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Identities and Everyday Life in Internet Chat Rooms

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<u>ABSTRACT</u>
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Cyberspace, especially computer mediated communication, has had a huge impact on people's lives and the societies they live in. In recent years this impact has increased as more and more people are logging onto the internet. This increase in societal and individual impact, as well as usage, has caused a boom in social science research into cyberspace. These changes have caused researchers to rethink previously accepted notions about identity, place, space, globalisation, the body and community. Current cyberspatial literature suggests that the internet, and in particular, computer mediated communication, is a new and exciting mode of communication, through which participants engage with other users across a multitude of nationalities and countries without limitation. The literature also suggests that the openness and unrestricted nature of cyberspace allows for interactions without traditional constraints such as location, age, sex, race, appearance and so on. Researchers suggest that online, people can be whoever they want to be; that identity becomes fluid and ever changing. However, much of this research lacks a strong empirical grounding to support these claims. This thesis aims to address these issues through new empirical work. Through observations of chat rooms and interviews with chat room users, this thesis questions concepts about cyberspace being a novel and exciting form of communication where identity is fluid and participants are free from the boundaries of location. The empirical research suggested that there is far more diversity than research shows in the way that people use chat rooms. Through focusing on the concepts of escape and routine the observations and interviews showed that chat rooms are far more embedded in everyday life than is currently portrayed. The empirical research also focused strongly on how people use chat rooms with regard to identity; challenging postmodern notions that identity online is about fluidity and change. Empirical research showed that participants use of chat rooms echoed the work of Goffman with regard to performances of identity whilst maintaining a central core self, rather than the work of the more postmodern researchers where there is no core self, only performances, and where identity is about fluidity and multiplicity.

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Introduction

One of the key technological developments in recent years has been the
production and expansion of cyberspace. The impact and take up of cyberspace,
has been far reaching, with developments of the World Wide Web growing at a
vast speed. The use of technologies such as e-mail, websites and other forms of
computer mediated communication are becoming commonplace now, but almost
unknown ten or fifteen years ago. The effects of such technologies are not just
limited to those who use them, but have impacted wider social practices creating
far-reaching implications on society. These changes in the modern world have
caused sociologists to re-think key sociological concepts of identity, time and
space, community and the body, (Kitchin 1998; Shields 1996; Featherstone and
Burrows 1995; Jones 1994, 1997), and consequently there has been an explosion
in theoretical research into cyberspace. Cyberspace research has had a significant
impact re-enforcing new ideas about identity, place, the body and community
(Kitchin 1998; Jones 1994; Bell 200)). Theoretical developments in recent years
suggest that our experiences of the world have become far more fragmented and
decentred. Society has moved from a modernist era in which there was a high
degree of stability to one of great fragmentation and destabilization (Harvey 1989;
Massey 1994; Lemert 1997; Hall 1992).

Central to postmodern debates about increased fragmentation and destabilization
are new notions of identity formation, as suggested by Giddens (1991) and Hall
(1992). They claim that identity has become fragmented and fluid; constantly
moving and changing. Giddens (1991) states that the self is not a passive entity; it
is not just determined by external forces. The self is a reflexive project of which
we are individually responsible for; we are what we make ourselves. The project
of the self is a journey, a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated
future. The reflexive self is continually conducting a form of self-interrogation
through which we are permanently reflecting upon our identities. Cyberspatial
and communication technology re-enforces and develops this reflexivity (Giddens

1991) by offering what appear to be a radically different conditions and opportunities for the production of self; the reconfiguration of space and place is a key component in this; as Mort (1989) argues, identity theory is often articulated in relation to space and place. Throughout this chapter I will explore these suggestions further looking both historically at theoretical notions of identity as well as looking in more detail at the use of identity theory when exploring empirical cyberspace research.

Contributors such as Giddens (1991), Hall (1992) and Massey (1994) refer to the notion of time-space compression and its affect on the modern world with specific reference to space, place and identity. The concept of time-space compression captures the sense that in the modern age, places are less grounded and secure and spaces seem shorter. This is an idea that we can see not only parallels the arguments about the postmodern world being fragmented and decentred, but is also an integral part of the postmodern concept of identity construction. The reflexive construction and development of identity is intertwined with external forces and structures, such as space and place. It is important to look at the concept of space as a concept that parallels the postmodern condition of identity being fragmented and fluid but also to look more specifically at the way people use cyberspaces and how these may or may not be different from 'real life' spaces (by 'real life' spaces I am referring to spaces and places offline / outside of cyberspace) and the impact this has on the way and how people present identity within these spaces. Further exploration into theoretical notions surrounding place and space will be discussed in more detail later on.

One of the focuses of this chapter will be to look in detail at identity and place/space in relation to cyberspace as a means of discussing the impact of cyberspace technologies, fragmentation and instability within society. The changes and impact of cyberspace on identity and place cannot be looked at in isolation because, as mentioned above, the process of identity formation is intertwined not just with internal reflexivity but also external forces such as the body, community and globalization are intertwined with research and theory relating to identity and place. Cyberspace, by its very nature, reconfigures these traditional and grounded spatial boundaries; for example the term 'World Wide

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Web' conjures images of transnational communication in which geographical boundaries are no longer confining. Changes in spatial theory, in conjunction with the fragmentation and disembodied nature of cyberspace communication, have had serious implications for our identities and identity theory. As Jenkins states "Popular concern about identity is, in large part perhaps, a reflection of the uncertainty produced by rapid change" (Jenkins 1996:9). This view about identity research and change being linked to uncertainty is echoed by Mercer (1990), who claims that:

> "Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. From this angle, the eagerness to talk about identity is symptomatic of the postmodern predicament of contemporary politics." (Mercer 1990:43).

Theoretical debates about space and identity are at the centre of cyber spatial change and postmodern theory. These debates epitomize the fragmentation, fluidity and destabilization that is present not only the modern world but in particular computer mediated communication.

Current research into identity and cyberspace has focused mainly on message boards, web pages and more commonly online games such as MUD's and MOO's (Multi-user domains or dungeons – online role play games similar and derived from the popular role play game dungeons and dragons). These games explore identity as performance within a role play game where you choose and develop a character of your choice. These rooms however are led by certain guidelines and rules set out by the nature of that particular game and although you have a scope to perform and develop identity, it is confined. I will explore postmodern concepts and theories surrounding cyberspace through an empirical study of internet chat rooms. Chat rooms are an excellent choice as unlike message boards or e-mail, in chat rooms participants can engage in continuous dialogue with little or no delay. As Giles states, "IRC, where communication unfolds synchronously in 'real time', are probably the closest on-line equivalent to naturally occurring talk, and might be the richer sites for identity work." (Giles 2006:475) Chat

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rooms, however are a far more open forum in which people are not set up to role play identity. Therefore although MUD's and MOO's can teach us a great deal about identity in cyberspace it can only tell us about how people use cyberspace for performing identity in a forum focused and set up for such performances. Although there are some boundaries that exist due to the form of communication being text based, traditional geographical, class, gender and racial boundaries are non existent. Such a forum allows the exploration of space and identity in a far more fluid way than in a face to face interaction or even than in other forms of cyberspace communication. The ability to explore identity without such boundaries and with this fluidity makes chat rooms a suitable venue in which to explore current theoretical changes in relation to cyberspace.

Before I look in detail at the concepts of identity and place in relation to cyberspatial technologies, it is useful to briefly clarify what we mean when talking about cyberspace. Bell (2001) describes cyberspace as

"combining three things...... it has material, symbolic and experiential dimensions. It is machines, wires, electricity, programs, screens, connectors, and it is modes of information and communication: e-mail, websites, chat rooms, MUDs. But it is also images and ideas....... We experience cyberspace in all its spectacular and mundane manifestations by mediating the material and the symbolic." (Bell 2001:2)

In this thesis I will focus not on the mechanics of cyberspace but more on the interactions that exist within cyberspaces. In the words of Bell (2001) I will be looking at the 'symbolic and experiential uses of cyberspace'. The word cyberspace, coined originally by William Gibson in the novel Neuromancer, literally means navigable space and is derived from the Greek work 'Kyber' which means 'to navigate' (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). Dodge and Kitchin (2001) refer to cyberspace as "the conceptual space within ICTs (information and communication technologies), rather than the technology itself." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:1) As well as concentrating on the interactions within cyberspace then, I will also be looking at the use of the space itself; the physical make up as well as the way people use different spaces. Cyberspace, however, should not be

seen as one homogeneous space but a number of rapidly changing and expanding spaces with each providing different forms of digital communications and interactions (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). Concepts of space and place with regard to cyberspace will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

Theorizing Cyberspace and Identity

The theorization of identity has undergone a number of changes in recent years. Interest in identity was relatively unknown before the 1940's but since the 1980's the term has become widespread and research into identity has dramatically increased (Weigert, Teitge and Teitge, 1986). It is suggested that the development of communication technologies in recent years has fuelled this interest in identity and that technology had a profound impact on the self and identity theory (Gergen 1991). It is important, when looking at arguments about the changing nature of identity, to have an understanding of the way concepts of identity have changed in recent years. I will therefore explore identity theory by looking at important contributors in the area as well as exploring specific historical changes in identity theory; to do this I will use the work of Hall (1992). Hall (1992) looked at the history of the self and categorized it into three concepts; I will explore his categories as a means of developing understanding into the progression of identity theory. Hall splits some fairly complex arguments into three neat categories, which may seem simplistic, but by breaking these concepts down we are able to see a clearly the way theory of identity has progressed and changed. These categories are being used as a starting point upon which the changes in identity theory with specific reference to cyberspace, computer mediated communication and chat rooms can be explored and further developed.

Hall calls these three concepts 'The Enlightenment subject', 'The sociological subject' and 'The Postmodern subject'. Understanding the progression through these concepts and the arrival at the current theorization of identity is important when looking at cyberspace, as the postmodern conceptualization of identity is central to my research. The Enlightenment subject, Hall argues,

was based on a "conception of the human person as fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose 'centre' consisted of an inner core." (Hall 1992:275)

It is argued that the core of this self first emerges as soon as the individual was born and although unfolded throughout its life, essentially remained the same. In psychological terms this is known as a prenatal identity, an identity the child has from birth. This theory of identity, although takes into account minor changes throughout the life course, states that the core identity was there at birth and will fundamentally never change regardless of wider social factors; "we are pre-programmed with these innate characteristics" (Reymers 2002:1). I have decided not to focus the discussion of identity around this concept as it is so far removed from current sociological theorizing of identity, social theory as well as my views on identity. Society, individuals and events impact upon a persons life and self and therefore to argue that a persons identity changes very little from birth to death despite socialization and other outside factors is not only unsupported by current sociological research, such as the work of Giddens (1991) and Butler (1990) but also leads to a very insular view of identity and the impact of society on the individual.

The complexities of the modern world, and the changes throughout it, were reflected within the development of a new concept of identity, named by Hall (1992) as 'The Sociological Subject'. This concept suggests that the inner core is not self-sufficient but is formed in relation to others. The argument exists that the subject still has a central core but that it is "formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds 'outside' and the identities which they offer." (Hall 1992:276). Identity is seen as "stitch(ing) the subject into the structure" and thus "stabaliz(ing) both (the) subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit". (Hall 1992:276). This concept is about the way people interact with others and how this can play a part in the way identity is constructed. Unlike the previous concept that presumed outside factors had no impact upon a person's identity, the concept of the sociological subject relies on personal interaction with others for the formation of individual identities. Within this concept, not only do the interactions we have with others play a large part in the formation of identity, so too does the world

around us. When Hall talks about the way that we are 'stitched' into the structure of the world, this is what he is referring to; the way that external forces in the structure of the world and the societies within it are not separate from the individual and are not independent from the formation of an individual's identity. These external forces not only impact on individuals and the way we form our identities but our identities impact on the world around us. The objective is strongly connected to the subjective in terms of identity formation. Hall (1992) refers to us being 'stitched' into the structure in such a way that it stabilizes both the subject and the cultural worlds that the individuals inhabit. However, this stability is what is now said to be shifting, consequences of this shift will be discussed in more detail when exploring Halls (1992) postmodern concept of identity theory. This traditional notion of the modern subject is characterized by interactionists such as Mead (1934) and Goffman (1969) who state that although people have a central core self, the development and creation of this identity is through interaction. Goffman's (1969) ideas surrounding identity are initially suggested in the title of one of his books – 'The presentation of self in everyday life'. Goffman (1969) explores the notion that we present different masks of identity at different times and to different people, he refers to this as 'playing a part', 'performing', having a role to play. However, by performing and presenting different masks of identity he is not saying that we have a number of identities but that the masks and the performances are part of our identity:

> "In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality." (Goffman 1969:30)

Although fundamentally Mead (1934) and Goffman (1969) both argue that ultimately there is a core identity their approaches are slightly different with regard to exploring identity construction, although both refer to the idea of people having roles in relation to identity. Mead (1934) argues that "identity is formed in the 'interaction' between self and society" (Hall 1992:276). In his book *Mind, Self and Society* Mead (1934) describes how the self arises out of social process.

Instead of approaching human experience in terms of individual psychology Mead (1934) looks at it in relation to social order. For Mead (1934) the development of self is pre-eminently social, he argues that social processes are prior to structures and processes of individual experience. He argues that that self arises out of the social processes of communication and cannot be explored and/or understood outside of these processes. Individuals are the products of social interaction and not the logical or physiological preconditions of interaction.

> "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process" (Mead 1934:135).

To explore the notion of the social self further, Mead (1934) goes on to discuss the process of role playing in relation to the self and explores these ideas through the concepts of playing and gaming. The difference between playing and gaming according to Mead is the complexity of the role play. When playing he uses the example of a child playing doctors and nurses whereas a game, he argues, involves much more complexity. In gaming the individual has to internalise all the roles of those who are involved in the game with them and understand the rules which condition each role. Mead argues that configuring roles according to certain rules bring a unity to participants, he calls this unity the 'generalised other'. He refers to the generalised other as "an organized and generalized attitude" (Mead 1934:151) and says that when you can view yourself from the standpoint of the generalised other then "self- consciousness in the full sense of the term" is attained (Mead 1934:151)

Although the self is a product of socio-symbolic interaction, it is important to remember that Mead (1934) did not see the self as passive reflection of the generalized other. The individual plays an active role in their response to the social world; they decide what they want to do in relation to others. Mead (1934) says that there are two phases to the social self, the I and the Me. The "me" is the social self, and the "I" is a response to the "me" (Mead 1934). He argues that the individual cannot exist outside of the social situation and that we react and

respond to these situations. Individuals choose their reactions, even if the reaction is to do nothing, but despite this freedom to choose reactions the individual's responses are still conditioned and are not totally free. Giddens (1991) parallels some of these arguments about the self not being passive and having individual reactions to situations. He refers to identity as keeping a biography, a kind of narrative of who we are and where we have been which we continually revise, change and edit. For Giddens (1991) then self identity is about our own understanding of our biography. Giddens wrote that "Self-identity has continuity - that is, it cannot easily be completely changed at will - but that continuity is only a product of the person's reflexive beliefs about their own biography" (Giddens 1991: 53).

> "A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self." (Giddens 1991: 54).

Giddens (1991) quotes Taylor (1989) saying that to understand who we are it is important to understand where we have been and where we are going. Giddens (1991) and Mead (1934) both discuss the importance of reflexivity in identity theory and discuss the importance of an ongoing process of identity formation. However they are still somewhat removed from current identity theory as they refer to identity as being built upon throughout life and although this concept has moved on from the idea that identity is fixed from birth, it still implies that there is a core self, that there is something fixed and stable. Current cyberspace research alongside postmodern identity theory argues that computer mediated communication allows for much more freedom in the exploration of self without rules and conformities that may be present in a face to face interaction. This is linked to new thinking in identity theory and argues that identity is a much more fluid process without constraints, rules and conformity. As Weigert, Teitge and Teitge (1986) state:

"The crisis of modernity brings to the fore the underlying dialectics of subjective and objective features of identity..........The pluralistic organization of society is reflected in the multiplicity of identities bestowed on and experienced by modern individuals. Every person is faced with the daily task of organizing his or her multiple identities successfully. In addition, the extent of change and contradiction accompanying the multiplicity of identities generates concern for the continuity of identity." (Weigert, Teitge and Teitge, 1986:54)

They argue that in times of great social change we must think "in terms of a more complex and realistic model of presenting an organization of multiple identities that is always implied by the presentation of that single identity." (Weigert, Teitge and Teitge, 1986:57-58) Despite these multiple identities they argue that people strive for some form of security and stability:

"Identity must remain continuous across space as we move from place to place; it must somehow remain continuous across time as well. Individuals strive throughout life to sustain a sense of self sameness". (Weigert, Teitge and Teitge, 1986:60)

This brings us on to Halls (1992) final concept of identity: the 'Postmodern subject', where identity is seen as fluid, multiple and fragmented, with little or no stability (Shields 1996; Featherstone and Burrows 1995; Jones 1994, 1997; Butler 1990) The self is seen as having no fixed or permanent identity or central core.

"Identity becomes a 'moveable feast': formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us." (Hall 1992:277)

Individuals are historically defined rather than biologically, as previously suggested, with no fixed identity but many changing selves that pull us in a number of different directions. Hall (1992), even suggests that

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"If we feel we have a unified identity form birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves." (Hall 1992:277)

Shotter (1988) also regards identity as fragmented and fluid. He refers to the self as having no inner core but just a constant stream of being. Shotter (1988) argues that identity construction takes place in and through dialogue and that by using dialogue people construct various social relationships and through doing so they construct a sense of their own identity.

Halls (1992) historical explanation of identity theory suggests that change in the social world has impacted the way we theorize identity. As Woodward argues,

"There have been significant changes in forms of domestic living, family life and employment in the post war period. Recent years have seen a proliferation of new technologies and communication systems which might appear to open up the possibility of transforming our daily lives........ identities are changing and fluid, and this very fluidity creates uncertainty and diversity." (Woodward 2000:2)

By breaking these concepts down, Hall (1992) shows the progression from modernism, where identity was rational, stable, centred and autonomous (Dodge and Kitchin 2001) to the postmodern theories of identity where there is little stability. Hand in hand with these profound changes in theoretical understandings of identity, a changing world offers new platforms and opportunities for the construction and performances of identities in everyday life. Before looking at some of the external changes and implications it is first useful to explore Halls (1992) concepts of identity with specific reference to my research into internet chat rooms and how people use these chat rooms for the presentation of identity.

As mentioned earlier, I will not go into further discussions of identity being fixed and present at birth and changing very little from this point until death, as current theory is so far removed from this as it clear that external factors, experiences and others must impact upon the development of the self. This moves the discussion

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on to Hall's concept of the 'sociological subject'. In particular I focused on the work of Mead (1934), Goffman (1969) and Giddens (1991) to explore these ideas as they are three of the main thinkers when discussing the formation of identity as a social and reflexive process. The ideas of Mead (1934), Goffman (1969) and Giddens (1991) are useful when exploring the way people use chat rooms in relation to identity. Mead, especially, focuses his discussions on the use of interactions for the formation of identity. Chat rooms are forums where interaction with others is the focus and the aim, therefore the idea that people use interactions as a way of developing identity is one that is not only relevant when researching chat rooms but one that will be explored throughout this research.

