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## Sexuality online: exploration and self-identification among college students

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SEXUALITY ONLINE:  
EXPLORATION AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION AMONG COLLEGE  
STUDENTS

by

CHELSEA NORDHAM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Sociology  
in the College of Sciences  
and in The Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

The Internet is a space that offers the exploration of sexual experiences without social repercussions to one's identity. As a de-centralized environment, social conventions, cues, judgments and risks may be present, but are not fixed. Online sexual activities are accessible through both interactive and observational means, such as forums, blogs, chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, video conferencing and websites. The current study sought to uncover the motivation and significance of Internet use on how college students perceive, experience and define their sexuality. The intent of this thesis was to look into the complexity of human sexuality that can be embodied online and help to extend our knowledge on how Internet use provides support and satisfaction for sexual needs that are significant to individuals affected by social discomfort. The study showed that shyness and anxiousness as temperaments associated with social discomfort were tied to utilizing the Internet for sexual experiences, such as exploration and strengthening of sexual identity.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                             |    |
|-----------------------------|----|
| INTRODUCTION.....           | 1  |
| LITERATURE REVIEW.....      | 2  |
| Virtual Environment.....    | 2  |
| Virtual Activity.....       | 3  |
| Virtual Identity.....       | 4  |
| The Current Study.....      | 5  |
| THERETICAL ORIENTATION..... | 7  |
| RESEARCH QUESTION.....      | 9  |
| HYPOTHESES.....             | 10 |
| METHODS/SAMPLE.....         | 11 |
| MEASUREMENTS.....           | 12 |
| DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY..... | 14 |
| RESULTS.....                | 15 |
| CONCLUSIONS.....            | 26 |
| APPENDIX.....               | 30 |
| REFERENCES.....             | 34 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Table 1. Demographic Percentages.....  | 15 |
| Table 2. Percentages of Univariate Variables.....  | 17 |
| Table 3. Independent t-tests for Anxious and Shy in relation to Internet Engagement for<br>Sexual Experiences..... | 18 |
| Table 4. Crosstab Shy and Social Discomfort*.....  | 19 |
| Table 5. Crosstab between Anxious and Social Discomfort*.....  | 21 |
| Table 6. Crosstab Shy/Anxious and Sexual Exploration .....   | 23 |
| Table 7. Crosstab Shy/Anxious and Strengthening Sexual Preferences.....  | 25 |

## INTRODUCTION

The Internet is a space that offers the exploration of sexual experiences without social repercussions to one's identity. As a de-centralized environment, social conventions, cues, judgments and risks may be present, but are not fixed. Through anonymity and the absence of physical interaction, the Internet allows users to experiment with or bypass social identities that influence interactions and mostly appear physically, such as race, gender, able-bodiedness and sexual orientation. Online sexual activities are accessible through both interactive and observational means, which include forums, blogs, chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, video conferencing and websites.

The current study aimed to uncover the influence and significance of Internet use on how college students experience and label their sexuality. The findings in this research will contribute to studies indicating that the Internet could be a utopian environment for creating and consuming sexual content regardless of social identity, which Shoshana Magnet (2007) and Kibby and Costello (2001) proposed. This study aimed to look into the complexity of human sexuality that can be embodied online as a reaction to the privilege and norms attached to heterosexual, cisgendered identities. With the current social value of habitual consumption and accessibility of technology and the Internet, the respondents in this study have aged to young adults having been socialized by mainstream society and virtual environments. This study will help to extend our knowledge about how Internet use provides support and satisfaction for sexual needs that are significant to individuals and influenced by social norms in online environments.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Virtual Environment

Cyberspace is an environment that differs from face-to-face interaction and offers legitimate community support and acceptance, as well as the transmission of culture and socialization. (Bargh, Mckenna and Fitzsimons 2002; Greenfield, Subrahmanyam and Smahel 2006; Mckenna, Green and Gleason 2002; Hillier and Harrison 2007). Many studies have focused on the advantage of Internet interaction for sexualized purposes due to the lack of visible social cues or 'traditional gating features' as referred to by Bargh, Mckenna and Fitzsimons (2002), and the opportunity for community and acceptance (Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes and Haar 2002; Magnet 2007; Mckenna, Green and Gleason 2002; Kibby and Costello 2001; Hillier and Harrison 2007). Social identities indicative of privilege are both challenged and supported in online sexual contexts, as Shoshana Magnet (2007) illustrated by studying the nude modeling website of [suicidegirls.com](http://suicidegirls.com). [Suicidegirls.com](http://suicidegirls.com) is an environment where women can express anger, desire and lust, or conversely where whiteness is normative and non-white models are commented on as different, exotic and representative of racial and ethnic stereotypes. Online environments offer unparalleled diversity or dehumanize through 'niche marketing', which reflects racial and sexual inequalities, such as the sexual commodification of women of color in the physical world.

