review sites. Over 45% of the respondents had each engaged with more than 20 providers. The most frequent expenditure for 60 minutes of sexual activity

was \$300, paid by 42.9% of the respondents. A plurality of respondents preferred a White provider (78.8%). Most respondents (83.6%) were attracted to a provider's happy and cheerful personality; in addition, 80.2% of respondents indicated that the desired characteristics of the GFE meant that the provider was "acting like a girlfriend and not like a prostitute at all." Almost half of the respondents (40.5%) had fallen in love with or become emotionally attached to a provider. Outside of fees or tips related to the session, 52.7% of the respondents had given additional money and/or material goods to the provider. A majority of respondents (83.8%) selected a lack of funds as the primary reason for stopping to engage with providers; 60.0% would stop if they contracted an STD; 49.6% of the respondents would stop if they entered into a new non-paying love or sexual relationship; 46.2% would stop if they were arrested for solicitation, and 45.1% would stop if their spouse or partner found out. Simply becoming too busy to meet with providers was chosen by 37.2%, while experiencing feelings of guilt or shame would stop 16.2%. Meanwhile, becoming diagnosed as a "sex addict" by a mental health professional would stop only 13.1% of the respondents from engaging with providers again. Among the reasons for preferring GFE providers over other kinds of sex workers, 59.3% selected *They act like girlfriends and not like prostitutes at all* as the most frequent reason. Consistent with the prediction, protected vaginal intercourse was selected by 39.9% of the respondents as the most frequent sexual activity. Finally, it was expected that there would be a positive correlation between having an ATE, falling in love with a provider or ATE, and giving the provider additional money over and above fees and tips for sexual services. Results were consistent with this prediction, as there was a positive correlation between falling in love or becoming emotionally attached to a provider and giving her additional money and/or material goods, $r(567) = .49, p < .001$.

True to the anecdotal information that had emerged on the discussion board, it was apparent that the respondents did have a determined sense of the GFE and its required behavioral components. Moreover, the majority in the study preferred a White provider aged 26–30 or older. As suggested in the hobbyist-provider relationships so often described by hobbyists in painstaking detail on the Erotic Highway, these men may have found it easier to experience the mutuality and behavioral commonalities of the GFE with a woman whose ethnicity, age and sociocultural background were not vastly different from their own. As for giving additional money or material goods beyond the fee or tips for sexual services, there were differences between married, separated and divorced respondents. More than half of the separated or divorced clients had fallen in love with or become emotionally attached to specific providers, whereas only one third of the married respondents had done so. In addition, about

one third of all respondents stated that they were not currently in a long-term partner of an actively working subgroup of hobbyists used to pursue longer-lasting emotional relationships with their paid partners. This particular emotional labor performed by hobbyists could have endeared them sufficiently to blur client-provider boundaries, though the findings suggest that such things were genuinely reciprocal. Further research was needed to explore the bounded authenticity, in order to understand the hobbyist-GFE provider emotional

Exiting the Erotic Highway

During the final two years of the study, the view underwent substantial change. The management staff were relocated to a new building, new boards were introduced, and a curious ripple effect began to show up on the Erotic Highway. The relational variety of sexual encounters on the board, most likely due to the inability to pay for the GFE, had transformed itself from a focus on exclusively medical issues where the provider was so numerous and frequent that they were regarded as medical advice. The focus was considerably more focused on the provider's occupation with sexual function, and so did the unintended negative consequences for the observer. Due to the disclosure of details in the consent, several clients contacted LG off-site. Posting on various discussion boards while issuing explanation of the process and the customary payment on LG's part appeared to be restricted to boards or

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one third of all respondents stated that they could marry or become a perma-
 nent partner of an actively working provider. These findings showed that a
 subgroup of hobbyists used providers not just for sexual services, but also to
 pursue longer-lasting emotional bonds that would otherwise be sought with un-
 paid partners. This particular group of respondents may have mistaken the
 emotional labor performed by the GFE provider for genuine reciprocal at-
 tachment. Alternatively, additional funds and resources spent by respondents
 could have endeared them sufficiently to providers who temporarily loosened
 client-provider boundaries, thereby leading clients to believe that their feel-
 ings were genuinely reciprocated. With this in mind, LG suggested that addi-
 tional research was needed with clients who ventured beyond the concept of
 bounded authenticity, in order to make further assessments in the area of
 hobbyist-GFE provider emotional relations.