Postmodernists and many cyberspatial researchers agree with these ideas, arguing that identity is theorized, presented, formulated and sustained as a fluid and interchangeable entity. However when looking at the subjective issues of identity formation we must be aware that the more objective issues and wider debates surrounding globalization are strongly connected to these debates; identity theory cannot be researched in isolation. The on-going process of globalization and technological change can be seen as playing a major part in the development of postmodern concepts of identity formation. The changing nature of the world through globalizing processes such as the development of sophisticated communication systems, has and is still having, a major impact upon the way we look at identity formation. Concepts of space are being reconfigured, geographical boundaries are being broken down, interaction is instantaneous with numerous people across the globe and at the same time and traditional determinants such as sex and race are being transcended. Has the process of identity presentation or exploration become a much more open and fluid process without such constraints? Research into these communication systems, such as internet chat rooms, can therefore be seen as a forum through which new processes of identity presentation or development could thrive. The nature of internet chat rooms, with their open structure, would be an ideal place for the development and presentation of multiple, changeable and fluid identities.

"The extent to which people use CMC as a means to invent new personas, they recreate their own identities, or to engage in a combination of the two

and the ways in which they do so are central to the construction of a computer-mediated social world." (Baym 1995:156)

Mead (1934), Goffman (1969) and Giddens (1991) all refer to the development of the self as a reflexive process. Giddens (1991) explores the idea of narrative and biography and discusses the importance of looking at where we are going, where we are and where we have been and continually reflecting upon this as a way of building a concept of the self. Are people able to use chat rooms as a way of developing their own narrative in a much more extended and free way than in a face to face interaction? Goffman (1969) discusses how people present different identities and how they have roles to play and performances to follow depending on the particular situation. Mead (1934) Goffman (1969) and Giddens (1991), however, still refer to the self as having a core, as there being something fixed and solid; within cyberspace. However it is the postmodern concepts such as those of Shotter (1988) where identity is seen as being a continuous stream of consciousness, where the self is multiple and fluid that is much more in line with the current literature and theories on cyberspace. Are chat rooms used for the performance of identity (Butler (1990), Goffman (1969), Mead (1934))? Performing identity and role play is a concept widely explored in cyberspace research but mainly through the use of MUD's and MOO's which are forums designed for such performances, it would therefore be interesting to explore chat rooms, a forum not specifically set up for such performances and role play, to look at the way people perform identity. I will explore these concepts in relation to the current literature on cyberspace and postmodern ideas about the fluidity of identity and performances (Butler 1990) as well as exploring identity in the traditional sense as fixed and stable (Goffman 1969).

It is not only research into postmodernism or identity theory specifically that have discussed these ideas; research into cyberspace, especially computer mediated communication have theorized identity in this way, as fragmented, decentred and fluid. Research into cyberspace, both empirical and theoretical, is where I will continue the debate surrounding the nature of identity as this is where I will situate my own research into internet chat rooms. As McCaffery and Schroeder state the

emerging postmodern culture is closely tied to technology (McCaffery 1991,
Schroeder 1994)

> The "conceptualization of the nature of identity in cyberspace corresponds
> closely to current psychoanalytical and postmodern theories of identity.
> These theories maintain that rather than the self being some permanent
> structure of the mind, or fixed within some genetic code, self is thought of
> a discourse in which identity is constructed through multiple experiences.
> Identity is thus fragmented, decentred and fluid, changing with time and
> structures, and indeed different for different occasions." (Dodge and
> Kitchin 2001:24)

It is emphasized that computer mediated communication technologies alongside
other cyberspatial technologies such as WebPages, MUD's and message boards,
allow and facilitate participants to take on multiple and fluid identities (Reid 1991;
Poster 1995a, 1995b; Robins 1995; Hayles 1993). Participants are not constrained
by determinants such as race, age and sex as they would be in a face to face
interactions and are therefore better able to express themselves and their identities.
They are able to change their identities as quickly as they can change their
username. Users are able to cycle through a number of different identities without
traditional boundaries; as I have already mentioned they are not constrained by
determinants such as race, age or sex, they are also not constrained by
geographical location or their body. Users can be who they want to be at any time
and change this persona as often or as little as they like. This allows identity to be
far more free, fluid and disembodied. In cyberspace "the self is reconstructed as a
fluid and polymorphous entity." (Robins 1995:138)

> "Cyberspace promotes the individual as an unstable identity, an individual
> bound within a continuous process of multiple identity formation." (Dodge
> and Kitchin 2001:53)

It is claimed then that cyberspace allows participants to develop fluid and multiple
identities:

"Masks and self-disclosure are part of the grammar of cyberspace......The grammar of CMC media involves a syntax of identity play; new identities, false identities, multiple identities, exploratory identities, are available in different manifestations of the medium." (Rheingold 1993:2)

But what is it about cyberspace that makes this process possible and why is it that cyberspace is seen as a forum that promotes this form of interaction? Dodge and Kitchin (2001) argue that part of the reason for ease of identity exploration within cyberspace is due to the disembodied nature of communication within the cyberspace forums and the autonomy that accompanies it.

"For many commentators, the adoption of cyberspace as a medium of socialization illustrates that identity is in fact unstable, multiple, diffuse, fluid and manipulabile. In this context, cyberspace is seen as an important medium because it allows us to explore who we are and because it is changing who we are. Analysts contend that it achieves this because it offers a disembodied nature of communication accompanied by relative autonomy. In cyberspace, it is argued, people are accepted on the basis of their words, not their appearance or accent." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:23)

This raises two key issues, disembodiment and autonomy. I will begin by exploring the notion of autonomy. The freedom that you have online is far more than in face-to-face situations. Some cyberspace researchers even go as far as saying that this allows the freedom to be completely unrestricted. The argument is that the freedom that allows participants to be who they are without limitation (Turkle 1995), or to choose how they want to be represented. Participants have the ability to play with identity online and adopt roles they would not, or could not in everyday life. (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). Alongside the open nature of the forum itself, contributors name two main reasons for the freedom exhibited and discussed within cyberspace. The first of these reasons is the anonymity of online interaction and the second is safety.

Without the pressures of face-to–face interactions and without feeling that they have to conform to societies views about what is, or is not, acceptable the

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expression of identity within cyberspace is almost limitless. You have the ability to be whatever sex, age or race you choose to be (Stone 1991). Identity in cyberspace is fluid and empowering because people can choose how they want to be represented. By interacting though cyberspace you not only have much more control over how you present yourself, you have much more time to carefully construct your persona (Correll 1995). With regard to safety the entire process carries far less consequences than in a face to face interaction (Aycock and Buchignani 1995). For example, if you upset someone online there are no physical consequences or repercussions. With regard to identity, people may feel freer to express themselves as they know there are safe no matter what they say or do; they are in control and can log off whenever they want. Technological advancements over the last few years, especially the advancements in cyberspace have created a new socially configured space in which there is unlimited scope for the formation and presentation of identity. Computer mediated communication lends itself to open and free flowing interactions where contributors are free from inhibitions and can explore and cycle through multiple identities with ease.

Much of the research looked at thus far however, has been from a theoretical standpoint; to fully understand the impact of cyberspace on sociological theory it must be empirically researched. It is therefore useful to explore some of the research conducted into specific areas of cyberspace to gain a deeper insight into the use of cyberspace technology for the construction or presentation of identity. This will give the theoretical and postmodern concepts of fragmentation and fluidity within cyberspace some empirical grounding.

Empirical Research: Identity and Cyberspace

Technological advancements, then, are an increasingly important factor when looking at the notion and concept of identity. It is suggested that the possibilities offered by mediated technologies have allowed new opportunities for the formation of identity without the previous constraints of determinants such as class, race, sex and gender. As Suler (2002) states:

"One of the interesting things about the internet is the opportunity if offers people to present themselves in a variety of different ways. You can alter your style of being just slightly or indulge in wild experiments with your identity .... The username you choose, the details you do or don't indicate about yourself, the information presented on your personal web page, the persona or avatar you assume in an online community - all are important aspects of how people manage their identity in cyberspace." (Suler 2002:455)

He argues that in cyberspace a person's identity embodies multiplicity and that "Cyberspace offers a niche for each of these specific facets of selfhood. Some people even talk about how we can "deconstruct" ourselves online." (Suler 2002:455) The work of contributors such as Cheung (2000), Chandler (1998), Roberts-Young (1998), Turkle (1995), Reid (1995) and others highlight some of the ways in which these new mediated technologies offer opportunities for the development of identity and explore multiplicity of online identities. For Example, Cheung's (2000) research is about personal homepages. He says that when personal homepages are constructed, they are created with a question in mind. This question is 'What am I going to put on my homepage?' Cheung (2000) argues that ultimately, this is asking the question, what aspect of yourself should you include on your homepage? Participants are using personal homepages to represent or construct their identity which is then transferred onto the internet. He says that the personal homepage is a vehicle of self-expression and a form of identity construction. As web page construction is a voluntary activity, Cheung (2000) argues that WebPages often reflect what the person sees as being their 'respectable self' but goes on to say that they may be selective in this process. What we must not assume, he argues, is that the person represented in these pages is the 'real' or 'authentic self'. By making this comment Cheung (2000) is making some interesting assertions about the nature of identity and the existence of a 'real' or 'authentic' self. He does however go on to say that in late modern society, "it is almost impossible to have a fully unified, completed and coherent self; rather, we all tend to have fleeting, multiple and contradictory selves." (Cheung 2000 Cited in Mackay, Maples and Reynolds 2001:80). Cheung's (2000) ideas parallel those above, the main arguments being that there is

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much more time for people in cyberspace to carefully construct a persona, an identity, but more importantly that they do carefully construct an identity and that due to the nature of a homepage they have the ability to change their site and whilst re-constructing it, re-construct their representation of themselves.

Chandler (1998) and Roberts-Young (1998) also conducted research into personal homepages, they worked together to look at Welsh adolescents homepages. They argue that the main purpose of a homepage is to present the 'self'; they are in agreement with the findings of Cheung's (2000) later work that a web page is not just a base for communication but a construction of the self. Chandler argues that:

> "Personal home pages are online multi-media texts which address the question 'Who am I?'. Since the web is, among other things, a global publishing system, such pages make public the personal. At the same time they can be seen as making personal the public, since home page authors engage in *bricolage*, adopting and adapting borrowed material from the public domain of the web in the process of fashioning personal and public identities. In such sites, what are visibly 'under construction' are not only the pages but the authors themselves." (Chandler, 1998:1)

They see web pages as empowering, offering a platform to those who would have otherwise gone unnoticed. They also make an interesting point about the ease at which the individuals are able to change the web page. They argue that this parallels the postmodern ideas of being able to 're-write the self' and the self-being fluid and changeable. Chandler (1998) refers to 'writing oneself in hyperspace' – "home pages are objects which enable their authors to think about their identity. They can be seen as one of Foucault's 'technologies of the self' which allow us to transform the very way we think of ourselves" (Chandler 1998:13-14). These ideas are supported by the work of Miller and Mather (1998) who argue that: "The web has the ability to present lots of pieces of information linked together in complex ways with no necessary order of hierarchy. By using this people can present many aspects of themselves simultaneously." (Miller and Mather 1998:2). They argue that the web allows a new way of presenting the self,

they call this 'the hypertext self'. Chandler agrees that cyberspace has caused changes in the way we explain identity, arguing that "The web is a medium which represents a radical departure from previous modes for the 'presentation of self in everyday life' (Goffman 1969)" (Chandler 1998:3). Chandler (1998) and others, such as Salinger (1995) and Seabrook (1997) compare personal homepages to bedroom walls, especially teenagers walls; where graphics, texts, photos and so on are displayed as a way of presenting and exploring self. Chandler (1998) however, argues that the radical difference with the World Wide Web is that it is a 'one-to-many' form of communication:

> "Web pages offer the potential for mass communication in a medium which, despite far from universal access, is incalculably more widely-accessible for self-presentation than conventional print publishing and the traditional mass media." (Chandler 1998:3)

As Ryder (1998) and Negroponte (1995) argue, the web allows mass producers as well as mass consumers; we are no longer passive consumers of media technology. The very fact that web pages remain online for all to see, regardless of whether the author themselves are online, and that web pages are created in the knowledge that others will be viewing them, produces a very different result from a face to face interaction. Rubio (1996) argues that web pages and face to face interactions should not be compared as if they are one in the same; he says that when you visit his web page it is not him that you meet as you would in a face to face interaction but merely a presentation of himself as produced on his web page. Chandler (1998), however, argues that "there is nothing new about this feeling of textual autonomy in print.....'Virtual selves' have existed ever since people have been publishing their writing..... What is new about such virtual selves is that they have never before been available to so many people." (Chandler 1998:4)

Cheung (2000), Chandler (1998) and Roberts-Young (1998) all spent time researching personal homepages and although they give insight into the use of certain areas of cyberspace for the presentation of identity they do not look at interaction. Personal homepages are, as suggested in their title, personal, although people may be able to contact you through your homepage they are not sites of

interaction. The work of Turkle (1995), however, highlights some of the ways in which we interact with others in cyberspace and present identity using computer mediated communication. Turkle (1995) looks at the use of MUD's (multi-user domains/dungeons) and their relation to the identity of the users. She says that "At one level our computer is a tool. It helps us write, keep track of our accounts, and communicate with others. Beyond this, the computer offers us both new models of mind and a new medium on which to project our ideas and fantasies." (Turkle 1995:9). She uses the work of Baudrillard (1994) and the hyper real to explain people's use of MUD's. Turkle (1995) argues that there has been a collapse between the real and virtual; reality has lost its meaning and only exists within simulacra. Turkle (1995) states that this process has been exemplified by the internet, which offers a new virtual opportunity for exploring and developing identity. She states that "when we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass." (Turkle 1995:177) Rheingold (1993) parallels these ideas when he talks about MUD's, saying that:

> "Identity is the first thing you create in a MUD. You have to decide the name of your alternate identity – what MUDders call your character, And you have to describe who this character is, for the benefit of the other people who inhabit the same MUD. By creating your identity, you help create a world. Your character's role and the roles of the others who play with you are part of the architecture of belief that upholds for everybody in the MUD the illusions of being a wizard in a castle or a navigator aboard a starship: the roles give people new stages on which to exercise new identities, and their new identities affirm the reality of the scenario."
> (Rheingold 1993:3)

Turkle also argues that these mediated forums allow us to think about identity as multiplicity; within the MUD's "people are able to build up a self by cycling through many selves." (Turkle 1995:178). Turkle found that people who use MUD's prefer to be within the MUD, where there is a virtual security, whereas 'real life' (RL) is full of uncertainty. She says for people who use MUD's they see real life as having 'nowhere to go but down' whereas in MUD's there is a kind

of virtual social mobility. This is similar to the idea of empowerment, talked about by Chandler (1998) and Roberts-Young (1998) in their homepage research.

Turkle (1995) also states that within the MUD's people are able to construct a character, it can be whatever they want it to be. Turkle (1995), however, says that people changing gender, pretending to be an animal, being deceitful or other such expressions are not putting on a costume or a role but that these are traits of the identity of the user that generally cannot be experienced in the same way outside the MUD. She says that they can become a "context for discovering who one is and wishes to be. In this way, the games are laboratories for the construction of identity" (Turkle 1995:184). MUD's and similar mediated forums that exist on the internet have become a significant setting for "experimenting with the construction and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create." (Turkle 1995:180) However, it has been suggested by Kennedy (2006) and Williams (2006) that identity play with regard to gender is something that is "practiced by a small minority and viewed by many as dishonest." (Kennedy 2006: 864).

Turkle (1995) and Stone (1991) both lend a great deal of weight to the anonymity of such forums in relation to why they are used for the formation of identity. Turkle argues that the anonymity of the MUD's allows the individual to express unexplored parts of themselves that they feel less able to do in a 'real life' situation. As Correll (1995) argues, cyberspace allows individuals far more time to carefully construct their identities and personae than in a face-to-face situation. This idea is echoed in the research conducted into personal homepages where people have a great deal of time to decide what to include and what to exclude from their page.

The traditional notions of identity as authentic and unified are, according to Turkle (1995), no longer in existence when looking at the virtual experience of identity formation within a MUD. She says that "When a player can create many characters and participate in many games, the self is not only decentred but multiplied without limit." (Turkle 1995:185). The MUD's imply "multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation." (Turkle 1995:157). Turkles' research into

MUD's actively supports the postmodern notions of the self as fluid and multiple, she even goes as far as saying that "MUD's make possible the construction of an identity that is so fluid and multiple that it strains the very limits of the notion..... The very notion on an inner "true self" is called into question." (Turkle 1995:158). "MUDding and other ways of playing with "aspects of the self" in cyberspace are helping to construct a notion of identity as multiplicity, thus MUD's are a context for constructions and reconstructions' of identity and they are also a context for the deconstruction of the meaning of identity as "one"" (Turkle 1995:174).

Reid (1995) also researched the use of MUD's in relation to online interaction and the presentation of identity. Reid (1995) argues that "The MUD system provides players with a stage, but it does not provide them with a script. Given the context created by the MUD universe, players are free to act and interact as they please." (Reid 1995:170) She argues that there is much less inhibition than in a face to face interaction due to the anonymous nature of the forums. Maintaining anonymity is also re-enforced by being able to choose a nick name rather than using their own name. (Reid 1995). Myers (1987) and Baym (1995) also state nicknames are transformed into trademarks and these "names are also enhanced to define identity" (Baym 1995:154). Reid (1995) says that the immediate reaction to this anonymity is a feeling of safety which leads to ease of interaction, lessening inhibition and consequently free flowing exploration and presentation of identity.

> "The immediate effect of this anonymity is to provide users with a feeling of safety......Protected by computer terminals and separated by distances of often thousands of kilometres, users are aware that there is little chance of a virtual action being met by an actual response. There are no sticks or stones to contend with, and although words may hurt, users can always resort to the "off" switch on their computer." (Reid 1995:174)

When exploring the notion of identity presentation, a number of researchers refer to results showing gender swapping (Reid 1991; Turkle 1995; Danet 1998; Stone 1991). Stone's (1991) most quoted example of gender exploration was the discovery of a middle aged psychiatrist who, whilst online pretended to be an

older , disabled, compassionate female who typed all her messages on a heartsick. This exploration of gender, although possible to some extent in our day to day lives, is far less consequential and far easier in cyberspace. This kind of exploration of identity, although only covered in brief here, clearly shows another example of the use of cyberspace as a way of presenting identity and as a way of exploring identity in a way that either not possible or much more difficult in everyday
life.

Cyberspace as a forum is open, anonymous and autonomous, a combination that allows freedom of exploration. The ability to change ones persona as easily as you change your nickname online, allows for ease of identity exploration as well as unlimited multiplicity. As Myers states:

> "Myers (1987b) examined, a 14-year old who called himself "the professor", who told him, "you can make the character behind the alias exactly like you, nothing like you, a combination of both, or even make it depending on the situation." (Baym 1995:154).

When looking at the empirical research into the use of cyberspace technologies for the presentation and/or formation of identity, two issues become clear. The first is that although there has been a great deal of research conducted into cyberspace and identity much of this research has been on either MUD's / MOO's, personal web pages or message boards, or the research has been looking at cyberspace in more general terms. It is also clear that the openness of the forums used plays a distinct and significant role with regard to identity. It is therefore important to look more closely at the forum space itself and explore theoretical concepts of spatiality in relation to cyberspace. As Dodge and Kitchin argue "In modern society it is recognized that social relations are formed by spatial concerns" (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:13). The following section, therefore, will look specifically at notions of space and place with specific regard to cyberspace theory.

Place and Space

Massey (1994) argues that a way of thinking about the ideas surrounding space and place systematically is to think in terms of 'activity spaces'. The activity space of someone is the links, activities, connections and locations within which a particular agent operates. If you were to do this for yourself it would be almost like a life map and for each person, company etc it would be significantly different. These changes in the modern world, through the processes of globalization, have caused changes in the nature of these activity spaces in two main ways. They are: increasing in their spatial reach and increasing in their complexity and the complexity of the linkages between them. What this means for the concept of place is that their boundaries are far more open and the complexity of the interconnections which link places together has increased. This is exactly what research shows has happened in cyberspace. Geographical and spatial boundaries have been transcended; users of cyberspace are no longer confined by such constraints. As discussed earlier this allows the presentation and exploration of multiple and fluid identities without the confines of traditional boundaries.