Closeness and intimacy in online sexual environments were attributed to having increased one's social circle by 68% of Usenet newsgroup users and in addition, 71% of romantic relationships that had begun on the Internet were still intact two years later when studied by Mckenna, Green and Gleason (2002). In a study done by Greenfield, Subrahmanyam



and Smahel (2006), thirty-eight chat rooms were monitored for two months and with known monitoring, adolescents provided more information to each other about gender and location, which the researchers attributed to anonymity and safety. Therefore, virtual environments create bonds that depend on realities of the virtual context, such as safety, anonymity and exclusion from the physical world.

### Virtual Activity

In virtual environments, activities such as performing gender, gender switching and chatting about sex and sexuality are appealing due to safety, anonymity and the availability of finding others. Nybote's (2004) analysis of "The Turing Game", which was an online game created by the Georgia Institute of Technology to analyze gender performance online, examined users that pretended to be the opposite binary gender. Gender performances were judged as inadequate, seeming too masculine or too feminine by other users. Nybote's analysis shows how particularly gendered behavior online is the product of construction and through these representations, users can question gender. Gender as a performance online was also studied by Roberts and Parks (2010), who highlighted gender-switching behaviors by conducting online surveys with two stratified random samples. Forty percent of participants had gender-switched by presenting themselves as the opposite binary gender and the main reasons stated were to play a different role than themselves. The researchers concluded that gender-switching was an experimental behavior and longitudinal studies were further needed.

The presence or absence of monitoring in chat rooms and its influence on activeness versus observational behavior of users was also explored. When Greenfield, Subrahmanyam and Smahel (2006) studied thirty-eight chat rooms, they coded for sexual exploration by measuring

the sexual content of participants' utterances. They compared monitored and unmonitored rooms and found that there were twice as many sexual themes in unmonitored rooms as monitored, with 28% of utterances being of sexual nature. Mckenna, Green and Smith (2001) found that after in-depth interviews with participants of cybersex chat rooms, 89% of users were simply observers and 11% were active participants in the chat. Twenty percent of participants felt that cybersex had helped them to feel less shame about their sexual needs and desires and only a small number responded to pretending to be a different gender.

Same-sex attracted youth were studied by Hillier and Harrison (2007). After considering two studies, (the first was a national study in 1998 of 748 people and the second was an online questionnaire with 209 people) about same-sex attracted 14-21 year olds in Australia and their experiences with online sexual exploration, one participant wrote a 'coming out' letter to his parents online and two other participants stated how practicing sex online was easier when young and not 'out' as gay. The researchers concluded that the Internet was useful for same-sex youth looking for role models and information. This expands on the notion of the Internet providing safe spaces, community and socialization particularly for minority groups.

### Virtual Identity

Anonymity and the expression of one's private thoughts and desires enable individuals to construct and control how others view them online, which in turn fosters a virtual self in virtual environments. Bargh, Mckenna and Fitzsimons (2002) found that by disclosing one's inner self to another person, there was greater liking between strangers meeting on the Internet and bonds created versus a face-to-face meeting. Mckenna, Green and Gleason (2002) found that anonymity caused relationships to form and endure, with 84% of respondents reporting that their

online relationships were “real, important and close.” Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes and Haar (2002) countered the praise of anonymity in online interactions by stating that it depersonalizes interactions, causing individuals to rely on stereotypes of social identities that are problematic due to power relations.

Individuals expressing aspects of their identity, such as their age, gender, location, marital status and job was also important to the sex entertainment study from Kibby and Costello (2001) and the same-sex youth study from Hillier and Harrison (2007). These expressions of one’s identity were disclosed when there was trust in the community and safety from physical action. In addition, users who were not heterosexual and disabled were more likely to gender-switch, with 50% of those who reported gender-switching identifying as disabled in the study done by Roberts and Costello (2001), showing that sexual orientation and able-bodiedness influenced online sexual activity.

Gendered behaviors were specifically critical to research concerning online identity as well. Kibby and Costello (2011) found that with video-conferencing, men may still be the active partners in the interaction and women may still be the “object of men’s leisure,” despite the unstable power dynamic between the object and subject. Nyboe (2004) observed in the gender performance game “The Turning Game” that rigid masculine and feminine stereotypes were standardly used. Also, in the “Suicide Girls” website study, Magnet (2007) found that women were both the objects and subjects of their own sexual desire.