Exiting the Erotic Highway

During the final two years of LG's tenure as a moderator, The Erotic Re-
 view underwent substantial changes. The network servers as well as the man-
 agement staff were relocated to the Netherlands. The site was also redesigned,
 new boards were introduced and the focus of the site expanded to include Eu-
 rope. A curious ripple effect of the 2008 worldwide financial recession began
 to show up on the Erotic Highway; senior members who preferred the more
 relational variety of sexual encounters stopped posting comments and reflec-
 tions on the board, most likely due to financial constraints and a decrease in
 ability to pay for the GFE. A cursory content analysis showed that the board
 had transformed itself from a relationship-oriented space to one of almost ex-
 clusively medical issues where questions about ED medications loomed, in fact
 so numerous and frequent that the site administrators had to post a disclaimer
 regarding medical advice. It appeared that a new crop of members were con-
 siderably more focused on getting more value for their money, hence the pre-
 occupation with sexual function. Meanwhile, as LG's research activities increased,
 so did the unintended negative consequences of remaining a participant-
 observer. Due to the disclosure requirement of using legal names and contact
 details in the consent, several members who participated in the study began con-
 tacting LG off-site. Postings asking for the results of the study also appeared
 on various discussion boards, with LG invariably declining to provide any data
 while issuing explanations of journal article submissions, the peer review
 process and the customary time lag in publication. The perceived lack of trans-
 parency on LG's part appeared to frustrate a few members and while the anger
 was restricted to boards other than the Erotic Highway, a group of hobbyists

began to openly complain to board moderators and the administrators about LG's policy of non-disclosure in keeping the data away from TER. With isolated laments becoming entire threads of derision, coupled with the more hard-edged stance of new members determined to chase the more emotions-focused White Knights off the boards, it was time to avoid a head-on collision and exit the Highway while still intact. On July 15, 2011, LG posted a final departure message on The Erotic Highway. Several responses to the posting were genuine expressions of gratitude, astonishment at the fact that LG's service had been pro bono to the site, and a request to stay in contact with the board, should the survey results eventually become public. And while the site administrator FFP thanked LG for all the years of service to the board, the overseas management remained curiously silent. Over five years of daily monitoring and crafting responses as the Love Goddess had come to an end.

In the early months of 2012, I undertook a content analysis of the numerous discussion threads that had amassed during the preceding five years on the board. The intent was to explore the spectrum of intimacy in a sample of postings generated by hobbyists who became involved with providers (Milrod and Weitzer 2012). During this covert observation of pseudonymous, publicly accessible data, my co-author and I decided to retain the original usernames in discussion threads that were often revelatory accounts of deeply personal intimacy. Meanwhile, the practice of retaining or replacing usernames in Internet research is an area of ethical concern. In her study of customers on PunterNet, a UK-based provider review site, Pettinger (2011, 230) treated postings as "authored, culturally produced text" and chose to replace usernames with pseudonyms. Beddows (2008, 131) has suggested that while online forum threads may be accessible without a password, contribution to them is not, and that researchers should be cautious not to underestimate the social and cultural significance of screen names. TER does have a privacy policy statement indicating that all posted information becomes public; thus, while we did not violate the law, I now believe that it would have been optimal to mask the actual usernames with invented names of our own. When the journal article on hobbyist intimacy was published just a few weeks prior to the quantitative hobbyist study, it garnered considerable attention in mainstream media. Hobbyists as well as the general public were able to read the postings, complete with usernames exactly as they appeared on the Erotic Highway board. As promised, I ventured on the various TER boards under my usual screen name and announced the online availability of the article at no cost for a limited time. While many appreciated the content and some peripheral discussion ensued, others were alarmed and offended by the use of the actual screen names. Moreover, many felt that the conclusions in the article were inaccurate or even spurious. Others were of the

opinion that LG had "sold out" the site that for all intents and purposes was private.

Three weeks later, the TER study (2012) went online; this time, however, the journal article was available for a fee, with only the abstract available. On the highly active posting members notice board, complete with my private group of members denounced the several posters with no background in social science, angry and confused by the methods, and mainly upset at the word "deviance," deviation from the norms of society with nothing to hide, save for the violations I posted could quell the inflation. I cried the loudest and knew the least. I posted on the General Discussion board, in which someone called me an inept quisling. The furor died down, and the research method of remaining a participant-observer ended. The support I had in FFP was not there any longer. She disappeared and her function was taken over by another person. I noted that any of my attempts to post were in the approval queue, controlled by a moderator in a zone—a far cry from the freewheeling nature of the site. When I finally tried to log into the site, a red automated message appeared on my screen:

You have been Banned! It is unfortunate that in our community it is necessary to ask certain questions. We wish you all the best of luck in whatever your future decision was in error, please email us if you have any questions.