The ability to communicate with ease to numerous people across national and international boarders re-enforces the earlier discussed concept of time space compression. The very fact that we are able to talk to people across the globe makes the world seem smaller than in the past, where previously this would not have been possible. Massey (1994) argues that this compression has made place seem less grounded and secure. David Harvey (1989) argues, in support of Massey (1994), that the growing mobility and 'internationalization' in the present era has made our notions of place and community as settled and grounded hard to sustain. He says that:

> "as space appears to shrink to a 'global' village of telecommunications and a 'spaceship earth' of economic and ecological inter-dependencies .... and as time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is, so we have to learn to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spatial and temporal worlds." (Harvey 1989:240)

With specific regard to computer mediated communication, Nobila (1998) argues that "Computer mediated communication, through written language and, to a lesser extent, through the oral language, has turned into a tool that makes it possible to construct a new type of social interaction beyond space barriers." (Nobila 1998:1)

Giddens (1991) and Robins (1995) both argue that by the late twentieth century spatial movement, interaction and communication will have become so far extended, fast and available that the boundaries by which we used to define places as distinct and separate from each other will be so frequently crossed that the notion of place will need to be re-thought altogether. Social relations have become so 'stretched out' and interconnected that it is hard to distinguish within a social space which coherent areas we might call places. As Castells (1996) states, it gives us the need to question our representations of places as coherent and grounded. Paralleling identity then, through the introduction of new technologies the logistics of space have been reconfigured to such an extent that "Some analysts contend that ICTs render this modern logic of space obsolete (Cairncross 1997). As such, ICTs challenge space-time relations as conceived in modernist thought." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:13)

Contributors such as Cairncross (1997) argue that instantaneous communication, intranets and the internet has led to a "collapse in spatial and temporal boundaries" (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:13) The ability to communicate 24-7 instantaneously no matter what side of the globe you are on, has let to a collapse in boundaries of this nature. We live in a spaceless world where time-space relations are meaningless. Internet communication technologies are also said to be having the same effect on geographic place and are creating a placeless world (Peet 1998). "Here, a combination of cultural globalization and the spatiality of cyberspace itself is thought to be transforming 'real' world spatiality and the relationships between people and place." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:15) Geographical boundaries are of little importance (Hauben and Hauben (1997)). "It is argued that the transformative agency of ICTs makes geographic space essentially 'spaceless' in that the contingency of space as a determinate of material practices is destroyed: geography no longer matters." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:14)

However, as Rheingold (1993) argues place and space are not disappearing they are just being re-configured and new places and new spatialities are being formed online (Rheingold 1993).

Computer-mediated communication is allowing new modes of interaction and networks of social relations which lack the constraints of place and space. Computer mediated communication is not just supporting new social relations but is producing a different kind of society, a new space of identity. For Rheingold (1993), the Internet does not just allow connections across space but represents a new space altogether. These places are very different from places in geographic space because they can be accessed anywhere, based on new forms of interaction and relationships and are centred on common affinity rather than coincidence of location. As Rheingold (1993) argues "cyberspace allows the reclamation and development of the community without the locale." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:35) The concept of place and space has been re-configured through the development of cyberspace technology; alongside this new spaces and places are being developed along with new communities. The concept of placelessness, space without the locale, is a theory that has been explored in relation to place and space but is also a useful concept when looking at identity. As suggested earlier the concepts of identity, place, the body and so on cannot be looked at in isolation, these theories are interconnected. Just as the locale is of little importance in relation to theories of space and place, it is also a relevant theory when looking at identity. The concept of the locale grounds spaces (as discussed earlier), without this grounding place is fragmented and fluid, the same applies to identity. Identity is not grounded in the local; cyberspace offers a forum of fluidity and fragmentation; it is not grounded in fixed determinants such as geographical place, sex and race. Cyberspace communication is a fluid and disembodied form of communication. The following section will look specifically at the notion of disembodied communication as another means of exploring concepts of fluidity and fragmentation within cyberspace.

Disembodied Communication

Related to the concept of placelessness, as well as theories about fluidity and fragmentation with reference to identity, is the notion of embodiment and disembodiment. The following arguments, centred on the body in relation to cyberspace, draw together ideas about the overall picture of cyberspace at present. The process of disembodiment then, is about transcending the physical and the material (Kitchin 1997). It is a process through which, as we enter into cyberspace, the body is left behind (Morse 1994; Kroker and Weinstein 1994). In recent years the concept of the body has re-emerged as a central concern across a range of disciplines including social theory (Bell 2001; Williams and Bendelow 1998). In parallel with concepts of identity and place, in post-structuralist thought bodies too have been radically reconfigured as fluid, multiple, fragmented and dispersed. The concepts surrounding theory on the body however, is not separate from theory on identity, space and place. As Brook and Synnott (1993) argue, our bodies do a lot of the 'identity work' our bodies are like 'embodiments of the self'. Bodies can be actively changed and re-configured to mould and shape them to fit in with the way the way we are or to work towards who we want to become.

William Gibson (1984) who coined the term cyberspace, refers to the body as 'meat', referring to the body in this way implies it is of little importance in cyberspace. The very notion of leaving the meat / body behind when we enter into cyberspace "picks up on the 'freedom' CMC offers users to jettison their RL bodies (and identities) and remake themselves in the non-material realm of bits and bytes." (Bell 2001:140) In everyday life we are confined by our bodies, not only can we only do what they will physically allow us to do but our bodies are part of who we are, we are judged by them. In cyberspace your body is invisible and irrelevant (Stone 1991). We maintain the ability to move beyond the body, to transcend it. In cyberspace nobody knows what you look like, your gender, your race, your age and therefore as part of developing identity you are able to move beyond your own body and create a new one, a virtual body (Westfall 2000). The disembodied nature of this communication forum allows users to experience a new kind of social interaction without the limits of embodied constraints and geographical boundaries.

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Problems and Research Questions

Research, both empirical and theoretical, suggests a clear picture of cyberspace as a disembodied, fluid and fragmented form of communication technology, where participants are able to explore multiple identities without constraints and boundaries. However, there are a number of significant problems with these ideas both theoretically and empirically. The postmodern cyberspatial research at large is overly utopian. As Green (2001) argues:

> "In the speculative discourses of recent years (both popular and academic), attention to the (over-hyped) potentials and problems of virtual reality (VR) technologies has tended to obscure the mundane social activities that incorporate 'the virtual' into everyday life" (Green 2001:73)

Much of the research is also theoretical and is failed to be backed up with solid empirical data. As Beckers (No date on article) argues "we want to encourage further research on digital cities and virtual communities. Only with more ideas backed up with empirical data we can see what is really happening" (Beckers, no date on article:5) There is also a large gap in the research in that areas such as chat rooms are strongly under-represented with regard to questions of identity and place. As Green (2002) argues, with specific regard to time and space in cyberspace, "so far, the sociological treatment has been largely theoretical" (Green 2002: 281). To gain greater understanding of the impact of computer mediated communication, with specific regard to identity and place, it is vital that empirical research is carried out in this area. The remainder of this chapter will work through the problems, questions and concerns that have arisen from the current research into this subject and will work through the research questions that have arisen from it.

There are a number of specific areas that need further investigation, I will explore in relation to identity, place and the body and although there are more general claims and questions to be discussed it is useful to work through each of these areas in turn, discussing the questions and concerns I have with the current literature. I will start with the literature on identity in relation to chat rooms.

Dodge and Kitchin (2001) suggest caution about accepting the views expressed earlier about identity being disembodied, fluid and decentred. They argue that "although identity is undoubtedly non-essentialist and fluid and cyberspace provides a media to explore identity, cyberspace should not be viewed as a disembodied media nor should identity be seen as a set of interchangeable, but separate components." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:24) Although I agree that we should not accept these ideas without question as it is an area that needs further investigation, Dodge and Kitchin's (2001) views about identity also leave me with questions. Firstly, the concept of identity itself needs further exploration. Research needs to be conducted into the nature of identity itself with regard to the theory that we have moved from a time of stability to one of fragmentation. There has been little empirical research on this and therefore this causes a number of questions about the validity of such arguments. Chat rooms and other forms of computer mediated communication may seem as though they are open forums in which people explore multiple and fluid identities, determinants such as race, age and geography may be of little importance due to the disembodied nature of communication within them. However, could people's use of chat rooms be far more grounded than this? Although determinants such as age, sex and location may not be as obvious as in a face to face interaction, people do not have to divulge such information, this does not mean that participants are not divulging it and reliant on these traditional notions; this is something that requires exploration.

Alongside these changes there has been an explosion of new technologies which lend themselves to the exploration of identity in an open and fluid manner. However, as suggested above, this may not be the case; could people's use of chat rooms be far more grounded in traditional determinants? It could also be possible that the nature of the chat room forum, with its open structure and disembodied possibilities means that the phenomenon of fluid and fragmented identity presentation is far more visible than in face to face interaction. It may be that this type of identity exploration has always existed but through research into cyberspace it has become much more visible and consequently seen as something that is new. To explore cyberspace and postmodern identity theory further I will empirically research the use of chat rooms to gain greater understanding of people's actual use of them.

Looking specifically at what empirical research there is, it seems although Cheung (2000) mentions the 'authentic self', he is far more interested in the way people can show different parts of themselves on their web pages. This alone does not mean identity in multiplicity; identity is not a singular process or entity, it is far more complex than that. By choosing what to display on a website and what not to does not represent identity as fluidity or multiplicity. What we decide to put in and what is left out can tell us about identity but does not give us insight into the fluidity of identity. Turkle's (1995) research into the multiplicity of identity also raises some questions about the way she defines multiplicity. Turkle refers to the different characters people occupy within the MUD's and argues that that the multiplicity of characters shows multiplicity of identity. However, multiple characters could be representing the different sides to a person's identity rather that showing that a person has multiple identities. The nature of the multiplicity of identity is far more complex than a person merely representing themselves in different ways through a number of different characters within computer mediated communication. Although much of the current research in the area of cyberspace suggests that identities are fluid and mobile, much of the research has been carried out in MUD's where the very nature of the game could give misleading results as it is primarily a role play game. Chat rooms by their very nature are not role play games and therefore need to be further researched empirically. The discussion about multiple and fluid identities within cyberspace, therefore does not take into account that these multiple identities could in fact be part of the identity of the person already. As Bayam explains "The personalities themselves come, of course, from the idiosyncratic qualities of participant characteristics." (Baym 1995:156). These ideas will be explored in detail when looking at people's use of chat rooms.

The research conducted into cyberspace, spatial relations and place also raises a number of questions. Firstly, Dodge and Kitchin argue that "The modern spatial logic can only be done away with if everywhere offers equal opportunities for production and consumption, and everyone has access to them." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:14-15) Cyberspace, internet and computer distribution is unequal across the globe therefore we cannot completely rid ourselves of spatial logistics as there would be a number of areas of total exclusion. "There is little doubt that

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ICTs do significantly disrupt the spatial logic of modernist societies, but they do not render it obsolete." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:14) As Robins (1995), Harvey (1989) and Massey (1995) argue, could increasing insecurity, fragmentation and change makes us need more strongly these notions of place and community to maintain some security and stability? They suggest that we need a place we can call 'home', "a blessed haven" (Harvey 1989 in Massey 1995:48) and somewhere where we can retreat from the pressures and speed of our everyday lives. They refers to people being able to "retreat at night to the fantasy of an 'olde world'" (Harvey 1989 in Massey 1995:48), for example, an old English Country village. Kevin Robins (1995) raises similar issues when he talks about the increasing popularity of 'heritage centres'. Robbins (1995) makes the point that because people do not feel the same security in place as they once did they are turning to alternative sources to gain this security, such as heritage centres. These centres are reconstructions of, for example, an old English town. People are able to go and visit these places and feel some sense of place, which due to the time – space compression of the modern era, are missing from their daily lives. Oldenburg (1989) echoes these views suggesting that online communities may fill a void that has been missing in modern society with regard to closeness and social bonding of individuals.

In relation to the ideas put forward by Robins (1995), could chat rooms offer the same kind of security? The internet and those who use it are often referred to as being part of a 'global community' which gives the impression that the internet could be a resourceful tool in a society where place is becoming less grounded and when people yearn for stability. As Thomsen, Straubhaar and Bolyard (1998) argue:

> "Although they transcend the physical and spatial boundaries that have
> traditionally defined a 'community,' 'cyber-communities' are often a
> primary form of social interaction for the growing number of individuals
> who often spend hours each day surfing the net" (Thomsen, Straubhaar
> and Bolyard 1998:1)

Although the internet cannot offer localism in the same way that, for example a small village could, i.e.: people living in close proximity with each other; it can offer a sense of localism, stability and community in other ways. For example, the internet, especially chat rooms, can bring people together who have similar interests, cultural backgrounds and so on, together in a 'community' an experience that would have previously been unlikely and difficult to sustain. Chat rooms could be seen as offering people chance to talk to others across international boarders and form 'cyber communities', but can also allow people who may already live close to talk to each other and allow them to form a kind of security and localism, away from the hustle of the outside world in a way that is different from a face to face interaction? It is often argued that people are able to talk far more freely when they are not in a face to face interaction and because of this, chat rooms may allow a closer bond between people and hence give them a form of stability that would otherwise be missing. Could chat rooms have the ability to produce a sense of security and a grounded place? Although this may not be in the traditional way that we think about place being grounded it does not mean that the internet, especially as it is situated centrally in the globalization debates, could not offer people a grounded sense of place. If the internet could offer this it would just be in a different construction from previous notions of grounded place. I am not arguing that there has not been a shift in spatial boundaries and relations but question notions that place has become of little or no importance. As Dodge and Kitchin state: "whilst cyberspace does undoubtedly fuel a destabilization in the link between place, identity and community, it does not destroy their interrelation: placelessness is partial." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:17) The internet has changed our relationship with space and place but has it lessened this bond to an extent that we can render place as obsolete? (Dodge and Kitchin 2001).

There have been a few studies that are beginning to confirm the idea that place is still of some importance. Adams (1998) for example, found that online interaction is spatially grounded through the use of vocabulary such as café, pub, and lobby. Correll (1995) also had similar findings in a study of an online lesbian café. Participants constructed elaborate settings to contextualize their interactions. He argues that this gave them a grounded communal sense of reality. (2004), in her study of a cyberspace community called cybertown has also found evidence of

cyberspace being much more grounded than much of the literature suggests. Finally, Foster (1997) documented an unsuccessful attempt to create a virtual community because it failed to achieve a sense of place.

Tied in with ideas about grounding cyberspace interaction in place we can take these ideas further when looking at the concept of the body in cyberspace. Research refers to online communication and interaction as a disembodied experience in which contributors are able to transcend the body 'leaving the meat behind'. However as Bell states "many commentators remind us, this is an impossible task; the meat can never be fully left behind." (Bell 2001:141)

> "Cyberspace developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body. But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical…….. Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies. (Stone CR: 525; my emphasis)". (Bell 2001:141)

However much we wish that we could leave our bodies behind they are not just an integral part of who we are and what makes up our identity but they we need them to function. (Sobchack 1995) "In the end, it seems however much we might wish the body would disappear, there's more meat than we can repress or dream away or forget, and we remain embodied – albeit in new ways…… what we find in cybercultures are techno-bodies, rather than tech-nobodies." (Bell 2001:141) As Stone argues, it does not matter how much we pretend to be in a different body or at least out of our own we can never truly escape:

> "'An individual may successfully pretend to be a different gender or age on the internet, he or she will always have to return to the embodied reality of the empty stomach, stiff neck, aching hands, sore back and gritty eyes caused by many hours in front of a computer terminal" (Stone 1992:113)

Cyberspace is an embodied media as identities explored online are always "contextualized within experiences offline." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:24), for

example, memories personalities, experiences, these things do not disappear as we log on.

> "We are aware of out lives on and off the screen and out actions are mediated with reference to both: spaces might be distinct and identity might be fluid and fragmented, but they are also situated – our lives in one space are contextualized in relation to life in others. Conversely, out lives offline become embodied through our memories and experiences online, so that a recursive process exists as the virtual is realized and the real is virtualized." (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:24)

When we turn the screen off are we are still the same person? (Kitchin 1997). Do you shed your identity and become somebody else when you are online or does your identity just become further explored and extended?

There are a number of problems regarding the amount of empirical research that has been done to back up these claims but there are also problems with the claims themselves. These problems are best explained in sections, firstly, identity. Further exploration needs to be carried out into the cyberspatial / postmodern concepts of identity. This research needs to question the notions of fluidity in relation to chat rooms and the possibility of either this always being the case but cyberspace highlights it more clearly and allows further more open exploration of identity than in everyday life, or is the identity of chat rooms users far more grounded than this? These questions need to be worked through in relation to place and the body, to further develop and question the theories relating to disembodied communication. The second section is about place; the concept of space and place in relation to internet chat rooms needs to be further explored. Is place becoming obsolete? Is cyberspace grounded in place? Finally, the concept of disembodied communication needs exploration, not just in relation to the body but in relation to identity and place. How, and is, computer mediated communication grounded in everyday life or is it a disembodied and fragmented from of communication media?

In the literature and current cyber space research the contemporary self is composed as fluid, disembodied and fragmented, however this research will question these ideas and produce empirical research in which to explore people's actual use of chat rooms. The research proposed here has three main aims. The first aim concerns the ways in which computer mediated communication is being used. The internet is widely received as a new and exciting forum through which individuals communicate to a multitude of people across national boarders. However, this is assumed rather than substantiated through empirical research. Could it be that there is more diversity within internet use and that people in fact also use the internet in far more mundane and routine ways? Perhaps computer mediated communication is used as a form of security, a place where people can escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life, rather than being an integral part of new postmodern practices. In relation to the way people use computer mediated, it is important to look at people's use of chat rooms globally, this is not referring to the use of chat rooms with regard to global internet use but refers to global interaction. Computer mediated communication, as suggested earlier, may be far more mundane than that; people may talk to others who are geographically and socially local to them, for example, friends from school or work. What is important here is to realize that there may be a higher diversity within internet use than is currently argued. This research aims to examine the impacts that these new technologies are having on the nature of communication and identity.

This research also raises some serious methodological questions about how we are to research the nature of identity, which brings me on to my second aim. Much of the current research is theoretical, we need more empirical research to discover what people themselves feel about their identities in relation to a central core self or multiple and fluid self with regard to internet chat rooms and CMC. As Mansell argues, "New empirical studies are needed to examine how people are interacting with new generations of technologies and to assess the social consequences." (Mansell 2002:252). Much of the current research into the area of cyber research and identity tends to impose theoretical standpoints about postmodern identity formation, for example, fluidity, fragmentation and decentredness, onto the reports given by the participants of these technologies without asking the participants how they feel about their identity formation. By

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asking the participants how they feel about such issues I believe that you are able to gain a much clearer and fuller picture about the nature of identity formation within these forums. I believe that allowing people to be reflexive about their own use of computer mediated communication in relation to their identity formation could give you a great deal of information that you may not have had before asking then to reflect. After all, they are the ones that are using the computer mediated communication and it is their identity that you are looking at.