### The Current Study

This study examined how current university students who matured to adulthood with Internet use have explored their sexuality in the past online due to shyness and anxiousness

caused by social discomfort. Also, this study examined how sexual exploration through online sexual activities influenced how currently view or not view their sexual desires and attractions due to shyness and anxiousness caused by social discomfort. Magnet (2007) and Kibby and Costello (2001) expressed the possibility for a utopia on the Internet. Magnet (2007) explained how suicidegirls.com could be a feminist context for female production and consumption of sexual content, whereas Kibby and Costello (2001) found the Internet could allow for “the possibility of rewriting codes of sexuality”. Although longitudinal studies are needed, this study used participants that had Internet use as part of socialization occurring in teen years. The expression of one’s true self, gender-switching behavior, same-sex attraction, relationship formation, community membership and sexual entertainment consumption were assessed in order to determine the significance of virtual environments for sexual experiences.

## THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Howard Becker (1963) defined deviance as “the creation of social groups and not the quality of some act or behavior” and referred to those who accepted being labeled deviant from mainstream society as “outsiders”. Although Becker was defining the labeling theory through crime, the labeling theory can be applied to those who use the Internet for sexual desires that are neglected from typical face-to-face interactions due to fears of labeling and/or altering their identity. Becker (1963) stated that “most people think or fantasize in a deviant manner”, but certain people conform to mainstream society and others embrace desires that differ. For the current study, individuals may use the Internet for sexual experiences and do not alter how they label their identity in non-virtual environments due to fear of stigma, such as with sexual orientation. Others may embrace the sexual experiences they have online and alter how they label their sexual identity offline. Those who reinforce their sexual identity through online activities may view themselves as different from heteronormative mainstream society and consider most of society as the outsiders to their sexual preferences, which Becker found to be an occurrence among people identifying with preferences stigmatized by mainstream society.

Shoshana Magnet (2007) illustrated the utopian cyberfeminist viewpoint that women can act on their sexual desires in virtual spaces unlike they do in society because of anonymity and safety from judgment and danger. Therefore, females may consider online sexual activities to be significant to them and virtual spaces as freeing. In this study, judgment and fear are measured by determining social discomfort, such as inquiring about the importance of privacy, safety and freedom from judgment and embarrassment. Social discomfort in this study is seen as the response to unwanted responses and interactions with others based on one’s actions and words.

Utilizing the Internet for sexual purposes due to social discomfort could mean avoiding disapproval from expressing sexual needs or the threat of receiving unwanted sexual attention that occurs in face-to-face interactions, which could be particularly significant to cisgendered females. In the current study, sexual exploration online is seen as a way of interacting and observing sexually in a space and manner that is flexible and controllable unlike face-to-face life. Sexual exploration online is not seen as deviant in the current study, but the preferences and activities explored exclusively online could be socially undesirable to express in one's daily life identity and therefore deviant in face-to-face life. As Magnet (2007) suggested, online sexual exploration is seen as freeing in the current study from dominant sociohistorical and cultural values that define sexuality and gender narrowly.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the impact of Internet use on the sexual exploration and self-identification of college students?

## HYPOTHESES

- Hypothesis 1: Respondents that identified as shy utilized the Internet for sexual experiences due to social discomfort (judgment, embarrassment, privacy and safety) more than those who did not identify as shy.
- Hypothesis 2: Respondents that identified as anxious utilized the Internet for sexual experiences due to social discomfort (judgment, embarrassment, privacy and safety) more than those who did not identify as anxious.
- Hypothesis 3: Respondents that attributed Internet use to sexual exploration will have used the Internet due to shyness and anxiousness.
- Hypothesis 4: Respondents that attributed Internet use to strengthening sexual preferences will have used the Internet due to shyness and anxiousness.



## METHODS/SAMPLE

Three hundred seventeen college students were anonymously surveyed online in regards to their experiences and views of sexuality from Internet use. Quantitative anonymous online surveys were used to gather the data for this study. The surveys were made accessible to students through the online survey system Qualtrics. The link to the survey was advertised and distributed, as well as explained as voluntary by a sociology professor. The data from Qualtrics was downloaded and statistically analyzed in SPSS.

This study aimed to study the significance of Internet use and sexuality; therefore undergraduate college students within the ages of 18 and 25 were ideal for this study because Internet use was likely an aspect of their lives during physical maturation and sexual socialization in teenage years. Students who identified as asexual, were not sexually active or not comfortable could choose to end the survey at any time. The sample consisted of students of any sex, sexual orientation, race, physical ability, age and economic class.

## MEASUREMENTS

*Demographics.* There are five demographic variables in this study. The measurement for sex had the options of female, male or other. Sexual orientation had the options of heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or other. In order to examine the age group of the sample, age was asked by a fill-in space. Able-bodiedness was measured as it is in the 2000 U.S. Decennial Census and race was measured as it was from the U.S. Census 2010.