In spite of the initial shock and disheartening communication, it did not stop my future work. I continue to believe that the participation in searching deviant communities online is a delicate and balancing act required to maintain a community of interest while still adhering to the standards of social science research on the Internet. In addition, substantially in the last ten years, participation in online outlets that enable the exchange of information in an immediate and accessible format across various platforms. In addition, the use of mobile applications

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Three weeks later, the TER study (Milrod and Monto 2012) appeared online; this time, however, the journal in question chose to retain the main article for a fee, with only the abstract available to the general public. One of the highly active posting members noticed the press release and copied it to the discussion board, complete with my real name and affiliation. Overnight, an irate group of members denounced the study as flawed and full of errors. Several posters with no background in social science research became suspicious, angry and confused by the methods, results and conclusions. Some were genuinely upset at the word "deviance," declaring that they were normal members of society with nothing to hide, save for the hobby. No explanations or exculpations I posted could quell the inflammatory anger, marshaled by a few who cried the loudest and knew the least. A brief flame war broke out on the General Discussion board, in which some defended LG while others considered her an inept quisling. The furor died down a few threads later, but clearly, the research method of remaining a participant-observer on TER had come to an end. The support I had in FFP was no longer there, as she mysteriously disappeared and her function was taken over by nameless administrators overseas. I noted that any of my attempts to post were now held in static purgatory of the approval queue, controlled by unidentified moderators in another time zone—a far cry from the freewheeling instant posting days on the Erotic Highway. When I finally tried to log into my account a few months later, this automated message appeared on my screen:

You have been Banned! It is unfortunate that sometimes in our little community it is necessary to ask certain people not to return. We wish you all the best of luck in whatever you choose to do. If you believe our decision was in error, please email us at admin@theeroticreview.com.

In spite of the initial shock and disappointment following this unvarnished communication, it did not stop my future studies of the hobbyist population. I continue to believe that the participant-observer approach is useful in researching deviant communities online, despite the demand in commitment and the balancing act required to maintain equanimity in relations with the community of interest while still adhering to the ethical conduct required in social science research on the Internet. Meanwhile, online fieldwork has changed substantially in the last ten years, particularly since the rise of social media outlets that enable the exchange of information and research data in an immediate and accessible format across various mobile platform technologies. In addition, the use of mobile applications and posting rights on news sites are

sometimes directly dependent on profiles established on social networks, mainly Facebook; therefore, any researcher of a community that espouses controversial opinions needs to consider identity management and the consequences of posting personal opinions on websites accessible to the public at large.

But perhaps the most challenging methodological dilemma is at the nucleus of the participant-observer approach—where to draw the line in terms of participation. In her ethnographic dissertation research of strip clubs, cultural anthropologist Katherine Frank worked as an exotic dancer from 1996 to 2002 at six different clubs in a Southeastern city while using her earnings to pay for graduate school. In her own words, Frank had “no idea how fascinating the world of adult entertainment would become” (2002, 20). Sociologist and university professor Wendy Chapkis (2005) provided sexual services to female clients at a brothel in Amsterdam’s Red Light District for a day, as an immersion into her dissertation field work. And while it seems unlikely but certainly not impossible that the average student of deviance could become a sex worker to pay for tuition or spend money on sexual services, there are still aspects of gendered communications that enter into the relationship between a female prostitution researcher and a heterosexual male participant, even if the two will never meet AFK. In my case, the question of “have you ever provided sex,” and the suspicion that my lack of personal experience would render me a poor researcher were part of a larger *leitmotif* that dogged me throughout the research process. Another was the occasional participant’s erotic fantasy concerning my appearance and potential for a sexual experience between us. This was manifested in private messages or even emails sent to my office email address, mostly after the completion of a survey. Some participants also assumed that I knew their identities from their provided survey answers and would refer back to them, in order to further personal contact. In those instances, a polite reply was provided, usually to the satisfaction of the participant who was thanked for his contribution. Clearly, it is the prerogative of every online researcher to decide the extent to which immersion into the community is beneficial; however, with the online and AFK worlds rapidly merging during the present decade, this may become an even more pressing issue than was previously imagined.

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