Researching identity is a complex topic, which brings me on to my third and final aim about the nature of researching identity. Claims for the postmodern self have been largely substantiated through academic interpretations of individual narratives or texts (Leonard 2003) but rarely through research which engages with individuals' own experiences and interpretations of identity, (Halford 2003). How, for instance, are we to deal with cases where an individual professes a coherent core sense of identity, but textual analysis suggests multiple and competing discourses of self? How do we encourage people to talk about the formation and nature of their own identity? Although these issues are extremely hard to address and we may not be able to find an 'exact' answer I still feel that it is important to questions such assumptions. The postmodern debates about identity construction, globalization and time – space compression then, although may seem clear and justifiable at first are not as simple as they initially appear.

Having looked at the theoretical approaches and arguments surrounding identity, place and embodiment, discussing the empirical research conducted into the area of the cybersociety and computer mediated communication and raised a number of concerns that I have with the research conducted thus far, this leads me on to discussing my main research objectives. Within my research into internet chat rooms and the presentation of identity, there are two main objectives that I wish to address. The first of these is about the way people use internet chat rooms. For example, are they used in new and exciting ways to talk to people across national borders, as postmodern arguments would suggest, or are they used in far more mundane and routine ways? Is there diversity within chat room use and if so how much, what kinds of diversity? In relation to this I wish to ask questions about the globality of chat rooms. This relates to the global vs. local debate; how global are

people in their chat room use? Current debates would suggest that there is a high level of globality within chat room use but is the reality that many people are using chat rooms to talk to their friends from school or work colleagues? Are chat rooms new and exciting or grounded and routine? The second objective is specifically about identity formation. This section will ask questions about how people use chat rooms for the presentation of identity. In relation to this I want look into the way identity is presented and what forms these identities may take, thinking about the contrasting theories of identity – fluid, multiple and fragmented versus fixed, core and stable. Such questions will be difficult to answer but nevertheless need investigation and questioning. Current debates about cyberspace and the postmodern society, identity and the use of computer mediated communication fail to look at some of these issues and/or make a range of assumptions that need to be questioned and worked through more thoroughly and empirically. This research will look at these assumptions and also contribute a piece of empirical research in an area where such research is severely lacking.

Methodological Implications

Introduction

The previous chapter looked at the literature and current research on cyberspace both empirical and theoretical and defined the research questions for this thesis. This thesis aims to explore how chat rooms are used, questioning some of the central assumptions of the cyberspace literature. I will examine whether there is global interaction among chat room users and consider the importance of place and the locale. I will also be exploring the theory of identity, space, place, globalisation and disembodiment with regard to the notion that chat rooms and computer mediated communication may be more grounded that suggested in the literature. Research into these areas will also relate to questions surrounding identity. I will explore chat rooms use with regard to postmodern theories about the fluidity and fragmentation of identity in cyberspace and explore people's actual use of chat rooms as many of the current claims about identity in cyberspace have been substantiated through academic interpretation and rarely engages with individuals' own experiences and interpretations of identity, (Leonard, 2003; Halford 2003). When researching cyberspace, specifically identity, it is important to look at people actual use of chat rooms but also to discuss with those who use chat rooms their thoughts, feeling and experiences of chat rooms with regard to identity.

Research Methods

The following section will look at my chosen methodologies and the reasons behind them. This thesis explores identities and the associated concepts through which recent theorizations of identity operate - space, place, globalisation, the body and community. It is important to briefly explore some theory with regard to identity to fully understand why particular methods were chosen. To fully understand identity we must understand the process through which identity is created (Jenkins 1996) without ignoring personal agency and the idea that identity is formed in relation to others in a social setting (Pile and Thrift 1995; Giddens 1990). People are not passive in relation to their personal identity; so when

researching identity people should be allowed, and given credit for, the expression, thoughts and feelings surrounding their own identities. Identity is not solely collective or solely individual it is always a combination of both. Identity is formed in relation to others but always has an element of personal agency, we do not live in vacuums unable to act with any sort of interaction with others and events but likewise we cannot deny the implication of others upon the way we act. In this respect the formation of identity is always personal as well as collective.

These ideas are similar to that of Mead (1934) and Goffman (1969), who refer to identity in relation to others and to the different ways people present themselves to different people and at different times. Strauss (1977) has similar views to Mead (1934) and Goffman (1969) claiming that:

> "Identity is connected with the fateful appraisals made of oneself – by oneself and by others. Everyone presents himself to the others and to himself, and sees himself in the mirrors of their judgements. The masks he then and thereafter presents to the world and its citizens are fashioned upon his anticipation of their judgements." (Strauss 1977:9)

The idea of identity being formed in relation to others is relevant to this research because chat rooms are such a socially interactive medium. The concept of masks and various presentations of the self is also interesting when looking at computer mediated communication. However, when conducting empirical research into the nature of identity it is useful to discuss with participants their experiences online and to understand their interpretations of those experiences with regard to identity. Researching identity is complex and this research has to take into account various other interconnected theories about place, space, globalisation, the body and community also; therefore a number of methods were decided on in order to answer the questions and aims discussed earlier.

This research needed methodologies that allowed me to look at process as well as individual experience not just with regard to identity but also in relation other areas of interest. On this basis I decided to conduct observations of internet chat rooms as well as interviews with those who use chat rooms. The observations will

show what people do in chat rooms and allow me to begin to draw out themes which can be further explored through interviews.

During the observations of internet chat rooms I will be looking to gain understanding into how people use chat rooms in general terms as well as looking at specific areas such as identity, globalisation, place and community. I will also use the observation stage of the empirical research to gain greater understanding into the language used on chat rooms as well as other idiosyncrasies that may be particular to chat rooms or individual rooms. The observations will allow me to draw out common themes in which I can focus my interviews around, this will lead to more in depth and focused interviews. The interviews will allow more in depth interactions with users to gain understanding and the reasons behind their actions and experiences of chat room use with specific reference, but not exclusive to how, and if, they use chat rooms for the formation and / or presentation of identity.

To draw out and develop these themes at the observation as well as at the interview stage, I will use a combination of computer aided qualitative coding as well discourse analysis. I will begin by discussing how I will use coding before moving on to discuss how I will use discourse in my analysis of the observations and interviews. Coding is a process of categorising data and describing the implications and the meanings behind it. I will begin by doing a broad process of coding, named as 'open coding' (Trochim 2005) to draw out some initial themes before moving on to 'selective coding' (Trochim 2005); looking at the data with regard to a specific theme or concept. During this process it is important not to have pre-determined categories but to be lead by the data; this will produce categories and themes that are based on the data as opposed to pre-conceived ideas. The coding will be used in conjunction with a form of discourse analysis as discussed in the following section.

The idea of discourse is one that is useful when exploring how people use chat rooms, in particular exploring the rules that exist within chat rooms that cause people to act or be a certain way. As Parker (1999) explains, discourse analysis is sometimes used "to refer to patterns of meaning" (Parker 1999:3), or "more

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broadly to refer to the whole symbolic domain" (Parker 1999:3). This type of analysis will allow more in depth understanding into the way people use chat rooms as a way of presenting identity in relation to discourses within chat rooms. To illustrate this it is useful to look briefly at the work of Foucault (1980). Foucault refers to 'discourses of power', a critical concept in numerous sectors of his work. Although I do not want to completely focus my research around the discourse of power, although it may play a part in the analysis, his work encourages me to think about discourses within chat rooms that may have an affect on the personal and/or collective identity of the users. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that self identity is created in discourse; he states that researchers are able to interpret the identity of the person just as they are able to interpret the discourse through which it was created.

"Identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies." (Hall 1996:4)

Very much in line with Halls (1996) thinking about identity in relation to discourse is the work of Butler (1993, 1994) as she states that:

"identities are discursive – performative......in the sense that they are best described as constructed through discursive practice which enacts or produces that which it names through citation and reiteration of norms or conventions." (Butler 1993, 1994 in Barker and Galasiński (eds) 2001:28).

I will use these idea's surrounding discourses, rules of engagement and themes within chat rooms to gain understanding into the way people use chat rooms in relation to identity as well as other themes that are drawn out at the observation stage of the research. This use of coding, themes and discourse will allow me to conduct more in depth and relevant interviews due to knowledge gained at the observation stage but also to focus my research with regard to questions raised in the previous chapter; such as how people use chat rooms with regard to identity

and the use of chat rooms with reference to place, space, globalisation and community.

The final part of the analysis of the interviews will be to conduct an in depth case study, or textual analysis, of a small number of the interviews. The reason for this is to look specifically, and more in depth, at the way a selection of interviewees discuss identity and how they use chat rooms in relation to their identity. The analysis of the case studies will not only refer to, and develop key themes; I will also broadly use the method of narrative analysis to explore the way people use chat rooms in relation to the presentation of identity. This approach will look at how the chosen interviewees use chat rooms as a way of telling stories about themselves and the impact this has upon using chat rooms as a way of exploring identity. As Murray (1989) says narrative is not just about understanding the identity of the narrator but it is about the "construction of self in a social context." (Murray 1989:178) A persons life is not just a list of data for researchers to study, but lives "consist of stories and stories are negotiated during social interaction." (Collins 1995:4.4). The idea of stories and identities being created through social interaction is an idea that closely relates to ideas about internet chat rooms. Do people use chat to explore identity and how do they use narrations about themselves to explore their identity?

One of the key methodological issues in relation to narrative analysis and other qualitative approaches to identity research, concerns the question of 'truth'. Are the identities the narrators fashion representative of their 'true self'. As Alasuutari questions: "are such life story narratives totally false, and are therefore useless in trying to get a grasp on an individuals true self?" (Alasuutari 1997:10). He does then go on to say that such narratives are useful because "any events included in the life story are there precisely because they make a point about the person." (Alasuutari 1997:10). As he claims:

> "Individuals do not have their readily narrated life stories in their back
> pockets or the back of their minds, waiting for a researcher to collect them.
> Any account of one's personal past makes a point and serves a function."
> (Alasuutari 1997:6).

In relation to these views it is beneficial to make a brief point about the idea of narrative analysis revealing, or not revealing, a persons 'true' identity. The idea of a 'true' self is one that was discussed in the previous chapter and something that postmodern theory has brought into question. This thesis is not about whether a person is revealing their 'true' self but about gaining understanding into how participants use chat rooms for the presentation of self and their experience and understanding of the concepts of having a 'true' self versus identity as multiplicity and fluidity.

It is important to discuss one final issue in relation to narrative and analysis which is especially relevant when looking at computer mediated communication before moving on to the practicalities of carrying out this research. Narrative is a representation; we therefore need to interpret this representation during our analysis of it. It could be argued that this would cause concerns due to bias, reliability and validity, however, as The Personal Narratives Group state:

> "When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. Their truths don't reveal the past "as it actually was", aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experience...... Unlike the truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them. Sometimes the truths jar us from our commonplace security as interpreters "outside" the story and make us aware that our own place in the world plays a part in our interpretation and shapes the meanings we derive from them. (Riessman 1993:22).

What is important when researching chat rooms and other forms of computer mediated communication is not whether what people say is 'true' or not but what they say and the insights this can give with regard to how people use chat rooms, identity and other areas of interest.

Practicalities of Methods

A number of methodological approaches have been explored and critiqued thus far, and from this process I have come to a clearer foundation on which I am able to look at the methodological implications for my own research in more detail. The following section then will look specifically at the methods and some of the practicalities in carrying out my research into identity and internet chat rooms. I plan to use three main methods – taxonomy of chat rooms, observations and interviews. The first thing I plan to do is to create a taxonomy of chat rooms. The main reason for this is to find out what is 'out there'. From the taxonomy I will be able to create a sample of suitable chat rooms of which I will pursue a number of them further in the later stages of my research. The compilation of the taxonomy is fairly simple, if not a little time consuming. I will begin by searching all the main service providers for their own chat rooms, then move on to the smaller service providers before doing a final web search for independent chat rooms. This search will be conducted through a number of search engines such as Yahoo, Ask Jeeves and Google. Once the taxonomy is complied and I have completed the sampling, I will move on to the next stage of my research, observation.

The practicalities of the observation is fairly self explanatory and will consist of observing a number of different chat rooms as decided from the taxonomy and sampling (the sampling process will be discussed in more detail later on). One of the practical reasons for carrying out observation is to familiarise myself with the language and abbreviations that are used within the chat rooms. For example 'LOL' means laughter on line or laugh out loud, 'ASL' means what is your age, sex and location and 'PMSL@' means pissesd myself laughing at...... It is also important to familiarise myself with rules, such as writing in capitals is seen as shouting and fairly rude. Observation of the chosen chat rooms will also allow me to pursue other areas of interest. These are looking into what people talk about in chat rooms and the implication of what they say for the formation of an individual and/or collective identity.

Through observation of the chat rooms I will also be able to look at the 'rules of engagement' within chat rooms. By this I mean the broader discourses that exist

within chat rooms as mentioned earlier. These could be things such as a discourse of 'truth'. From looking preliminary into chat rooms I found that telling the truth is something that people tend to feel strongly about. For example if a person is asked 'ASL?' and they give an answer, if later, when they are asked by a different user, respond with a different answer, people notice and they do not tend to look favourably upon this. These sorts of discourses could be numerous and competing. They may not only differ between chat rooms but they may also differ between the time of day and so on. The analysis of such discourses will not only be interesting in its own right but will also give me insight into the rules of engagement within chat rooms that could affect the personal and collective identity of the users and assist in the development of themes that will help during analysis and in the preparation for the interviews.

The fact that chat rooms are written text will help in the analysis process. Not only are that chat rooms all text based but for many of the chat rooms it is possible to copy the text and paste it into a word document so you can spend more time on analysis without having to remain on line or in the chat room.

The final stage of my research will be interviews. Interviewees will be chosen through sampling, taking into account the observation results. The practicalities of this will be discussed in more detail later on. The interviews, in content, will follow on from the observation stage of the research. Interviews will continue to look into the use of chat rooms for the formation of identity; I will also follow up the idea about the rules, themes and discourses that exist within the rooms and further explore the affect these have on the formation of identity of the users. All the interviews, consent permitting, will be conducted within private chat rooms so that the only people present are those that I am interviewing. As with the observation, the majority of transcripts of the interviews can be directly copied and pasted into a word program which will allow further time for analysis. The fact that I am able to do this will also have two other large advantages for me. The first of these is time, by not having to transcribe the interviews, as you would if you had recorded the interview, I will save valuable time and consequently leave more time for analysis. The second advantage is that it will cut out any transcribing errors; the data will be an exact copy of what was written at the time.

With the use of these three methods: a taxonomy, observation and interviews I will be able to gain a lot of useful information about the formation of identity within internet chat rooms. The interviews will allow me to steer participants to talk specifically about chat rooms in relation to identity formation, as well as allowing me to pursue points of interest picked up in the observation stages and to prompt the participants to discuss the issues that I want to hear about; this will not be possible during the observation as I will be a non-participant observer. The observations, however, will allow me to watch the way people interact within these rooms in a totally natural setting, i.e. without an interviewer asking them to talk about their experiences of chat rooms. The observation will allow me to gain a valid representation of what people talk about in chat rooms and so on, whereas in an interview situation respondents may not feel that they can talk as openly. With the combination of both these methods I should gain a great deal of valuable data. Before beginning the empirical research it is first important to look at the ethical considerations of this research with regard to researching identity, carrying out interviews and observations, as well as the ethics of online researching.

Researching Online

With research in a virtual world being a relatively new practice Jones (1999) suggests that it is still "common practice in internet research is to regard face-to-face conversation as the ideal communication environment" (Jones 1999: 42). This should not be the case; many researchers are pushing the boundaries of internet based research and gaining excellent research data which otherwise may not have been so rich or possibly or even accessible without some level of online researching. However, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed when conducting research in a virtual arena that are not as important or relevant when conducting interviews and observations face-to-face. There are a number of practical implications, for example, understanding the use of abbreviations when observing chat and conducting interviews. It is also much more difficult to encourage people to expand upon what they are saying or to open up during an interview because when interviewing online there are not the same kinds of contextual cues as in face-to-face interactions. A number of people interviewed gave brief answers to some of the questions I asked and sometimes when people

did give more detailed answers it was difficult to tell when they had finished answering a question. With some respondents I had to ask a number of further probing questions in order to gain a fuller understanding of their thoughts or feelings on a particular question. Others were much longer with their responses; in which case there was a balance between encouraging people to say more and expand upon ideas and keeping their interest. Chat rooms are very fast modes of communication where text written is seen by others without the time delay present in a medium such as e-mail. Therefore, while being careful not to cut responses short by asking another question before they had finished fully answering the previous one, I had to also be vigilant about not leaving it too long between questions to keep the interest of interviewees.

In many cases it was obvious when a person had finished one question and I could then move on to the next, but in one particular interview knowing when the respondent had finished talking became more of an issue. There were a number of occasions when I found myself asking the next question before she had finished responding to the previous one. In cases such as this I agreed with the interviewee that when they had finished responding they would give me a trigger word so I would know to move on to the next topic. For example, in one of the interviews, the respondent typed "done" at the end of her responses. In face-to-face interactions it would be seen as extremely rude to cut people off in this way but those who were interviewed found this an acceptable part of communicating online, as Mann and Stuart explain, "In the online environment chat interruptions are difficult to avoid as distinctions become blurred" (Mann and Stewart 2000:61).

Throughout online interactions with myself as an interviewer as well as with other chat room users it became clear that people found other ways to express themselves which may not be available to them in the 'normal way'. This was done mainly through the use of emoticons which is the verbal translation of feelings – for example, this could be through words or abbreviations such as lol (laugh out loud) or through smilie faces ☺, sad faces, ☹ or even shocked, angry or winking faces. The use of emoticons, as Mann and Stewart state, "offer interviewers another textual means to show feelings (:-) for smiling/happy; :-0 for surprise/shock) and to soften the potentiality distancing abruptness of some CMC

messages by adding humour or whimsicality." (Mann and Stewart 2000:135).
The expression of feeling and actions was also expressed through words with
asterisks at the beginning and end of the text; for example Name: *makes a cup of
tea* or Name: *Gives ..... a big hug*. As Hine (2005) says "the lack of physical
presence means that understanding and perceptions of others have to be negotiated
by text........the simple gestures of nodding, agreeing or eye interrogation are, for
instance, not possible through e-mail. Such conversational elements must
nevertheless be translated into a text based context and have to be adjusted to each
interviewee" (Hine 2005:40). Textual cues when researching online have to be
learnt by the researcher and once you have become familiar with them
interviewing and observing online can produce data as rich as a face to face
interactions, perhaps even more so!

The nature of researching online did cause me to overcome some interesting
situations that I would not have had to deal with if I was interviewing face to face.
For example, a number of the interviewees in the gay and lesbian chat room did
not want to be interviewed in a private room and would only conduct an interview
if it was in the main room. This was difficult at first as other chat room
participants were involved in the discussion I was having with the interviewee.
However, the data gained from these interviews were no less valid than the other
interviews and produced some interesting responses that may not have happened
in a one on one situation. Although these interviews were more of a performance
to others in the room than the one-on-one interviews appeared to be, people are
always performing to their audience, these interviews were just a slightly different
way of performing. If people are always performing, the truth of what they are
saying could be called into question. The issue of truth is one that is often raised
when researching online as when you are not face to face with those you are
researching it is perceived as being much more likely, and common, that people
will not be truthful. However, this was not an issue for a number of reasons.
Firstly, throughout the research, both during observations and interviews, there
were strong discursive and normative pressures to tell the truth; this was policed
by other chat room users for inconsistencies. It would be possible for chat room
users to have multiple identities across a number of different chat rooms but this
would take a fair amount of setting up and was not something that interviewees

owned up to during questioning. Despite the strong discourse of truth that was evident throughout the research, it was not possible to be completely sure that people were telling the truth; however this is the same during all research and is not something particular to online research. When interviewing face to face it is much easier to know if people are telling the truth about things such as age, sex, gender, race and so on, but, as with interviewing online, you can never be sure if they are answering truthfully about other issues. As determinants such as gender, ages and so on, are not an integral part of my research this was not a major concern.