*Dependent variables.* Sexual exploration online was measured by the respondents' reports of gender-switching, same-sex activities, intimate relationship formation, sexual community membership and sexual entertainment consumption. Respondents were asked to answer yes/no to questions about involvement in online sexual activities to measure sexual exploration. Sexual self-identification was measured by a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. These questions covered expressing aspects of selves such as attractions, desires and fantasies in virtual environments. Yes/no responses about support, confidence and connection to others measured the strengthening component respondents experience online through independent questions.

*Independent variable.* Internet use was measured by yes/no engagement in forums, blogs, chats, email, instant messaging, video conferencing and viewing of websites. In addition, yes/no responses about social discomfort (judgment, embarrassment, privacy and safety) were measured for assessing the motivation for utilizing virtual environments. A shy and/or anxious temperament was measured by a 4-point Likert Scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', as Mckenna, Green and Gleason (2002) found that online relationships made shy and anxious people less shy and anxious. Each Likert scale question was recoded into reading

‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ as indicating anxiousness or shyness and ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ as not indicating anxiousness or shyness. Both shyness and anxiousness were recoded into a variable that combined shyness and anxiousness and were then compared to sexual exploration and sexual identity strengthening variables.

*Control Variables.* Control variables that accounted for intervening influences for using the Internet for sexual experiences were crime and/or abuse victimization, temperament, work status and able-bodiedness. A study done by Greenfeild, Subrahmanyam and Smahel (2006) and another study by Mckenna, Green and Gleason (2002) found that virtual environments provide safety and anonymity that allows for greater disclosure and intimacy. Therefore, participants may use the Internet as a safe space due to past trauma. Participants were asked to answer yes/no to if they have experienced a traumatic crime and/or sexual abuse. Work status was measured by an opened ended question asking how many hours a week the student works because students with little social leisure time may resort to the Internet for intimacy. Able-bodiedness was measured in the demographics portion of the survey and has been included due to a study done by Roberts and Costello (2001) that found 50% of participants that reported gender-switching online also identified as disabled. Ableism may influence Internet use due to lack of social support and/or intimacy and sexual fulfillment in physical interactions.

## DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

The data was collected from Qualtrics and statistically analyzed using SPSS. Hypothesis 1 was tested by running a crosstab between shyness and each of the variables for social discomfort. Hypothesis 2 was tested by running a crosstab between anxiousness and each of the variables for social discomfort. Hypothesis 3 was tested by running a crosstab between a variable measuring both shyness and anxiousness and each of the variables for exploration. Hypothesis 4 was tested by running a crosstab between a variable measuring both shyness and anxiousness and each of the variables for strengthening preferences.

## RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic Percentages

|  |      |
|--|------|
| Sample Size                                | 317  |
| Sex  |      |
| Male                                       | 27.1 |
| Female                                     | 71.9 |
| Other                                      | 1.0  |
| Race                                       |      |
| White/Caucasian                            | 66.2 |
| Black/African American                     | 9.7  |
| Latin/Hispanic                             | 11.7 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander                     | 4.2  |
| Native American/American Indian            | .3   |
| Sexual Orientation                         |      |
| Heterosexual                               | 80.8 |
| Homosexual                                 | 1.9  |
| Bisexual                                   | 13.3 |
| Other                                      | 3.9  |
| Disability                                 |      |
| Blindness/deafness                         | 1.0  |
| Limit in one or more basic physical        | 1.6  |
| Both blindness/deafness and basic physical | .3   |
| None                                       | 97.1 |
| Traumatic crime and/or sexual abuse        |      |
| Victim                                     | 13.6 |
| Not Victim                                 | 86.4 |
| Age  |      |
| 18 -25 Years                               | 91.2 |
| Work                                       |      |
| Unemployed                                 | 39.4 |
| 10-20 hours                                | 24.9 |
| 40 hours                                   | 5.3  |

The majority of the sample was female (71.9%), white (66.2%), heterosexual (80.8%), able-bodied (97.1%), not a victim of a traumatic crime or sexual abuse (86.4%), between the ages of 18-25 (91.2%) and unemployed or worked under twenty hours a week (64.3%). At 58.7%, respondents indicated that they had utilized the Internet for sexual experiences. At 55.2%, the sample identified as shy and 56.9% identified as anxious.

When measuring for sexual exploration online, respondents were asked about seeing a variety of sexual preferences, gender-switching, same-sex desires and intimate relationship formation. When measuring for strengthening sexual preferences, respondents were asked about the role of the Internet in how that they perceived their own sexual identity. Over 60% of the entire sample reported that utilizing the internet for sexual reasons allowed them to see a variety of sexual preferences, feel similar to others due to online activities, that exploring online for sexual reasons should be part of one's private life and the feeling of privacy and safety was important. Over 70% of the entire sample did not indicate gender-switching online, exploring same-sex desires online or forming an intimate relationship online.

