

Chapter 9

Performing the Discourse of Sexuality Online

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on Foucault, Butler, and video-sharing on sexual social networking sites. It argues that the use and prevalence of video-sharing technologies on sexual social networking websites has a direct impact on notions of sexual identity. Though sometimes pitted against one another and at times contradictory, the ideas of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler on the nature and expression of sexuality and gender identities in fact gel rather well, and both can help us to gain a deeper and more rounded picture of the impact and importance of the burgeoning phenomenon of internet dating websites in general, and sexual social networking in particular.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with the notion of performance – in particular the performance of sexuality, and most specifically, the performance of the discourse of sexuality. It posits that the proliferation of sexual discourse and sexualities since the early 19th century outlined by Foucault (1990; 1992; 1998) continues apace in the Information Age, if anything accelerated and broadened to a wider

public by the phenomenon of internet dating. It also posits that the performativity of gender identities outlined by Butler (1990; 1993) continues, with online categorization in internet dating sites in fact prescribing ever more specific and ‘niche’ roles. This chapter contends, moreover, that the practice of video sharing on internet dating (perhaps better described as sexual social networking) sites, is illustrative of why Butler’s criticisms of Foucault in fact fail. Finally, this chapter introduces the

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sociology of masculinity to information systems and communication studies readers, in the voice of Whitehead (2000), and his Foucauldian understanding of the discursive masculine subject.

This is a very large topic to which a book chapter such as this cannot do true justice, so the objectives of this chapter, more narrowly, are to introduce the relevant ideas of the three theorists just mentioned, applying them briefly to two websites, one global the other specifically for the UK, aimed at the gay male community, and to examine the impact of video-sharing on these websites upon these Foucauldian and Butlerian notions of the self, and upon Whitehead's ideas concerning the discursive masculine subject. The author, a gay man, has undertaken an ethnographic study of these two websites, having been a member and participant in Gaydar since April 2000, soon after it was launched, and of Fitlads since a year after its launch in April 2003.

Through discussion of these two websites, this chapter argues that – certainly in the gay male experience, and by implication in a broader sense, also - video sharing in online sexual social networking proves to be illustrative both of Foucault's concepts of the body as Idea, of sexuality as discourse, and of Butler's notions of the performative body.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social Constructionism was famously introduced (albeit leaning on Mead's (1934) work on symbolic interactionism) by Berger & Luckman (1967), as an approach which focuses on the ways in which people and the groups they form contribute to the creation of their perceived social reality – the collective power of society to determine individual identity. Social interaction lies at the heart of all knowledge for the social constructionist. Whilst this chapter aligns itself with the fundamental contention of social constructionism, namely

that no man is an island, and that our selves and our interaction with each other are indivisible, poststructuralism, and its more contemporary approach to the nature of identity, is the principal philosophical approach propounded in this chapter. Although there is a good deal of overlap, not all social constructionists are poststructuralists, but the author of this chapter is. As an approach, poststructuralism represents the deconstruction of all systems of thought, treating all ideals, systems, structures, definitions and assumptions with suspicion, encouraging, on the contrary, a continual and profound scepticism and freshness and open-mindedness of enquiry as central tenets of its approach (Kreps 2010). This applies, of course, as much to social constructionism, as to any other system of thought.

However, there are number of fundamental alignments between the two approaches that are pertinent for the discussion in this chapter. Poststructuralism arose from the structuralist approach espoused by a number of 20th century writers. Structuralism originates from Saussure: "... we cannot know the world on its own terms, but only through the conceptual and linguistic structures of our own culture ... Structuralism's enterprise is to discover how people make sense of the world, not what the world is." (Fiske, 1990; p.115). The aim of structuralism is an explicit search for the permanent structures of the mind itself, which is where both social constructionism and poststructuralism diverge from it. Such an approach is both too realist and even positivist, and constructionism is interested in culture more as a set of structures of meaning and power. It is here that it shares much of poststructuralism's focus. Constructionists and post-structuralists share a postmodern rejection of such concepts as objectivity, reality and truth. However, in the post-structuralist view, the veracity of meaning, too, is in question - it is always 'deferred,' and because meaning is in dispute, it is the basis of political and ideological struggle.

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