Ethical Considerations

Researching identity can be a sensitive subject; interpreting what somebody tells you about themselves and their identity could be a difficult obstacle to overcome ethically. I initially did not feel very comfortable with interpreting what someone had said about something as personal as their identity. What makes me think that I should be able to interpret what that person has said in relation to their identity better than the person whose identity it is? However, with some reading into the subject of the ethics of researching identity I have managed to overcome these issues. I felt very encouraged to read about others experiences of studying identity, for example, Josselson (1996) writes:

> "I worry intensively about how people will feel about what I write about them. I worry about the intrusiveness of the experience of being "writ down", fixed in print, formulated, summed up, encapsulated in language, reduced in some way to what the words contain. Language can never contain a whole person, so every act of writing a persons life is inevitably a violation." (Josselson 1996:62)

Although I feel uncomfortable conducting work into such a sensitive subject as a person's identity, as Josselson says: "To be uncomfortable with this work, I think, protects us from going too far. It is with our anxiety, dread, guilt and shame that we honour our participants." (Josselson 1996:70) It is also imperative to remember that when researching we are not necessarily looking for the same

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things out of the interview or observation so by interpreting what someone has told us is not necessarily an intrusion. As Collins states:

> "I decided that it was not necessary to send participants drafts of my analyses and to ask for their feedback.... In sum, I claimed my authority as narrative analyst by articulating a distinction between what I wanted to communicate through my interpretations and what women superintendents wanted to communicate by narrating their experience." (Collins 1995:3.5)

Sociologists train to analyse data, interview scripts, observations, narratives and so on and although I may feel a little uncomfortable delving into some of the personal details of my participants lives in relation to identity and the internet chat rooms that they use, as I am placing my interpretation upon their lives which may be different to the way participants see themselves. As Ochberg (1996) argues we are not just repeating what the participant has told us but interpreting and analysing it:

> "When we interpret a life story, we do not simply report what our informant told us. Instead, our retelling changes the story in a much more fundamental way than the kind of light editing we take for granted. We do not simply tell a shorter story, one that distils the highlights from a long and repetitive transcript, nor do we simply organize events chronologically or group them into themes. Instead we convert what we have been told from one kind of account into another. We systematically call into question the ordinary assumption that our narrator is simply reporting what happened." (Ochberg 1996:110).

Rather than merely reporting what the participant has said, we interpret the data and often look for deeper meanings. Collins (1995) uses the example of Susan Chases work when illustrating this point, saying:

> "she did not include her interviewees in her attempts to interpret their stories. Her justification, which is retrospective, centres on her assumption of authority as a narrative analyst. She argues that she is less interested in

the details of interviewees' individual lives but rather 'in how women superintendents' narratives embodied general cultural phenomena'."
(Collins 1995:3.5).

Here, Collins re-iterates the point that we are not always looking for the same things in an interview and that a person may report on an event and we may be looking at it in a totally different way from them, in this respect then, although researching identity can be a delicate issue, it is a worthwhile project to undertake with due care and consideration to the participants. As Bar-On argues, there is an

"ongoing struggle in which the analysts try to describe their own understandings of the texts, to prove something, while also trying to remain faithful to the experiences of the interviewees and the way they themselves have formulated them." (Bar-On 1996:16)

It is also relevant here to point out that much of the research states that such a process can not only be beneficial for the researcher, in terms of their work, but it can also be beneficial to the participant. Participants of qualitative research have said they benefited from being able to talk and have the whole session revolve around them. As Ochberg explains:

"The stories people tell are one way of reclaiming some measure of agency. No matter how buffeted one has been by events, at least one can take charge of how the story is told and, in this way, rescue oneself from passivity. To tell a story allows one to make something of an experience and, thereby, of oneself. In turn, for an interpreter to show the rhetoric at work in a narrative is not to demean the narrator but to appreciate this act of self-construction. Yet to see this, we must listen to the account not as it was intended – as a literal description but as an effort of persuasion."
(Ochberg 1996:98).

With consideration into these issues and thought throughout the empirical stages of my research I feel that these ethical issues are possible to overcome, I also

believe, as these final sections show, that research into identity can be beneficial to the participant as well as the researcher.

Before moving on to look at the practicalities of the empirical research it is important to discuss a final ethical consideration with regard to privacy and informed consent. This is not as relevant during the interviews where informed consent will be gained at the beginning of the interview, where participants will also be told a little about the research, will be asked to give their consent to taking part in it, told they can leave at any time, not answer questions if they don't want to and so on; as well as being given the opportunity at the end to change their name or for me to make up a different name for them if they so wish. All of the participants' identities were kept anonymous so that they could not be traced in any way and I made sure that there were no detrimental consequences for any of the participants as a result of participating in the research. As Jones argues:

> "If an interviewer solicits respondents to participate in an on-line survey or interview, or to contribute personal anecdotes, those who do respond have made a conscious choice to do so. They have the option to disguise their identities with user names that do not reveal actual names or exact locations. Respondents can also control how much information they wish to volunteer." (Jones 1999: 247-248).

During the observations, participants, although being able to see my name in the list of people currently logged onto the room, will not be aware I am recording the data and conversations produced in the room. After careful consideration I decided that due to chat rooms being open forums, accessible to all and in the public domain, that informed consent was not needed. As quoted by the American Sociological Association, researchers

> "may conduct research in public places or use publicly available information about individuals (such as naturalistic observations in public places and analysis of public records or archival research) without obtaining consent," (American Sociological Association code of ethics 1999).

Although internet research, and consequently the ethical procedures for online researching, is relatively new, the American Sociological Association have drawn up some key issues to think about when researching online. The ones that are particularly relevant to my research, and have not already been covered, such as informed consent, are: intrusiveness, perceived privacy, vulnerability, potential harm and confidentiality. I will work through each of these in turn, explaining how they have been considered in this research. Firstly intrusiveness, the observations were not intrusive, they were about recording data and passively analysing results and findings. The second is perceived privacy, this refers to how private the forum is perceived; we which we have already touched on to some extent. The American Sociological Association refer to issues such as, is registration required and how large is the membership? Some of the chat rooms required registration and others did not; many of the chat rooms that did were the larger chat rooms and many stated that the reason for the registration was to stop computer generated logons that are often used in chat rooms to entice people to particular websites. The process of registration was also to ensure that a nickname was chosen and that it was not the same as an already registered name. Registration was always easy and there were no specific requirements other than an e-mail address. Membership in many of the chat rooms was huge and in the smaller rooms it was still regularly changing suggesting that the membership was larger than it may initially appear. It is also important at this stage to point out that should chat room participants choose to engage in private discussions one on one or in larger groups they can do so without others being able to see their conversations or even know that they are in a private chat.

The following two points refer to vulnerability and potential harm. I purposely chose chat rooms where participants were not vulnerable such as medical rooms where participants were suffering from cancer, for example. I also chose not to focus on children specific chat rooms and chose not to interview people under the age of 16 or to use rooms where it was obvious that most of the participants were under 16 years of age. The observations and interviews will have no potential harm for the individuals or for the chat room as a whole and finally as chat in chat rooms, unlike message boards, is irretrievable and not held on any sort of online

database or file, it is not possible to trace any of the participants. I also made sure that participants were aware they could withdraw from the research at any time. As the interviews were conducted online, this was easier than in a face to face interview as participants could just close the interview screen or log off the internet altogether. As Hewson, Yule, Laurrent and Vogel (2003) argues, "Our recommendation we offer, in helping to ensure that participation is entirely voluntary, is to make it easy for participants to withdraw from the study at any time during the procedure." (Hewson, Yule, Laurrent and Vogel 2003:52). Great care was also taken to ensure that there were no detrimental consequences from carrying out this research to any members of the chat rooms looked at and that ethical considerations were thought through and taken seriously throughout. Certain areas of the research were changed during the research to reflect these ethical concerns.

The research design, in its original form, did not distinguish between the various chat rooms and as such there were no plans to treat any of the rooms differently. However, as the research progressed it became clear that there were differences in the chat rooms which required changes in the research design. When observing the chat rooms certain rooms allowed a level of analysis to take place during the observations whereas others such as aol and yahoo were so busy that the data had to be printed and *all* analysis had to take place after the observations were over. There were also differences across chat rooms when conducting interviews and looking for interviewees. Certain interviewees, mainly from the gay and lesbian chat room, required more information, proof of my research project and reassurances of my authenticity before they would agree to participate in an interview. When conducting interviews with those from the gay and lesbian chat rooms therefore, I offered more information about my research and a link to the university website where my research project was listed. After discussions with a number of people on this chat room it became clear that a link to the university website was an essential part of my introduction to my research to gain trust and reassure prospective interviewees that my research was authentic. I offered this information to other interviewees, in other rooms, if requested, but in the lesbian and gay chat room this information was offered as a matter of course.

It also became evident that in some other chat rooms, such as yahoo and aol, interviewees preferred an abbreviated version of my research topic rather than detailed information, like in the gay and lesbian chat room. When conducting interviews in chat rooms where there were frequently high numbers of chatters, such as aol and yahoo, participants never asked for more information about my research and on a few occasions asked to cut directly to the questions without knowing fully what my research was about. In these chat rooms I produced a cut down version of the introduction to my research that still contained the important issues, such as confidentiality and anonymity but less information about what the research was about. More information was given if requested and I always checked that the interviewee was happy with everything before beginning the interview but in these chat rooms I was never asked to give any further information. I also found that in the busier chat rooms where chat was extremely fast, it was best to split longer sections of the introduction, and some of the questions, into smaller parts so that there was less to read and to maintain interviewee interest.

Now that I have discussed the methods and their ethical considerations the next stage is to begin the research itself. The following section will discuss the process of creating the taxonomy of chat rooms. It will explore what is 'out there' as well as explain how the process of this taxonomy took place. I will also explore the sampling process that took place in order to manage the data I had gained and consequently which chat rooms I have chosen to focus on for my observation as well as the interviews.

The Taxonomy and Sampling Stages:

The Taxonomy

Before I could begin any in depth research into what goes on in internet chat rooms I had to establish which chat rooms I wanted to look at and also develop an understanding of what was 'out there'. I wanted to come up with a comprehensive list of the chat rooms available on the internet. The scope of chat rooms available on the internet far exceeded my initial expectations. I had to develop a strategy to

find out what was out there whilst still maintaining a level of manageability. I knew that I could not do random searches for chat rooms on different search engines because the list would be extensive. I also had to deal with the fact that when you put 'chat rooms' into a search engine like yahoo it comes up with an almost immeasurable amount of hits and that this would be far to much to cope with, bearing in mind the time scale.

I had to narrow the searches down somehow but I didn't want to change the words that I was putting in the search engine. After all if you want to search for chat rooms what could you put in the search engine that would be more appropriate than 'chat rooms'? Maintaining a broad search was important because I wanted a range of chat rooms to look at when I got on to the later stages of my research. What I decided to do was to firstly limit my search to three search engines. I chose Yahoo, Google and Dogpile. The reason for choosing Yahoo and Google is because they are very well known search engines and are highly used. From my own personal experience I find them both easy to use, very comprehensive and fairly inclusive. By this I mean that they have a very large amount of data and therefore when searching you are given a comprehensive list of what is out there, and one that is not a too selective. I also chose to search dogpile because it searches nine other search engines so you get a list of the top hits from various search engines without having to individually search them.

I'd decided which search engines to use I just had to narrow down the results they were returning. Without narrowing this down the results were totally unmanageable as you can see: Yahoo returned 2390000 Google returned 2630000 and Dogpile 106. As Dogpile returned 106 hits across nine search engines I decided that it would be plausible to look at all of these hits for sites with actual and usable chat rooms. As I went through the lists I made a note of all the sites with chat rooms and ignored the sites that were just talking about chat rooms or advertising chat rooms, software and so on. To narrow down the results on Yahoo and Google I decided to look at the first two hundred hits on each of the search engines. Again I made a list of all the appropriate chat rooms and their site addresses. As you would expect, not all of the sites found on the search engine were listed for further research. Some of the sites turned out not to be chat rooms

at all and some of the sites were either not working or were no longer being kept up to date and therefore had no chatters in the rooms or more often, the room wouldn't load despite repeated attempts. Some of the chat rooms, as you would expect, were repeated not only across the different search engines but also within them.

Categorising

I was then left with a list of 166 chat rooms to categorise and then narrow down for more in depth research. I had to categorise the chat rooms into topics to make them manageable and then I would be able to start deciding which ones to research further. I broke the rooms down into initial categories such as: Regional, Internet Service Providers, Medical, Religious, Romance, Children or Teen and Sport. The initial categories were based upon main topics that are listed in the categorisation process in the larger, multi subject, rooms such as AOL, yahoo and msn. It was clear whilst sorting through these categories that there would be many chat rooms that did not fit into any of the categories listed thus far. Those that didn't fit in to any of these categories got put into another pile and then they were narrowed down again. Some of the categories had so many chat rooms in them and the subjects were fairly varied that they were able to be divided again into sub categories. The final categories were as follows:

- Regional
    - o Specific and
    - o Multi Regional
- Race
- Educational
- Music
- Political
- Sport
- Medical
    - o Children
    - o Mental Health

- o Drug Related
- o HIV and AIDS
- o Other
- Religious
- Children and Teen
- Family Friendly
- Romance, Dating and Relationships
- Gay and Lesbian
- Adult and Sex Related
- Specific Subject (that do not fit in to the already listed categories)
- Virtual Reality, Avatar or Voice Activated
- Sites that List other peoples chat rooms
- Internet Service Providers (ISP)
  - o Well Known
  - o Less well Known
- Multi Subject Rooms that are not ISP

Sampling Strategy

All the chat rooms had been divided and sub divided into categories, it was then just a matter of deciding which chat rooms to use for further study. The list now amounted to 166 different chat rooms. These rooms were not the only rooms on these sites either they were merely the web address of the site with the chat rooms on it and although not all of the sites have multiple chat rooms on them many do. For example a site such as msn or AOL has an almost immeasurable number of chat rooms spanning many different topics, languages and countries. Although many of the other sites are not on the same scale as msn, may have multiple rooms within their sites.

I used stratified sampling to decide which categories to look at further and how many chat rooms I would look at in each category. I would then use a mix between stratified and random sampling to decide which chat rooms to look at within these categories. I wanted to use stratified sampling at the initial stages

when deciding which categories to look at because I wanted to get a range of chat rooms. I felt to enable me to have a contrasting range of rooms I was better able to decide which categories to look at using stratified sampling rather than leaving it to random sampling, as with random sampling I may not necessarily get the range which I am hoping to achieve. Once I had decided which categories to look at I had to decide how many chat rooms I would look at from each category and which chat rooms I would choose. To some extent this was already decided for me. For example, when looking at the Gay and Lesbian category there was only one chat room listed in this area and therefore it was easy to decide that I would look at one chat room in this category and that would be it. In other categories it was far more difficult. I thought about deciding how many I wanted to look at and then leaving the rest to random sampling but through experience of chat rooms and the speed at which websites can change decided that this would not be a good idea. Some of the chat rooms that I had looked at during the initial stages of my research whilst compiling the taxonomy were no longer being used or working. I therefore decided that I should begin by looking at all the chat rooms in the categories I had chosen to look at and find out which ones were still in use. Once I had done this I could then use random sampling to pick the chat rooms I wanted to look at from each category whilst assuring that the chat rooms would be researchable i.e. up and running and used. I was then left with a list of chat rooms that I wanted to use for the observation stages of my research.

The Results of the Sampling

Now that I have explained the process I went though to decide which chat rooms to use for further investigation it is important that I put names to the explanations and discuss how I chose some categories and not others and give a list of the final categories that I have chosen to focus on.

I decided to begin with listing the categories that I definitely did not want to explore further. As there were so many categories I decided that this would be a good place to start as there were a few categories that I knew I did not want to look at any more in depth. These categories were the adult chat rooms and the children's chat rooms. There were a number of reasons that I did not want to

pursue the adult rooms further. They were, firstly these rooms often cost money and for the information I felt I was likely to get out of the rooms it would be a waste of already finite resources. I felt that the people using these types of sites would not want to talk to me about identity, neither did I feel that these rooms would tell me a great deal about the way people use chat rooms with regard to identity. There are also a number of issues surrounding access in relation to these sites which would be a great problem for me especially accessing many of these sites through a university server.

The other category that I decided not to look at was the chat rooms specifically designed for children. Many of the websites advertise the fact that these sites are for pre-teen children and that was a deciding factor for me why I should not pursue these sites further. There are again a number of reasons why I have decided not to look at these sites any further but one of the main ones is the issues around child abuse and paedophilia. This was especially relevant at the time of the sampling as msn, one of the largest chat rooms providers, has decided to shut all its chat rooms due to child abuse issues. I feel that this would be too big a problem to tackle in this thesis, there are too many ethical issues alongside issues of consent and especially with the current media coverage on these issues to research these rooms would be a thesis in itself. Therefore ethical, moral and practical reasons had assured me that I should not pursue these sites any further. I also decided, for many of the same reasons as listed above that I would not pursue the family based chat rooms any further. These rooms, much the same as the children's chat rooms and are aimed at pre-teen children. I also feel that in the current climate, with high media coverage on issues of child abuse on the internet and teenagers disappearing with people they have met thorough internet chat rooms that the security on such sites will have been heightened. I do not feel that the people monitoring the sites would allow me to observe or interview children and I am not willing to do this covertly as I believe in this respect it would be both ethically and morally wrong.

For these three categories it was fairly easy for me to decide that I did not want to pursue them any furthers but I was still left with a number of categories that needed organisation. There were categories I knew I wanted to look at further,

those I knew I didn't want to look at (those listed above) and the majority of categories in the middle that I was not sure if I wanted to look at them further or not. I decided to do some preliminary observation into all the categories that I was not sure about to help me to decide which ones to look at further. This proved to be very helpful and I was able to dismiss some categories almost immediately or after a short while of observation. For example, medical chat rooms; I decided fairly quickly after some observation in each room that I did not want to pursue these rooms any further. There were two main reasons for my decision; the first is that many of the chat rooms to do with medical issues are based around children and childhood illness. The illnesses are often very serious, and sometimes terminal. I felt it would be inappropriate to enter into these chat rooms and conduct any research due to the personal and emotional nature of the topics that are discussed within the rooms. Other chat rooms in this category I felt were too personal, such as the chat rooms about HIV and AIDS, and ethically I felt it was inappropriate to research such rooms. There were also a number of rooms in this category that were based around scheduled chats and specified meeting times or were more message board based with dormant chat rooms and were not places that I felt would give me a great deal of insight into the way people use chat rooms for the formation of identity.

I then observed all the chat rooms in the education category and the political category. After some exploration of these sites I found that in a couple of cases, the chat room no longer worked, but in the majority of rooms the chat was based on specific subjects at scheduled times. Scheduled topic and time chats is not something I want to pursue further in this piece of research. After looking at a few scheduled chats and reading a couple of transcripts from such chat I decided that as a specific subject is being discussed it is not really a place where people will explore notions of their identity. They may develop some form of collective identity but it would be very difficult to research this or really get much of an understanding of it. Also the people using these chat rooms tend to log on to a specific subject chat to discuss that subject and then leave when the chat is over. They do not use these forums in a way that would encourage the formation of identity as the chat is so rigid it does not give as much room for identity exploration.