Table 2. Percentages of Univariate Variables

|   | Yes  | No   |
|---|------|------|
| Engagement with Internet for Sexual Experiences | 58.7 | 41.3 |
| Shy   | 55.2 | 44.8 |
| Anxious   | 56.9 | 43.1 |
| Shy and Anxious                                 | 58.8 | 41.2 |
| Exploration                                     |      |      |
| View variety of sexual desires                  | 62.9 | 37.1 |
| Pretend to be opposite sex                      | 13.6 | 86.4 |
| Act on same-sex desires                         | 20.8 | 79.2 |
| Intimate Relationship formation                 | 28.2 | 71.8 |
| Strengthening                                   |      |      |
| Sexual Community                                | 48   | 52   |
| Only experienced                                | 40.5 | 59.5 |
| online  |      |      |
| Further understand Desires                      | 59.2 | 40.8 |
| Change view of Desires from Internet use        | 41.8 | 58.2 |
| Similarity to others                            | 65.9 | 34.1 |
| Confidence in Desires                           | 51.3 | 48.7 |
| Need of Internet                                | 43.5 | 56.5 |
| Discomfort                                      |      |      |
| Part of Private Life                            | 60.5 | 39.5 |
| Free of Judgment                                | 58.2 | 41.8 |
| Free of Embarrassment                           | 46.8 | 53.2 |
| Importance of                                   | 61.8 | 38.2 |
| Privacy   |      |      |
| Importance of Safety                            | 63.9 | 36.1 |

Shy/Anxious\*: Reports of both shyness and anxiousness.

Table 3. Independent t-tests for Anxious and Shy in relation to Internet Engagement for Sexual Experiences

| Independent Variable | Mean  | T     | df  | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-----|-----------------|
| Anxious              |       | 1.071 | 246 | .285            |
| Yes                  | .5972 |       |     |                 |
| No                   | .5288 |       |     |                 |
| Shy                  |       | .478  | 248 | .633            |
| Yes                  | .5646 |       |     |                 |
| No                   | .5340 |       |     |                 |

Hypothesis 1 was tested by running crosstabs comparing shyness to five social discomfort variables to see if respondents that identified as shy used the Internet for sexual purposes due to social discomfort more than those who did not identify as shy. Social discomfort was measured by assessing if exploring sexual desires online was seen as part of one's private life, free of judgment and free of embarrassment and if privacy and safety were important aspects.



Table 4. Crosstab Shy and Social Discomfort\*

| Social Discomfort     | Shy  | Not Shy | $\chi^2$ | Asymp. Sig.<br>(2-sided) |
|-----------------------|------|---------|----------|--------------------------|
| Part of Private Life  |      |         | 1.436    | .231                     |
| Yes                   | 64.4 | 55.8    |          |                          |
| No                    | 35.6 | 44.2    |          |                          |
| Free of Judgment      |      |         | 4.631    | .031                     |
| Yes                   | 65   | 51.4    |          |                          |
| No                    | 35   | 48.6    |          |                          |
| Free of Embarrassment |      |         | 15.064   | .000                     |
| Yes                   | 55.8 | 32.2    |          |                          |
| No                    | 44.2 | 68.8    |          |                          |
| Importance of Privacy |      |         | 2.267    | .132                     |
| Yes                   | 65.2 | 55.9    |          |                          |
| No                    | 34.8 | 44.1    |          |                          |
| Importance of Safety  |      |         | 1.773    | .183                     |
| Yes                   | 66.4 | 58.2    |          |                          |
| No                    | 33.6 | 41.8    |          |                          |

Social Discomfort\*: part of one's private life, free of judgment, free of embarrassment, privacy and safety.

The results show that 64.4% of shy individuals responded that interacting with and observing sexual media online was part of their personal lives. When asked about feeling free of judgment online for sexual purposes, 65% of shy individuals responded yes and a significance level of .031 indicates that shy individuals are more likely than non-shy individuals to value freedom from judgment about sexual activity online. Shy individuals also valued the importance of privacy and safety more than non-shy individuals. Conversely, when asked about feeling free of embarrassment online for sexual purposes, 68.8% of non-shy respondents said that they would not be embarrassed if others knew about their interaction with sexual media online and a significance level of .000 indicates a significant relationship. Throughout the five variables for

social discomfort, shy individuals were more influenced by social discomfort than non-shy individuals when using the Internet for sexual experiences.

Hypothesis 2 was tested by running a crosstabulation between anxiousness and five variables measuring social discomfort (part of private life, free of judgment and embarrassment, importance of privacy and safety). Hypothesis two stated that respondents that identified as anxious used the Internet for sexual purposes due to social discomfort more than respondents that did not identify as anxious.