I then looked at the sport sites. I had hoped to look further at one of these chat rooms but after some intensive observation found that the sites do not lend themselves to identity formation. Many of the sites are more message board based or have scheduled chats. Those that are not, the chat is centred on team results, predictions favourite teams and so on. They are fan based sites with discussions centred on particular teams with little else discussed. Much the same as the political and educational rooms they are unlikely to give me much data about the way people use chat rooms with regard to identity. Much the same as the sport category that I had hoped to look at further, I wanted to pursue one of the two chat rooms in the race category. I thought that they would be interesting sites to look at and would give me an insight into the formation of identity within chat rooms especially with reference to race. Unfortunately the chat rooms on these sites would not load on my system which, after a lot of trying, lead me to believe that they no longer worked.

I was then left with eleven categories, all of which I wanted to explore further. All of the chat room categories left were ones that I felt would give me an insight into the way people use chat rooms for the presentation of identity. There were also rooms that would allow me to explore the notion that chat rooms are global, for example, I decided to look at a chat room from the multi-regional category as well as the specific region category. The chat room categories were also a great contrast from one another, which is what I wanted, as I want to look at a range of different rooms and not just concentrate on the same type. This will give me insight into how different people use different rooms. I also chose to look at a site that allows you to create your own chat rooms as I felt this could tell me about how people use chat rooms and create their own chat rooms to express, explore and develop identity. I also wanted to look at virtual reality chat rooms as I felt that this would give another angle to my research. The final list of categories was as follows:

- Multi-Regional Chat Rooms
- Specific Region Chat Rooms

- Romance Chat Rooms
- Gay and Lesbian Chat Rooms
- Virtual Reality / Avatar / Voice Activated Chat Rooms
- Private / Create your own chat room
- Internet Service Providers
- Multi Subject Chat Rooms
- Music Chat rooms
- Religious Chat Rooms
- Specific Subject Chat Rooms

So I having decided the eleven categories I wanted to look at it was now just a matter of deciding how many chat rooms to look at from each category and which ones. I did not want to look at more than twenty chat rooms as it would be unmanageable, especially as I want to observe each of the rooms thoroughly and then conduct interviews. With a time scale in place for this research I decided on a number between fifteen and twenty chat rooms could feasibly be researched. With eleven categories it was not as easy as looking at one or two from each category so I started with the categories that had a limited number of chat rooms in and decided that for the majority of these rooms I would look at only one chat room from each. For example, in the gay and lesbian category there was only one chat room so it was easy to decide which chat room to observe and use for interviews. Many of the other categories had a number of chat rooms within them so rather than just randomly picking one chat room from these categories I decided to investigate the chat rooms in each category and check that they were all suitable for further research, i.e. they were fully functional and that they were being used by people, even if it was just a small number of people. This investigation allowed me to reject a few of the chat rooms in some of the categories; I then made the final decision on which chat room to look at by random sampling. For most of the categories I chose only on chat room but for the larger categories I chose two chat rooms. I was then left with eighteen chat rooms in total that I would pursue for observation and interviews. The following list shows my final list of chat rooms and the categories that each of the chat rooms are from.

- Alamak - Regional chat Rooms (Multi Region)
- F & P Friends - Regional chat Rooms (Specific Region)
- Dating Chat rooms - Romance/relationships or dating
- Gay.com - Gay and Lesbian
- The Palace - 3D or Virtual Reality
- On Chat - 3D or Virtual Reality
- Chatting in Cybertown - 3D or Virtual Reality
- The Chat Shack - Create your own chat rooms
- Aol - ISP's
- Yahoo - ISP's
- I Music - Music Related
- Christian chat - Religious
- Eat Sushi - Specific Subject
- Psychic - Specific Subject
- Active Chat Rooms (Dream chat) - Multi Room websites that are not ISP's
- ICQ - Multi Room websites that are not ISP's
- Opti Chat - Multi Room websites that are not ISP's
- Chat Rooms teen Web - Multi Room websites that are not ISP's

Observations:

There were eighteen chat rooms in which I would conduct my observation and I also planned to do some preliminary observation of each room before starting the actual observation. There were two main reasons for this, firstly, to make sure that the chat rooms still existed and that it was still possible and feasible for me to observe them. Secondly, to get more of a sense of what I was looking for so as not to waste time during the actual observations and to maintain a loose form of structure throughout the observations. Due to the nature of computer mediated communication there can be a great deal of text on the screen at any one time, my preliminary observation helped me to filter out some of the unnecessary text and to focus on the more interesting data. For example, many of the chat rooms inform you when somebody leaves or enters a room and in the more active rooms

this can be very often. I became much more aware of these messages and learnt to ignore them. I also became much more aware of what I call robots, which are computer generated messages aimed at luring people in the rooms to a specific site, usually ones with web cams on them and then charging people to look at the cam.

After the preliminary observation was finished and I had constructed an observation log, I focused on when and how often I would observe the rooms. I decided upon no more than two hours at a time, as it can take a great deal of concentration and I didn't want to miss anything by loosing concentration. I then decided to look at three different time of the day. They were morning (9:00 – 12:00 am), afternoon (12:00 – 5:00 pm) and finally evening (5:00 – 11:00 pm). So by the end of my observation each chat room had been looked at for six hours in total and at three different times of the day. In the chat rooms, where it was possible, I recorded the data by copying it into a word package and in those where this was not possible I took detailed notes. I made up an observation log sheet for each of the rooms and meticulously filled them in even if there was nobody in the room for the full two hours so I could keep a comprehensive record of each room and what I had found. With detailed notes and observation logs I began the analysis of my observation results.

Observing peoples use of chat rooms, although would raise a number of useful and interesting ideas for understanding the way people use chat rooms for the exploration of identity, the observations could not be used as a research tool for this thesis in isolation. The observations left a number of avenues that needed further exploration as well as areas that were not able to be explored through observation and therefore interviews were needed with those who use internet chat rooms to gain a much more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of how and why people use chat rooms with specific reference to the way people use chat rooms for the presentation and exploration of identity.

Interviews

The following section will give background into the logistics of the interview process. Approximately fifty interviews in total would be carried out across nine different chat rooms. Each chat room was chosen due to the results obtained at the observation stage and results of a short section of observation from each room before the interviews began. Chat rooms where little or no observation data was found were not used for the interviews and chat rooms that no longer existed, had dramatically changed in format and so were no longer accessible, or were empty for large periods, were also not used. Whilst making sure I conducted interviews in active chat rooms I also wanted to make sure I was looking at a range of chat rooms. From the observations I made a list of the most active chat rooms overall and the most active chat rooms in each category (when there was more than one). Chat rooms that were both active and in a category on their own were put on the final short list and when there was more than one chat room in a category I picked the most active. This required observation of a number of chat rooms to check that the site was still active and accessible and that it had not changed dramatically since observation so that it would no longer fit into the same category. This final list left me with nine chat rooms spanning seven categories which was a manageable number whilst still allowing me to explore different types of chat rooms. The final list of chat rooms used was as follows: AOL, Alamak, On Chat, Yahoo, I music, ICQ, Teen Web Chat, Gay.com and Christian chat.

Like the observations, interviews were conducted at three different times of the day, morning, afternoon and evening and equal numbers of people were interviewed at each time of the day, except where there were no people present in the room at those times in which case the interviews were then carried out at another time in the day. Although it was originally planned that an equal number of interviews would be carried out in each room this did not turn out to be the case. In some chat rooms more interviews were carried out and in some less, this was due to two main reasons. The first reason was that some chat rooms proved to have more people using them and therefore a larger number of potential interviewees and hence it was easier to find someone willing to be interviewed and the second reason (linked to the first) was due to the time constraints of the

project, having larger numbers of potential interviewees meant that it was far easier to find willing participants in a shorter space of time. The following graphs show the number of people interviewed in each chat rooms and also the time of day that people were interviewed in each chat room. For most of the room's there was equal distribution between morning, afternoon and evening, as shown above. The room where this was not possible was the Christian chat room as no-one was in this room in the morning or afternoon, therefore all interviews were carried out in the evening. Also gay.com was far more popular in the evening than the morning, when I never found anyone to interview, and the afternoon when I did find a few people but in limited numbers. The graph also shows that I conducted more interviews in chat rooms such as AOL, Alamak, Yahoo, teen web and gay.com than in the other rooms. This was purely down to numbers in the rooms and the level of willingness to participate in the research. As so many of the chat rooms had a regular base of chatter I had to be careful how I asked people to take part in the research, if the regular chatters took offence to me asking for interviewees it could jeopardise how many willing future interviewees I could get from that room. This was more of a concern in some chat rooms in comparison with others. For example, in Gay.com in both the male and female chat rooms there was suspicion regarding my project and many more questions were asked before anyone would agree to take part. In the female chat room on Gay.com there was also some aggression toward me as a researcher as well as a number of regular chatters who often made comments about the research which could have jeopardised future participants. The main cause of this was due to a number of interviewees insisting on the interviews being carried out in the main room as opposed to in private chat. The interview dominated conversations in the room and was probably not that interesting for other chat room users and consequently caused some of the chatters to 'poke fun' at the questions. These interviews were some of the most challenging but at the same time yielded some good results. I wanted to include some of the smaller chat rooms, especially those where there was only a limited, or no choice, of chat room (unlike Aol and yahoo where there is a huge choice) and therefore knew at the outset that I may not get as many interviewees from these rooms. This was not a major concern as for each of the smaller rooms I managed to get at least one interviewee for morning, afternoon and evening.

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What time Interviewees were conducted in each chat room

(Chart — Y-axis: Number of Interviews (0–10); X-axis: Chat Room — AOL, Alamack, OnChat, Yahoo, I Music, ICQ, Teen Web, Gay.com, Christian Chat. Legend: Evening, Afternoon, Morning)
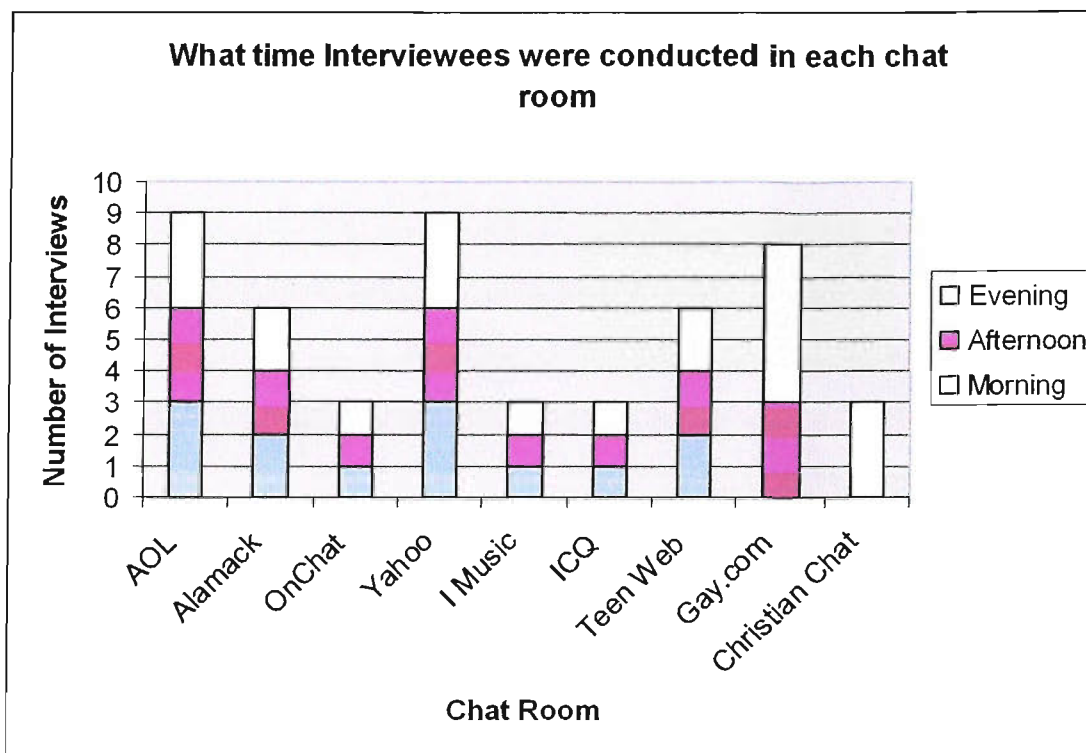
It was decided that between forty and sixty interviews would be carried out because with this number of interviewees I would be able to draw out trends and ideas without loosing the in-depth analysis gained through qualitative research. There was no concern that reliable and valid statistical data may not be obtained with this number of interviewees as this was not the aim of the research and it was decided that as the aim was to gain in-depth understanding via qualitative research and analysis a smaller more in-depth sample would be more beneficial to the thesis. When interviewees began to repeat previous interviewees I decided that it would be more beneficial to stop the interviews and begin the detailed analysis of the results. This resulted in fifty interviews in total being conducted. Throughout the process I was careful that I gained a base number of interviews from each chat room across the three times of the day where possible. Subsequent interviews were then carried out across rooms where there were willing respondents, again continuing a pattern of spreading the interviews across as many rooms as was feasible. Once the interviews were finished coding and analysis could be begin.

The following chapters look at the results gained from the observations, followed by findings from the interviews.

Observing Online Interactions

Introduction

Cyberspace research suggests that computer mediated communication is a new mode of social interaction. It is portrayed as novel and exciting; a forum in which people are able to explore and cycle through a multitude of identities (Turkle 1995; Shields 1996; Featherstone and Burrows 1995; and Jones 1994, 1997). Due to its open and disembodied nature participants can break away from traditional boundaries and constraints and escape from the mundane routines that make up our everyday lives. However, as I suggested in Chapter One, there are a number of theoretical and empirical problems with these ideas. Much of the cyberspace research is solely theoretical, and makes a number of questionable assumptions (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). For example, researchers make unsubstantiated assertions about computer mediated communication being a disembodied, fragmented and global form of communication. The analysis of cyberspace needs much more careful consideration and empirical research to access people's actual use of computer mediated communication.

The main focus of this chapter will be to explore use of chat rooms in relation to everyday life, place and identity. The primary method here is the observations of chat rooms. The observations of the chat rooms and the analysis of the findings will question assumption about disembodied, fragmented, global and extraordinary use of cyber technologies. I will explore the diversity of chat room use by looking at both escape and routine in chat room use as a way of gaining understanding about how people actually use the rooms. Use of chat rooms suggests that they are not just used and in exciting and disembodied ways but that there may be a more grounded use of chat rooms. The observations suggest that chat rooms are part of everyday life and that chat rooms are used in mundane and routine ways. These observations suggest that chat rooms are grounded in the routines of everyday life; they are embodied forms of communication media as opposed to exciting and disembodied modes of global communication.

This chapter will use the data from my observation results to argue that chat room use is grounded in everyday life. Current literature and research suggests that computer mediated communication is disembodied, fragmented, fluid and out of the ordinary. To explore these claims further I will use the literature on everyday life as a way of exploring the concept that chat room use is more diverse than this, that it is embodied and grounded in routine and everyday life. The theory from the current literature and the idea that chat rooms are grounded are very much in tension with one another, each suggesting opposing uses of chat rooms. To develop these concepts further and to gain greater understanding of how people use chat rooms in relation to everyday life it is important to look at the literature on everyday life.

Everyday Life

Everyday life is not a new concept, "For if by everyday life we mean the rhythms and routines of daily existence, there is a sense in which everyday life is as old as human society." (Bennett and Watson 2002:x). However the concept of everyday life did not make "its first appearance in social thought until the 1920s, while its emergence as a recognised area of enquiry in sociology is limited largely to the period after the Second World War." (Bennett and Watson 2002:x). So, when we talk about the study of everyday life what do we mean? Everyday life is about the ordinary and the routine. It is not about those who are extraordinary but about the masses. It is also not about special moments or times in our lives, birthdays, religious rituals or ceremonies or festivals but about what happens in our everyday lives; what goes on a day to day basis. The concept of everyday life therefore implies that there is a "contrast between some kinds of days and others - between weekdays and weekends, for example, or between the rhythms of regular working life and the occasions when these are punctuated by special events." (Bennett and Watson 2002:x). Everyday life is about sameness and difference; it is about the contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary. "Everyday life is like the air we breathe or the ground on which we build; it is the foundation of social life." (Hemmings, Silva and Thompson 2002:302). We are able to use the study of everyday life to explore micro sociological concepts such as interactions and

individual identity but we can also use the study of everyday life to explore macro concepts such as social order and social change.

My main focus in this chapter will be the micro, how people actually use the chat rooms. As already suggested there is a tension between the literature, which suggests that cyberspace is unique and extraordinary and my theory that there is more diversity in chat room use. These ideas produce two contrasting notions about how we use chat rooms, exciting and disembodied or ordinary and grounded; this suggests chat room use as grounded in everyday life or escaping these routines. To develop these theories further and to analyse people's use of chat rooms with reference to these theories I will use the concepts of escape and routine. These concepts highlight the conflict between the current literature and the theories of a more grounded use of chat rooms. The use of these concepts develops analysis of chat room use in relation to identity, place, space and the body and allows further exploration of chat room observation findings. The notion of escape allows development of theories about disembodiment, fluidity and placelessness, where as routine allows the exploration of theories surrounding computer mediated communication being embedded in everyday life, as embodied, grounded and localised. The following section will explore these concepts in relation to escape and routine.

Space and Place

Everyday life, it is argued, is grounded in time and space (Silverstone 1994) and therefore, literature on everyday life is useful when looking at globalisation and the impact of internet communications on place and space. The following section looks at the idea of time space compression and globalisation within the chat rooms I observed and draws out some questions about the theoretical ideas of space and place that were raised earlier. It is suggested in the literature that the internet fuels an entire global community which spans across a multitude of geographical boundaries (Harvey 1989; Noblia 1998; Massey 1994). During my observations a main focus was to look for evidence to support or refute such claims. Do people use internet chat rooms globally; is there global participation and / or interaction and what are the implications of this in terms of time/space

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compression and identity formation? In terms of everyday life, the use of chat rooms for global interaction suggests a way of escaping from the confines of everyday life. By talking to others across the world, or even just across the country, people could be trying to break free from the routines of everyday interactions with those whom they are in close proximity with and also people that are very familiar to them. By talking to people who they do not know or do not talk too often, could be a relief from the monotony of everyday routines, however such interactions themselves, if carried out on a daily basis, or in a routinised manner, could lead to routine and monotony in itself. When observing the chat rooms then, I was not only looking for trends of people's global interactions and global participation I was also looking at people's global interactions in terms of escape and routine. These ideas explore the concept that global phenomenon such as the internet or chat rooms could have routine as well as having elements of escape.

My findings were significant with regard to the debate surrounding the importance of place and the global use of chat rooms. My findings contradict those stated in the literature, where it is suggested there is high global participation and interaction among chat room users and that due to the disembodied nature of a forum such as a chat room that place is of little importance (Gillespie and Williams 1988). The following section will look at some of my findings and examples from my observations to highlight such contrasts with the literature.