Table 5. Crosstab between Anxious and Social Discomfort\*

| Social discomfort     | Anxious | Not Anxious | $\chi^2$ | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|-----------------------|---------|-------------|----------|-----------------------|
| Part of Private Life  |         |             | .011     | .916                  |
| Yes                   | 62.1    | 37.2        |          |                       |
| No                    | 37.9    | 62.8        |          |                       |
| Free of Judgment      |         |             | .031     | .859                  |
| Yes                   | 58.3    | 57.1        |          |                       |
| No                    | 41.7    | 42.9        |          |                       |
| Free of Embarrassment |         |             | 4.434    | .35                   |
| Yes                   | 51.8    | 38.3        |          |                       |
| No                    | 48.2    | 61.7        |          |                       |
| Importance of Privacy |         |             | .096     | .757                  |
| Yes                   | 63.8    | 61.9        |          |                       |
| No                    | 36.2    | 38.1        |          |                       |
| Importance of Safety  |         |             | .168     | .682                  |
| Yes                   | 60.3    | 62.9        |          |                       |
| No                    | 39.7    | 37.1        |          |                       |

Social Discomfort\*: part of one's private life, free of judgment, free of embarrassment, privacy and safety.

While there was no statistically significant difference, 61.7% of non-anxious individuals indicated that feeling free of embarrassment was not a reason for utilizing the Internet for sexual purposes. The strongest relationship was seen with a chi square of .011 in relation to over 60% of anxious individuals valued sexual experiences online being part of their personal lives, whereas over 60% of non-anxious individuals did not find online sexual experiences to be part of their private life. Non-anxious and anxious respondents valued freedom from judgment and the importance of privacy and safety equally at over 60%.

Hypothesis 3 stated that respondents that attributed Internet use to sexual exploration used the Internet due to shyness and anxiousness. Hypothesis 3 was tested by recoding the shy

variable and the anxious variable into one variable and running a crosstab with each variable for sexual exploration online. Sexual exploration online was determined by asking respondents if they had seen a variety of sexual desires online, pretended to be the opposite sex, acted on same-sex desires or formed intimate relationships online.

Table 6. Crosstab Shy/Anxious and Sexual Exploration

| Exploration                     | Shy/Anxious | Not Shy/Anxious | $\chi^2$ | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------------|
| View variety of sexual desires  |             |                 | 2.165    | .141                  |
| Yes                             | 73.8        | 61.8            |          |                       |
| No                              | 26.2        | 38.2            |          |                       |
| Pretend to be opposite sex      |             |                 | .278     | .598                  |
| Yes                             | 11.2        | 14.3            |          |                       |
| No                              | 88.8        | 85.7            |          |                       |
| Act on same-sex desires         |             |                 | .162     | .687                  |
| Yes                             | 26.2        | 26.2            |          |                       |
| No                              | 73.8        | 76.8            |          |                       |
| Intimate Relationship formation |             |                 | 3.798    | .051                  |
| Yes                             | 32.9        | 17.9            |          |                       |
| No                              | 67.1        | 82.1            |          |                       |

Both the majority of shy/anxiousness individuals and non-shy/anxious individuals reported low levels of pretending to be the opposite gender, acting on same-sex desires and intimate relationship formation. The majority of both groups reported yes to finding that exploring sexual interests (desires, fantasies, attractions) online has helped them see a variety of sexual preferences and behaviors. In addition, the majority of both groups reported no to forming intimate relationships online with a near significant level of .051.

Hypothesis 4 stated that respondents that attributed Internet use to strengthening sexual preferences used the Internet due to shyness and anxiousness. Hypothesis 4 was tested by running a crosstab between shyness/anxiousness and the seven variables measuring strengthening sexual preferences. Sexual preference reinforcement was measured by asking respondents if they had visited online sexual communities that embraced what they liked

sexually, if they utilized the Internet for experiences that they did not pursue offline, if they Internet had helped them understand what they liked sexually, if online activities had changed how they thought of their sexual desires, if they knew others favored similar sexual tastes, if they were more confident in their sexual preferences and if they thought they would think differently about their sexual preferences if they had never utilized the Internet.

The results indicated that there were significant relationships between shyness/anxiousness and sexual communities, exclusivity to online spaces, further understanding desires, changing view of own sexual desires and having more confidence in sexual preferences due to utilizing the Internet. Over 60% of non-shy/anxious respondents reported not visiting an online sexual community or perceiving the Internet to provide sexual activities (forums, blogs, chat rooms, email, instant messaging, video conferencing, website viewing) as satisfying desires that were not expressed offline. Seventy three percent of shy/anxious individuals reported yes to the Internet helping them understand what they liked sexually. Both groups were similar in over 60% finding that the Internet showed them that other people enjoyed similar sexual preferences and that they would not think the same way about their sexual preferences if they had never used the Internet for sexual experiences.

Table 7. Crosstab Shy/Anxious and Strengthening Sexual Preferences

| Strengthening                            | Shy/Anxious | Not Shy/Anxious | $\chi^2$ | Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--|-------------|-----------------|----------|------------------------|
| Sexual Community                         |             |                 | 4.596    | .032                   |
| Yes                                      | 59.7        | 40              |          |                        |
| No                                       | 40.3        | 60              |          |                        |
| Only experienced online                  |             |                 | 18.893*  | .000                   |
| Yes                                      | 59.1        | 16.7            |          |                        |
| No                                       | 40.9        | 83.3            |          |                        |
| Further understand Desires               |             |                 | 4.349    | .037                   |
| Yes                                      | 73          | 52.6            |          |                        |
| No                                       | 27          | 47.4            |          |                        |
| Change view of Desires from Internet use |             |                 | 5.272    | .022                   |
| Yes                                      | 57.5        | 37.5            |          |                        |
| No                                       | 42.5        | 62.5            |          |                        |
| Similarity to others                     |             |                 | .108     | .742                   |
| Yes                                      | 68.8        | 66.1            |          |                        |
| No                                       | 31.2        | 33.9            |          |                        |
| Confidence in Desires                    |             |                 | 4.371    | .037                   |
| Yes                                      | 57.5        | 39.3            |          |                        |
| No                                       | 42.5        | 60.7            |          |                        |
| Need of Internet                         |             |                 | 1.391    | .238                   |
| Yes                                      | 31.2        | 41.1            |          |                        |
| No                                       | 68.8        | 58.9            |          |                        |

## CONCLUSIONS

The Internet as a space for interaction and observation differs from face-to-face interactions in that social norms, cues, judgments and risks are present yet flexible. The Internet as a utopian space for sexual experiences allows users to bypass social pressure and therefore, avoid the experiences of judgment, embarrassment and lack of privacy and/or safety (Magnet 2006, Kibby and Costello 2001). In the current sample, 58.7% of respondents indicated that they had utilized the Internet for sexual experiences, 55.2% identified themselves as shy and 56.9% identified themselves as anxious. This shows that over half of students in the sample accepted the Internet as a sexual space and identify as shy and anxious, which in turn indicates that social discomfort is tied to utilizing the Internet for sexual reasons. Social discomfort was measured through privacy, safety, judgment, embarrassment and perception of private life. Violating social norms or fulfilling certain social cues related to identities that differed from face-to-face identities were assumed to cause social discomfort and manifest in individuals that identified as shy and anxious. Therefore, shyness and anxiousness were compared to variables measuring social discomfort, as well as compared to variables measuring sexual exploration and strengthening of sexual preferences.

Hypothesis 1 assumed that respondents who identified as shy utilized the Internet for sexual experiences due to social discomfort, which was supported as 64.4% of shy students responded that interacting with and observing sexual media online was part of their private lives and they valued privacy and safety more than non-shy. A significant relationship was found between shy students and feeling free of judgment when online for sexual reasons and between non-shy students and not feeling embarrassed about others knowing about their interaction with



sexual media online. Hypothesis 2 assumed that respondents who identified as anxious utilized the Internet for sexual experiences due to social discomfort, which was also supported as 51.8% of anxious students valued feeling free of embarrassment. Anxious and non-anxious students differed in the majority of anxious students valuing sexual experiences as part of their private lives and non-anxious students not finding online sexual experiences as part of their personal lives. Although Mckenna, Green and Gleason (2002) found that 84% of their respondents attributed anonymity to causing intimacy online to endure, hypothesis 3 was not supported as low levels of sexual exploration through same-sex desires, gender-switching and intimate relationship formation were found in this study in relation to shyness/anxiousness. This study found a near significant relationship in that both shy/anxious and non-shy/anxious students did not identify with forming an intimate relationship online, but that the majority of both groups indicated that exploring sexual interests online helped them see a variety of sexual preferences and behaviors. As a result, sexual exploration online was important in expanding the knowledge of sexual interests in students, but shyness and anxiousness was not a key motivator in utilizing the Internet for sexual exploration through gender-switching, same-sex experiences and intimate relationship formation. Hypothesis 4 looked at strengthening sexual preferences and shyness/anxiousness. Hypothesis 4 was supported as the majority of shy/anxious students' valued sexual communities' online, exclusivity online, understanding and having more confidence in their desires and that the Internet had changed how they viewed their sexual desires more than non-shy/anxious students. This shows that avoiding social discomfort in the form of shy or anxious temperaments strengthened how shy/anxious students considered their sexual preferences to be capable of validation and comprehension.