I will start by discussing Alamak chat because it is a site that markets itself as being global. Initially it did appear that this site would attract a global audience and promote a form of global interaction and community because the advertising on the site promoted global use and there were chat rooms from a multitude of different countries. However, after observation of this site I found that this was not the case. Alamak chat has a number of different chat rooms and splits them in two ways. Firstly there are a number of rooms based on geographical location such as, USA, Canada, UK, Philippines, India and so on, and secondly there are a number of more general chat rooms. So from the out set this kind of segregation does not promote a site with a high amount of global interaction. However the site may not have a high level of interaction but still have a high level of global

participation. Although there are many different chat rooms from various countries across the globe represented within Alamak chat, not the entire global community is included within their site. Although the internet itself is not entirely global as there are proportions of the world, mainly third world countries, who have very limited, if any, access (Kitchin 1998). Alamak chat did not represent the world globally; there were a number of countries that were not represented. Although global participation in Alamak chat may, or may not be, proportional in terms of overall global access, where I want to focus is on global interaction. My reasons for focusing on interaction is because peoples interactions with one another tells us much more about the importance people put on place and also allows us to explore the notion that because the internet is disembodied that place is of little or no importance. When looking at global interaction, not surprisingly due to the set up, there was very little global interaction, people tended to stick to the room that mirrored their nationality and rarely ventured into other rooms. Much of this could be put down to a language barrier in Alamak chat; however an overarching trend across all of the chat rooms I observed suggested otherwise. This was due to the importance and sheer volume of questions relating to location. For example:

> **[Jason_X]** hey inualuk where r u from?
>
> **[Jason_X]** hey julia where r u from?
>
> Alamak Chat 23/3/04 (Evening)

> **[Tree]** from w r u from sherli, I'm Cape Town
>
> **[Mishgun]** Hello, everyone!!!
>
> **[Mishgun]** where are you from, sarah?
>
> **[Mishgun]** So, sarah, where are you from?
>
> **[Sarah]** Indonesia...and you???
>
> **[Ringogirl]** anyone from britain?
>
> Alamak Chat 24/02/04 (Morning)

However these questions were not just a matter of finding out where someone was from but there were regular questions across all of the rooms asking if there was anyone there from a specific place. The more open the room was to having a variety of different nationalities using it the more common it was for people to ask

what country other users were from, or if there was anyone there from the UK or India for example. This trend did not just exist within Alamak chat and other such 'global' chat rooms but it was a trend that ran through all the chat rooms. The more local the room was, for example, Yahoo UK, the more specific the questions got in relation to geographical location, i.e. asking if there is anyone in the room from a particular city.

> **Gibsonb871:** any girls from around kent want 2 chat?
> **DancingQueenKay:** ANY 1 FAE SCOTLAND
> **Kirstypoo2218051:** IS ANYONE FI EDINBURGH IN ERE
> **Jonjoshergy:** any 1 from Sunderland
> **Myr537:** ne1 4om london im me
> AOL Chat 03/01/04 (Afternoon)

The importance of these questions of location clearly shows that place still holds importance for the users of the chat rooms. A related finding from the observations was about the use of the term 'ASL'. I found during the observations that the single most common question, across all of the rooms I looked at, was ASL, which means what is your age, sex and location. Many people also introduce themselves by stating their age sex and location.

> **JerBemi:** tory asl plz
> **JerBemi:** Luke asl plz
> **NO1 SUPER SUB:** HIA SEXY ASL PLS
> AOL Chat 03/01/04 (Afternoon)

> **Angelic(7)** (Says to Pretty(6)) asl
> **Cloe(5)** (Says to valerie(3)) asl pls
> Opti Chat 24/02/04 (Morning)

Conversations have to have a starting point and having something in common is a good way to start a conversation. Having something mutual on which to initially start a conversation allows those involved to base it on a common theme and build a foundation with which they can then develop the conversation further.

However, the sheer volume of questions relating to location, initially to start up a conversation but also through the question ASL, raises serious issues about the claims in the literature by contributors such as Cairncross (1997) that place is of little importance. The observations show that place is still important to participators in internet chat rooms and that chat rooms are grounded in place and the locale as they maintain a strong link with their physical location by asking question such as where are you from, is anybody here from the same town as me and what is your age, sex and location?

There are a number of reasons why location could be seen as so important. I have already discussed its use for starting up conversations by having a common grounding; another strong possibility is that people could be asking questions about geographical location because they hope it will lead to meeting the person face to face. This idea would strongly promote the idea that people do not see chat rooms as disembodied. Although they may be using a form of communication where their physical location is of little importance users make it an important factor and make it part of themselves and their presentation of self. However, from watching conversations started up on the basis of where they live, it is not common for the conversation to continue for a significant amount of time and I have never seen any evidence of suggestions to meet up face to face. With the use of private messages though, this is not something that I can be sure about. I will explore the notion of people meeting face to face and also explore the idea that even if you do not meet face to face that there is an intention to meet which fuels the questions about geographical location further in my interviews.

I will also explore the importance of ASL further in relation to an intention to meet face to face. Are people asking ASL because they want to talk to people who they have a chance of meeting up with, so are close in proximity or are there other reasons? The literature suggests that the internet transcends place and that determinants such as age and gender become of little importance. However, as the data shows, this does not seem to be the case. Although there is no evidence from my observations that people do meet up face to face, an intention to meet up could be a major reason behind these kinds of questions. It also shows that determinants such as a person's age, gender and location are still seen as important

determinants when deciding whom to talk to within the chat rooms. Chat rooms are grounded in traditional determinants such as people's age and sex; it is based on these characteristics that people make informed decisions about who to talk to. The importance of these questions ties in with my previous comments about escape and routine. Chat rooms and other forms of computer mediated communication, according to the literature, are supposed to transcend geographical location. Chat rooms are presented as disembodied, determinants such as age and gender are claimed to be of little importance. The observation results clearly show that this is not the case. This raises the idea that chat rooms, rather than being an escape from the day to day routines of everyday life and all the social practices that chat rooms supposedly transcend, that chat rooms actually re-enforce these ideas. Important characteristics in a face to face interaction, such as a person's age and their gender are still important in chat rooms. It is possible that in a chat room it is even more blatant than in a face to face interaction, as face to face you do not need to ask a persons gender and rarely ask a persons exact age whereas, within chat rooms these questions are asked regularly. As mentioned earlier, a main reason from asking such questions could be due to an intention to meet it is also likely that there is a sexual basis on which people ask such questions. People could want to meet, or at least talk to, those who they feel they may be able to have a relationship with. On the basis of this they ask questions about gender, age and location to fit their specific needs or wants.

Sex, Fantasy and Flaming

After observing a number of chat rooms it became clear that sex was an important subject when looking at internet chat rooms. As Atwood (2006) claims, "There is probably no other time in history where sexuality has so pervasively permeated society" (Atwood 2006:448). Sex was a major topic of conversation within the chat rooms and also played a significant role when participants were deciding who to engage in conversation with. It is also an interesting area when looking at the contrasting uses of chat rooms; chat rooms as routine but also as escape. Sex was not only the topic of many conversations but also the catalyst for starting a conversation.

Piemac5: any fit girlz hu got pics n wanna talk press 123

WITTSANDREW: Twinkle cummin 4 this shower then?

Twinkletoe686652: behave lol

AOL Chat 03/01/04 (Afternoon)

SubTwiggySocks18: I want sex

Gary: Rev is masturbating

FrankD: how sweet

Blueeyedboy: go rev!

Gay.Com (men) 13/04/04 (Morning)

Ladies_get_naughty: hey guys.....4 cute girls here

Sweeterthenanyguy: any females in here want to cyber chat im me

Yahoo 21/01/04 (Afternoon)

Action * Yuffie** passes out ***

Action * Yuffie** wakes up shortly ***

Action ***Angel Of Shadows Rapes Yuffie before she is fully awake ***

Action ***Angel Of Shadows Blames it on a dream! ***

Action * Yuffie** blinks and screams ***

Teen Chat Room 24/02/04 (Afternoon)

The openness and the anonymity of chat rooms allows people to feel much more comfortable expressing themselves and also expressing their sexual desires (Suler 2002, Turkle 1995). Without the barriers of a face-to-face interactions participants are much more free to openly explore their sexuality (Atwood 2006, Bolding et al 2004, Subrahmanyam et al 2004). "Our lives are generally made of talk. Our identities are composed, and daily re-composed, in it. Our friendships, loves, and social structures arc built upon it." (Salamensky (ed) 2001:viiii) Talk is such an important feature of our day to day lives; as Zimmerman and Boden (1991) state: talk is "at the heart of everyday existence" (Zimmerman and Boden 1991:3). As talk makes up such a large part of our everyday lives it is important to look closely at talk in relation to social issues such as identity. When looking at

chat rooms it is especially important to look at the process of talk as chat rooms can only function through talk, all be it in a text based format. The study of mundane, everyday conversation is essential for understanding social interaction and wider social structures. (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970).

The talk that goes on within internet chat rooms, due to it not being face to face allows for much more exploration and openness especially in relation to somewhat taboo issues such as sex (Friday 1975). The control of being able to log off whenever you want to and the comfort and security of being at your own computer, usually in your own home, could lead to much more open discussions and explorations of feelings and desires. The volume of this kind of sexual chat is a way of breaking away from the taboos placed upon us by society in relation to talking about sex and being honest in our own desires. The openness of such a forum could have significant implications on the use of chat rooms for the formation of identity. The freedom allows participants to be who they are without limitation (Turkle 1995). Research into cyberspace suggests that computer mediated communication forums, due to their open structure, allow much more scope for the construction of identity and that within such forums identities are much more fluid and fragmented. Although I have a number of questions surrounding the nature of identity construction in relation to fluid and multiple versus solid and centred, the open nature of forums such as chat rooms does allow more opportunity for the exploration of identity through the ability to explore desires and or fantasies that may be more difficult, or impossible to play out in 'reality'. These ideas will be explored further in the interviews.

Nancy Friday (1975) conducted a number of studies into women's sexual fantasies and she raises a number of relevant points when looking at the sexual nature of chat within the chat rooms. She states that may women enjoy fantasy as it is a way of safely exploring ideas and actions many of which they could not or would not act out in real life. Although Friday's work focuses on women this concept can be applied to all users of chat rooms. The set up of the room allows people to be much more explorative in relative safety and without as much embarrassment as in a face to face interaction. The use of chat rooms in this way

is more of an escape; an escape from the taboos of everyday life and the confines of prejudices and taboos regarding sex, fantasy and desire.

Although the observations showed the quantity of chat on a sexual nature, the more intimate chats were suggested to go on in private where participants engaged in a one to one chat inaccessible by others in the chat room. However, there are some examples of pure fantasy of a sexual and of a non-sexual nature, for example:

> **Action*** (11) Vampire Destiny Runs A Light Finger Down JTR's Tummy Still Behind Him Her Arms Wrapped Tight Around His Waist As She Drinks A Small Sigh And Growl Escapes Her Lips As the Blood Fills Her Mouth.
> **JackThe Ripper**(12) (Says To KillerGoldFish(10)) runs around his boxers on his head my boxers are gone!!!... *looks at your T-shirt* you slut...you ate them didn't you!...you lazy T-shirt you ate the boxers!
> Chat Rooms Teen Web 24/02/04 (Morning)

The chat room participants use the 'action' command to carry out actions that would not be possible in 'reality' (actions within this particular room are highlighted by asterisks). Examples of such actions are much the same as discussed earlier in relation to sex and sexual fantasy, the sexual nature of chat allows people to freely explore sexual desires as well as breaking away from the taboos of today's society and talking with people in a way that is not as possible in everyday conversation (Atwood 2006, Bolding et al 2004). Although not all actions are of a sexual nature they show elements of fantasy throughout. Some are events that would not, or could not happen in 'reality' and others, although possible are unlikely. In my interviews it would be interesting to explore the use of chat rooms to play out such fantasies. Also to explore peoples reasons for using these forums to act them out. Do people play out such fantasies because it would be impossible in reality, or unlikely, or is it more to do with the nature of the forum in that it lends itself to playing out fantasy? Does the anonymous structure, the ability to log off at the click of a button, the feeling of control in the situation, impact on the way users participate in chat rooms when exploring or

expressing fantasy? Looking at the use of chat rooms in relation to fantasy could also lead onto exploring identity. Fantasy and identity are closely intertwined so exploring people's use of fantasy in chat rooms develops greater understanding in the use of chat rooms in relation to presenting identity. Cohen and Taylor (1992) argue

> "Our lives are run through with fantasies: they invade our work-place, our kitchen table, our marriage bed. At any moment it is as though we can throw a switch inside our heads and effect some bizarre adjustment to the concrete world which faces us – make horses fly, strip the women, assassinate the bosses – or else conjure up an alternative reality which has apparently little connection with our present situation. Fantasies are always on the tip of our mind, about to enter consciousness. They squeeze themselves into all those moments of our lives when we are not fully engaged by the demands of the concrete world. They provide a continual possibility for the blurring and distortion of the clear predictable lines of paramount reality." (Cohen and Taylor 1992:91).

The literature suggests a singular approach to the way people use chat rooms, chat room use however is not as simple as this. I will use the concepts of escape and routine to make sense of people's use of chat rooms with regard to sexual fantasies. When thinking about the way people use the rooms, such as for the playing out of sexual and other such fantasies and the exploration of desires we can see how chat rooms are used as an escape from everyday routines. Although, the logging on and the use of chat rooms in this manor may be a routine event and the topics they talk about may be routine but the actual content of the chat is not something that would be discussed in day to day situations other than those that occur within the chat rooms themselves. In this respect the chat rooms are used as a way of breaking away from the routines of everyday life. People are talking about subjects that are not part of their everyday lives outside of the chat room; in some examples of peoples' use of chat rooms they are using the rooms to explore ideas that are impossible to perform in everyday life. However as we have found out with the grounded questions about age, sex and location and the other

discussion about routine and everyday events, peoples use of chat rooms can also re-enforce the routines of our everyday lives.

People's use of chat rooms and the topics they choose to discuss are part of their everyday lives. They may not be conversations that they would have in an everyday social setting, outside of the chat room, but within it these conversations are everyday and routine. This leads me on to the phenomenon of flaming in chat rooms as these exchanges, although an everyday and routine occurrence within the chat rooms, are not commonplace in face to face interactions. For example:

> **Sexylad john01:** this chat room is bollox
>
> **WHITSANDREW:** Sexylad john01 is GAY
>
> **Sexylad john01:** WITSANDREW......int gay but his b/f is tho
>
> **WHITSANDREW:** haha!
>
> **WHITSANDREW:** Funny!
>
> **Twinkletoe686652:** Bloody hell u 2 take a chill pill lol
>
> AOL Chat 03/01/04 (Afternoon)

The above examples highlight ways in which people use chat rooms to escape routine. They argue with each other and insult one another; this is not something that can be done as freely in day to day life. In fact the process of arguing on the internet is so commonplace that it has been given a name – 'flaming', although it is an area that has been largely overlooked in current research (Lemus, Seibold, Flanagin and Metzgen 2004). As Turkle (1995) explains, flaming or flame wars are where participants "state their positions in strong, even outrageous terms with little room for compromise." (Turkle, 1995:272). The very fact that there is a name given to these arguments shows that not only are they common but suggests that there are a number of people who enjoy these types of interactions. Turkle, in her research into MUD's and MOO's interviews a participant who discusses their use of a MUD in relation to flaming. He says:

> "There was a premium on saying something new, which is typically something that disagrees to some extent with what somebody else has said. And that in itself provides an atmosphere that's ripe for conflict. Another

aspect, I think, is the fact that it takes a certain degree of courage to risk really annoying someone. But that's not necessarily true on an electronic medium, because they can't get to you. It's sort of like hiding behind a wall and throwing stones. You can keep throwing them as long as you want and you're safe." (Turkle 1995:218)

The element of security, you can log off whenever you want and physically the other people online cannot hurt you in any way provides users with a feeling of safety as well as anonymity. This allows users to feel more comfortable in not only expressing their views but also in arguing with others. This feeling of safety can also be applied to other areas such as when revealing sexual fantasies or desires or exploring personal identity. As Subrahmanyam et al (2004) suggest, chat rooms allow "a relatively safe place to "practice" new kinds of relationships" (Subrahmanyam et al 2004:663) and to explore themselves in an "anonymous social context" (Subrahmanyam et al 2004:663). A clear example of this kind of flaming behaviour took place in Christian chat. As the argument went on for many pages I will briefly explain the event and then give a small extract by way of example. A chat room user named Master Splinter enters the room; they gain the trust of the room by chatting to people, joining in the conversations asking polite questions for a short while. He then appeals to the 'Christian nature' of the room by saying he's depressed, he wants to take his own life but he's too much of a coward. Not surprisingly the other chat room participants try to comfort Master Splinter who continues to chat about his/her depression. Master Splinter then confesses to having killed his/her sister. For a brief moment the other participants jump to his aid until one of the users decides that he is not telling the truth and is just trying to wind the room up.

> **Janeece** – ok…..done playing splinter……i don't play
> **Master Splinter** – playing Janeece?
> **Spring03** – splinter if you are playing its not funny
> **Master Splinter** – No, you turn on me. Its time. I cant face it anymore…..
> **Janeece** – hmmmmm……well you have the knife……do what you gotta do

Master Splinter then leaves the room. All the members of the chat room are sure that he was playing a game and were annoyed about it. The conversation then goes on for a while longer even after he has left. Later on, in the same room there is another example of flaming when Janeece and Dream Catcher get into lengthy arguments, with Dream Catcher making comments to wind up the others in the room such as:

> **Dream Catcher** – when was the last time any of you actually listened to anyone, instead of trying to get another evangelistic scalp, another notch on your ecumenical bedpost, huh?
>
> **Dream Catcher** – whatever Janeece? You sound like a dumb cheerleader, I'd rather you didn't reply at all if youre going to embarrass yourself.
>
> **Janeece** – do I dare say......yeah......wwwhatever......and chance sounding like a dumb cheerleader......hmmmmm choices......hmmmm
>
> The chat then continues with insults flying between Dream Catcher and Janeece and other members of the room for quite a while finishing with:
>
> **Dream Catcher** – well you've all provided some small amusement, but I got bigger fish to fry. Later loosers
>
> Christian Chat 20/01/04 (Evening)

This example shows how people use chat rooms in a very open way, feeling free to insult other chat room users and then leave when they have had enough and have fulfilled their desire for 'amusement' according to Dream Catcher. Later conversation in the room reveals that Dream Catcher acted in a similar way to another flamer who regularly flames in that room. Flaming within this particular room seems to be a common occurrence and perhaps even a routine event for the flamers or many of the chat rooms users who are subjected to it. In this respect flaming could show example of both escape and routine; these ideas will be explored in more detail in the following section.

Escape and Routine and Escape as Routine

When looking at the results of my observation however, despite there being a lot of chat of a sexual nature, the playing out of fantasies, sexual and otherwise and many examples of flaming, there was also a significant amount of chat about mundane and routine events. Conversations were about issues such as taking the rubbish out and doing the laundry.

> **Gary:** I went to change the laundry and u were gone
> Gay.Com (men's) 13/04/04 (Morning)

This was intertwined with chat about sex and arguments with other users. As we have already discussed chat rooms can be seen as a form of escape and as a way of enforcing routine, but the intertwining of two such contrasting notions is not what you would expect to find. Although I will discuss this further later on, the intertwining of these two contrasting notions, the routine versus escape, the ordinary versus the extraordinary can give us an insight into identity online. The nature of interactions online and the way that conversations switch between the mundane and the extraordinary without pause or unevenness gives us insight into the fleeting nature of performance and / or construction of identity of the users within such a forum.

Our everyday lives are characterised by routine events and actions, those events that we see as 'normal' actions in our everyday lives like brushing our teeth.

> "The normal is what can be relied upon or accomplished without a great deal of specific attention. It may well be thought of as dull and unexciting – even oppressive in the predictability of its routines – but it does not need to be specifically addressed as a source of problems or anxiety." (Chaney 2002:10)

For example, returning home after work, logging onto your computer, checking your e-mail and then logging onto a chat room can as easily become as part of your daily routine as brushing your teeth. Equally the content of the conversations

within the chat rooms can also add to a sense of routine and monotony. Everyday life is made up of such routines; it is what gives our daily lives a sense of order and meaning.