Society categorizes individuals and creates a hierarchy of social identities that carry advantages and disadvantages. The decentralized and anonymous nature of the Internet provides a space within the larger space of society where individuals can explore experiences that can be repressed or socially undesirable in certain face-to-face interactions, such as interacting and observing with sexual intentions. The current study focused on social discomfort due to undesirable behaviors and thought in face-to-face society and how shyness and anxiousness represented individuals who utilized the Internet for experiencing sexual spaces because of social discomfort. The study is limited in sample size and through the method of online anonymous surveying because in-depth interviews, focus groups and longitudinal studies would provide a deeper understanding of the motivation and experience of online sexual experiences for individuals. The current study did not emphasize the influence of economic class on sexual exploration online, nor did it look at the aspect of social isolation and increased stigma due to geographic location as a motivation to seek sexual satisfaction online, which could be further studied. Future research could also focus on social discomfort in the form of discrimination and how discrimination motivates utilization of the Internet for sexual experiences, such as looking at sexual minority groups and heterosexual women expressing sexual desire online due to face-to-face society excluding them.



## APPENDIX

You must be 18 years or older to participate in this survey. This survey has sexual themes; if you are not comfortable please exit at any time. Participating in this survey is anonymous and voluntary. Please click on the box or fill in the blank to best represent your answer.

1. Are you a college student?
  - Yes
  - No
2. Have you engaged in online activities (forums, blogs, chat rooms, email, instant messaging, video conferencing, website viewing) for sexual experiences?
  - Yes
  - No
3. Would you describe your sexual activity online (forums, blogs, chat rooms, email, instant messaging, video conferencing, website viewing) as interactive or observational?
  - Very Interactive
  - Somewhat Interactive
  - Both Interactive and Observational
  - Somewhat observational
  - Very observational
4. Do you think exploring sexual interests (desires, fantasies, attractions) online has helped you see a variety of sexual preferences and behaviors?
  - Yes
  - No
5. Have you ever pretended to be the opposite sex online?
  - Yes
  - No
6. Have you ever acted on same-sex desires online?
  - Yes
  - No
7. Have you ever formed an intimate relationship with a stranger and/or familiar person from interacting online?
  - Yes
  - No
8. I have visited an online sexual community (blog, forum, website) that embraces what I like sexually.
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  -

9. The Internet offers me sexual activities (forums, blogs, chat rooms, email, instant messaging, video conferencing, website viewing) that satisfy desires that I **do not** express anywhere else.
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
10. Using the Internet for sexual experiences has helped me understand what I like sexually.
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
11. Have you changed how you think of your sexual desires and attractions due in part to Internet media consumption and/or support from blogs, forums, chat rooms and websites?
  - Yes
  - No
12. Do you think in general, other people enjoy similar sexual preferences due to what you've encountered on the Internet?
  - Yes
  - No
13. Are you more confident in your sexual preferences because of using the Internet?
  - Yes
  - No
14. Do you think you would think the same way about your sexual preferences if you had never used the Internet for sexual experiences?
  - Yes
  - No
15. Interacting with and/or observing sexual media (forums, blogs, chat rooms, email, instant messaging, video conferencing, website viewing) online has been part of my private life.
  - Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
16. Do you feel free of judgment when you explore sexual desires online?
  - Yes
  - No
17. Have you interacted with and/or observed sexual media (forums, blogs, chat rooms, email, instant messaging, video conferencing, website viewing) that you would be embarrassed to have others know about?
  - Yes
  - No
  -

18. Do you think that sexual desires should be privately explored, such as on the Internet?
- Yes
  - No
19. Do you feel safe exploring sexual activities online?
- Yes
  - No
20. Have you been a victim of a traumatic crime and/or sexual abuse in your life?
- Yes
  - No
21. I would consider myself to be a shy person.
- Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
22. I would consider myself to be an anxious person.
- Strongly agree
  - Somewhat agree
  - Somewhat disagree
  - Strongly disagree
23. Currently, how many hours per week do you typically work? \_\_\_\_\_
24. Sex:
- Female
  - Male
  - Other
25. Sexual orientation:
- Heterosexual
  - Homosexual
  - Bisexual
  - Other
26. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
27. Do you have any of the following long lasting conditions?
- Blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment
  - A condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying.
  - Both
  - None

28. What is your racial/ethnic background?

- White/Caucasian
- Black/African American
- Latin/Hispanic
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Native American/American Indian
- Multiracial
- Other

If you have been a victim of a traumatic crime and/or sexual abuse, please contact UCF

Victim Services at

12201 Research Parkway, Ste. 450 Orlando, FL 32826

Hotline: (407) 823-1200

Phone: (407) 823-2425

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