> "Everyday life, it is argued, cannot be sustained without order - and order manifested in our various traditions, rituals, routines and taken for granted activities - in which we, paradoxically, invest so much energy, effort and so many cognitive and emotional resources. In the ordering of daily life we avoid panic, we construct and maintain our identities, we manage our social relationships in time and space, sharing meanings, fulfilling our responsibilities, experiencing pleasure and pain, with greater or lesser degrees of satisfaction and control, but avoiding for the most part the blank and numbing horror of the threat of chaos." (Silverstone 1994:1)

Such routines allow us to go about our daily lives in a controlled and managed way. Silverstone (1994) suggests that we maintain these routines to avoid an unstructured existence, which would lead to 'undesirable chaos'. Although routine can allow us to lead an un-chaotic existence could this lead to total predictability and consequently a mundane existence? "The route we take to work, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, are visible reminders of an awful sense of monotony." (Cohen and Taylor 1992:46) The use of internet chat rooms can be seen as a way of breaking this monotony as well as a way of enforcing it. Chat rooms can also be about breaking the monotony and enforcing it at the same time. The concepts of escape and routine are not exclusive; they can exist alongside each other but also intertwine. Everyday life literature is about the routine and the ordinary but it is often assumed that routine leads to monotony. Does everyday life always have to be monotonous? Some researchers would suggest that this is not the case, for example, Gardiner (2000) and Lefebvre (1971) both argue that the everyday, the routine, can be more than monotonous repetition. Repetition does not necessarily lead to monotony it can lead to sanctuary and feeling of control and security. Lefebvre argues that there is a "power concealed in everyday life's apparent banality, a depth beneath its triviality, something extraordinary in its very ordinariness" (Lefebvre 1971:37) "To study the everyday is to unlock the extraordinary potential that is hidden in its prosaic routines."

(Gardiner 2000:6). For something to be a routine does not mean that it has to be monotonous. For example, the routine of checking your e-mail when you get home, logging on to your favourite chat room or talking about the same thing over and over, although may be repetitive can also be secure and safe. The following examples highlight the routine nature of some of the chat that happens within the chat rooms that I observed.

Blitzen: Gulps down mushroom soup

Active Chat 24/02/04 (Afternoon)

Gary: I put the dishes away

Rev: so I took the garbage out

FrankD: I hit the garbage cans pulling out of the driveway yesterday

Rev: way to go FrankD

Ncbeartop: humm....my belly is growlin

Gary: are you taking your garbage cans with u when u move?

Gary: Since you decorated them so nicely

Rev: not the outside ones

Gary: pity

Gay.Com (men's) 13/04/04 (Morning)

Pez1232000020000: Might change the channel

Baby_Blues_402: What channel that on?

Baby_Blues_402: Cable?

Pez1232000020000: WOW...WORSE.....THE TENNIS!!

Baby_Blues_402: LOL....OMG

Baby_Blues_402: Change quick

Yahoo 21/01/04 (Afternoon)

Some of the discussions that take place are not only routine in themselves, such as the constant asking of ASL, the discussions about where people are from and the seeking for a certain kind of person to talk to, but some of the discussions are about routines themselves, such as doing the laundry, taking the rubbish out and

being hungry. The chatters are discussing what they are eating, the chores they are doing and the television program they are watching, as Carl (2006) suggests

"technologies are a part of our everyday lives and mundane relational routines. Certain technologies, like cell phones, are seen by some not just as tools but as extensions of our identities and the way we display ourselves to others. Also, we interact with them in a very distracted way while doing other things (watching TV, listening to music, browsing the web, writing a paper, etc.). Thus communication technologies are not just isolated from other parts of our lives but are intricately and consequently entwined with other activities, most notably composing our everyday relationships." (Carl 2006:107)

Such events are routine and monotonous in themselves but surely discussions about them only adds to the monotony of their daily lives? The importance of such discussions, however, may not re-enforce this monotony but forge a sense of community, participants all have these routine events in common, they have found common ground on which to build upon and commence further discussions. Solidarity is forged based on the monotony of such everyday tasks as such chores are common to all. It could also be argued that the very fact of complaining about such tasks is what makes them bearable. The fact that they know that others have to suffer the monotony not only builds a sense of solidarity but gives them a way of escaping the routine. As Higmore (2002) suggests:

"with this quantifiable meaning creeps another, never far behind: the everyday as value and quality - everydayness. Here the most travelled journey can become the dead weight of boredom, the most inhabited space a prison, the most repeated action an oppressive routine. Here the everydayness of everyday life might be experienced as sanctuary, or it may bewilder or give pleasure, it may delight or depress. Or its special quality might be its lack of qualities. It might be, precisely, the unnoticed, the inconspicuous, the unobtrusive." (Higmore 2002:1)

Routine in everyday life can be both a sanctuary and a prison, as you can see from the examples from my observations, people use chat rooms as a way of escaping this prison as well as using it in a way that helps them to feel secure. Everyday life is centrally about the unthought-of, the pre-cognitive. Chat rooms are seen as an escape from this, a forum that is fragmented, disembodied and a way to escape the mundane existence that is everyday life. My observations, however have suggested otherwise. What I have found is rather than being routine or escape, chat rooms are more of a hybrid; on the one hand there is grounded, pre-cognitive interactions, the mundane and the routine but on the other hand there is the conscious and extraordinary interactions; the escape.

Identity, Routine and Escape

This section will explore identity with regard to escape and routine. When looking at internet chat rooms, much of the talk is of a routine nature, and for many, the act of participating within the room has also become a routine, but because people feel comfortable in their surroundings they are more free to explore and develop identity.

Through discussions about escaping routine and monotony, Cohen and Taylor (1992) explore the constitution of identity and discuss the nature of identity in relation to monotony and our need to develop escape methods in order to constitute identity. They suggest that it is only the new, novel and exciting which can constitute identity. However, contributors such as Higmore (2002) suggests that routine can be a sanctuary, a place in with people feel secure which I would ague is somewhere in which people are able to freely explore identity rather than fighting to 'fit in' and 'present' themselves in a certain way.

> "Giddens (1991), for example, has stressed that in late modernity the intimacies of the self are increasingly influenced by distant happenings. Day – to – day routines imply some social stability that helps contain anxieties of being vulnerable to the rapidly changing world. Because the overall framework of ontological security becomes fragile in modern social conditions, routines are of central importance; they hold at bay the

'threat of personal meaningless' (1991 P.202) enabling the control of one's life circumstances." Silva 2002 in Crow and Heath (eds) 2002:180).

Babha and Gilman's (2001) work, although not about computer mediated communication is about a form of communication and parallels these arguments about sanctuary and security. They argue that the telephone is a place where people feel very comfortable and are better able to express themselves.

> "So many of our relationships are mediated by the phone, that plastic technology. People reveal things about themselves, feel very comfortable on the telephone. Deals are made on the telephone, assignations are planned on the telephone, we can circumspect but we can also be shameless on the telephone." (Babha and Gilman 2001:8)

Much the same as in chat rooms there is a sense of anonymity and with this comes an ability to feel more comfortable in expressing oneself. As with the discussions about the exploration of sex, fantasies and desires on the internet, chat rooms allow an openness to further explore, construct and present identity. Bull (2000) also explores this notion of routine, security and identity in his work on the use of personal stereos. He looks at the reasons why people use personal stereos in relation to the monotony of everyday life. Cyberspace commentators present the internet as a way of escaping routines of everyday life but as we have already explored computer mediated communication can be about escape and / or routine. Bull (2000) focuses, on the one hand, on the routine and argues that, similar to the security in a chat room, for example, people who use personal stereos feel secure when they are listening to them. However their feeling of security, according to Bull is due to their ability to escape the monotony of everyday life though listening to their personal stereos. "Personal stereo users also demonstrate an acute awareness of the fragility and potential oppressiveness of the everyday and manage this perceived contingency through the use of their personal stereo." (Bull 2000:147) As discussed earlier, however, everyday life and routine does not necessarily have to be monotonous. It is unlikely that chat room users would log on to these sites if they found them monotonous and therefore, despite some of the

chat and the users being routineised in their habits they too could be trying to escape monotony just not monotony from the same things.

Routines such as going to work, sitting at their desk and doing their work are punctuated by listening to their personal stereos.

> "The use of a personal stereo is the only thing that makes the time pass bearable for these users. At least while they listen to it they do not have to think about their daily routine or the office that awaits them. Personal stereos permit users to reclaim or repossess time." (Bull 2000:190)

> "What they particularly dislike about their daily routine are those parts of the day inhabited in 'no mans land'. They enjoy playing a tape that reminds them of something in their own narrative.....Personal stereos are mood managers that minimalize the contingency of user's thoughts, moods and emotions." (Bull 2000:189)

They want to avoid what Bull calls "internal chaos" (Bull 2000:189); those unwanted thoughts that flood the mind when they are alone, the hard to order thoughts and feelings. Personal stereos prove an escape from this chaos and provide a sanctuary where they are able to hold on to their 'own narrative'. During my observation I did notice that there were some people using chat rooms whilst at work. Often people's status within the chat rooms would be listed as idle and sometimes their profile stated that they were online but working. This could be to break the monotony of their day. The use of chat rooms while at could be a form of escapism but at the same time it could be a routine and part of the normal practice of their working day.

Bull argues that "Personal stereo use represents a way of 'being in the world' in which technology constitutes an accompaniment to, and mediator of, the mundane everyday construction of social experience." (Bull 2000:149) Much the same as this, people use chat rooms at work and at home as a way of breaking this monotony. Although the process of playing a tape or logging onto a chat room can be routine in itself what goes on in the chat rooms, or what plays on the tape

allows the users to maintain a sense of personal identity and provide them with a forum in which they feel secure and are able to explore their own personal narrative. This security often comes with a sense of routine but not necessarily monotony. Alongside the tension between escape and routine there is the tension between routine and monotony. As we have explored, routine can be monotonous but routine can also be a refuge, a sanctuary and safety. The idea and tensions between monotony and routine is one that I will explore further in my interviews.

I will talk briefly about the use of fantasy, role play and online gaming for a number of reasons; firstly there are a number of games that can be played online, such as in MUD's or MOO's which have been researched both empirically and theoretically as places where identity is explored with multiplicity and fluidity. Chat rooms are not set up for this kind of role play, although interestingly although not strictly speaking role play games, it was evident that people were taking on fantasy roles within the chat rooms.

> **Action *** Souless Whisper** Licks her parted lips her snake light tongue rattling some as she does so.
> **Action *** Souless Whisper** Tightens the straps to her mask, then pulls up her gauntlets. She mutters to herself under her breath her eyes being closed all the while
> **Action *** Minion of Death** walks back to the tavern and slams a bottle of JD
> Teen Web Chat 24/02/04 (Afternoon)

These fantasy/role play games are similar to Dungeons and Dragons. These games are also similar to computer games such as 'The Sims'. The games allow people to escape to an alternate world and away from the monotony of everyday life. However, for some gamers I would question how much of an escape this really is as users may be escaping the routines of everyday life just to reinvent the same kind of routines within the game. For example, the characters in the game still have to eat food, sleep, wash and so on, they may end up doing different things on a day to day basis but after a while these actions become routine. In reality they have invented another world/life which continues to have all the routines of

reality. However, there is great appeal of these games and they are very popular both online and in computer/console game format. The popularity of these games could be related to the concepts raised earlier about the imbalance and tension between monotony and routine. Participants may be acting out the same routines as in their everyday lives but at the same time find this an escape from the monotony of their lives or a just enjoy the routine of the game without finding it monotonous. The very fact that these games are fantasy allows much more scope for experimentation and exploration and although the character may have to sleep, drink, eat and go to the toilet, because this all happens within a game with a character they created, routines such as this are enjoyable. According to Cohen and Taylor the level of escape all depends upon "how much is invested in them and to the degree to which fantasies are called for". (Cohen and Taylor 1992:119) Sports are suggested to offer a higher level of escape because they are "activity enclaves in which some sense of self-expression is possible and which generate their own dramas and draw on cultural dramas." (Cohen and Taylor 1992:119). In this respect then, chat rooms must allow a high level of escape potential as they are so open to self expression, for fantasy, games and role play. In my interviews, although I am not exploring specific role play games, I will pursue further the role play within the chat rooms.

Online gaming and computer mediated communication could be seen as form of escape as suggested above but also as a way of being more insular with regard to personal entertainment. "With no public life to turn to, the only escape becomes repetition of the private situation." (Cohen and Taylor 1992:8) With the decline of community events in public forums and increased privatisation, people have turned inward from their entertainment, for example, with the watching of television and the use of the world wide web. However, through the use of cyberspatial technologies, such as chat rooms, although it may appear that people are more isolated, with the use of the internet, they could in fact be part of a much wider network.

> "television and other such electronic media's the computer have
> undermined the traditional relationship between the physical setting and
> the social situation 'building' or breaking down walls or physically

relocating people may either isolate people in different situations or unite them in the same or similar situation...........the electronic media have thoroughly undermined our distinctive sense of place. Whether we are at home, at work, or on holiday or in the car, we are still in touch with each other through our membership of a single audience." (Cohen and Taylor 1992:9)

As Sheller and Urry (2003) discuss the impact that modern technologies, such as television, have had on our lives and they argue that "because of commercialisation and privatising TV –watching have destroyed older feeling of solidarity and belonging to a community.......the public is being privatised, the private is becoming oversized, and this undermines democratic life." (Urry and Sheller 2003:107) They argue that on the one hand technologies such as the automobile and the internet are contributing to the decline of the public sphere but on the other that they cars allow for more personal freedom and that the internet enables new possibilities for global communication. Although to some extent technologies can be seen as making people far less community based and more privatised in their living, we must take into account the possibilities for new technologies developing different kinds of sociality. For example, let us look for a moment at some research on the impact of television. It is suggested that the Internet is not in fact an activity that is undertaken in isolation "Television is usually watched in the midst of other everyday activities." (Storey 1999:109) The television can take a central role physically in a person's house and therefore can actually promote a form of togetherness. Computers are unlike televisions, in the sense that people do not gather around a computer to watch a program in the same way, however, could people gather in chat rooms thus forming a different sense of togetherness?

The idea of the internet, CMC and chat rooms as a new kind of community is something that I will explore further in my interviews. As I have already established there are questions about the globality of chat rooms in relation to interaction as well as participation but it would be interesting to explore community in a more local sense in chat rooms. Chat rooms, by their very nature, being on the World Wide Web are seen to be global but looking at community in

relation to chat rooms from a more local perspective has not been looked at by researches into cyberspace or community. Through exploring these ideas I will also look at face to face interactions in relation to place. Place has always been explained as something that is grounded and solid but in cyberspace it is seen as much more fluid. We have established that place is still seen as an important factor, as I discussed earlier when looking at the importance of location and ASL, however does cyberspace technology allow people to form a connection without a grounded notions such the intention to meet face to face or the ability to ground the relationship in a specific location?

These ideas are relevant to my own research and draw parallels with my findings relating to globalisation and location. Especially data suggesting that place and the local is still of great importance within chat rooms, despite being seen as a global forum. However arguments about being able to stay in touch with people wherever we are highlights the idea that computer mediated communications, such as internet chat rooms, could be offering new forms of sociality, alone at the computer but in touch with all numbers of people online. The ideas about escape and routine tie in strongly with my own work and my observation results as there are example where chat rooms can be seen as an escape from the routine and monotonous existence that is everyday life. For example, the use of sex within chat rooms, the arguments that take place within them and the discussion of fantasies, all point towards the use of chat rooms as a form of escape. However there is also much evidence that points towards chat rooms as reinforcing, and being part of, the routine of people's everyday lives. For example, coming home and going on line in itself can be a routine as well as the numerous discussions about mundane actions such as doing the dishes, taking the rubbish out and the complaints of boredom. However this is not to say that chat rooms have to be a form of escape or routine they can be both or either. They can mean different things to different people at different times; they can be both an escape and a routine.

Through observation of internet chat rooms I have been left with a number of areas that need to be explored further through the interviews of chat room participants. I will look further at the global versus local debate and explore the

arguments about face to face interaction and/or language being a significant factor when deciding who to talk to. I will explore the vast topic of sex, the sexual nature of chat and the freedom of chat rooms for sexual exploration and experimentation. I will also look further into the ideas of escape and routine to explore people's perception of conversations they have within internet chat rooms, their ideas about escape and routine and the affect of this upon their everyday life. Finally I will look at all these issues and concepts and their impact for the development and presentation of identity within internet chat rooms.

Identity and the Everyday - Rules and Regulations in Chat Rooms

Introduction

The observations of internet chat rooms raised a number of interesting issues with regard to the use of chat rooms both on a practical level, (for example, the kind of language that was used, the strong use of asl, the quantity of talk of a sexual nature on the one hand and more routine and mundane chats on the other) as well as beginning to open up more in-depth and complicated issues surrounding identity. Although the observations were a useful research tool, they left a number of questions and issues regarding identity, globalisation, space and place, disembodiment and community that can only be fully explored through interviews with those who use internet chat rooms.

The observations raised issues surrounding everyday life, and explored discourses of both escape and routine which began to answer some questions with regard to identity. The literature suggests that chat rooms are new and novel forms of communication (Suler 2002; Van Bolhuis 1997; Edwards 1995; Turkle 1995); the observations, however, suggested that chat rooms and identity can be grounded in everyday life. The observations showed two distinct ways people use chat rooms; as a way of escaping the routines of everyday life but also using them as an integral part of their daily routine. The way that people switched between such interactions without pause or tension gave some insight into the fleeting nature of identity online as well as the performance of identity and its construction within chat rooms. These findings suggested the fluidity of identity, where people are able to present various selves without pause or unevenness. However, the observations also suggested in contrast with these ideas that identity was in fact far more grounded in routine as well as determinants such as place, gender and age. The understanding, thinking and reasoning behind such interactions needed more thorough investigation via interviews and questioning about online interactions on internet chat rooms. Through observations it was difficult to gain understanding of how people use chat rooms with regard to identity because I was not able to understand why they did certain things and it was not possible to find out how people felt about their use of chat rooms with regard to identity;

consequently some of the ideas discussed during the analysis of observations need more investigation in order to gain fuller understanding of the performance and exploration of identity online. The observations allowed me to comment on the performance of identity but only in relation to the self people chose to show while being observed. They could not give me answers about how they were feeling and about what they thought they were doing with regard to the performances of identity.

Also, with regard to globalisation, analysis of the observations suggested that place is still of significant importance to chat rooms users. However the observations were not able to explore these issues further than physical make up of a chat room – whether it encouraged global interaction and the widespread use of asl and questions of a similar nature. I was especially interested in exploring the importance of place with regard to meeting face to face with other chat room users. Do people try and chat with people they live in close proximity to so it is easier and more possible that they may eventually meet them face to face, or is it more to do with having common ground in which they can initiate conversation? However, to fully understand the importance of place with regard to the globality of chat rooms and the impact upon identity, the interviews needed to explore more than just the findings of the observations with regard to asl. Chat rooms are clearly much more grounded than much of the cyberspace literature suggests but the explanations behind these observations needed much more empirical investigation.

This chapter will address areas from the observation analysis that need further exploration as well as addressing questions about chat rooms that are thus far unanswered, to give a comprehensive understanding about peoples use of chat rooms in a broad sense as well as specifically looking at the use of chat rooms with regard to identity, globalisation, disembodiment, community. I will look specifically at the global versus local debate. I will explore the use of sex, fantasy and flaming within chat rooms, asking participants to reflect upon their use of chat rooms with regard to this as well as their experiences and their views on others use of chat rooms. I will explore with more depth the concepts of escape and routine and the diversity of chat rooms, including looking at the relationship

between chat rooms and everyday life. I will also look at chat rooms with regard to community. Finally, throughout the analysis of these themes I will be exploring the use of chat rooms with regard to identity with specific reference to the literature and postmodern concepts of identity as fluidity (Sheilds 1996; Featherstone and Burrows 1995; Jones 1994, 1997; Butler 1990).

As explained in the methodology chapter, fifty interviews in total were carried out across a range of chat rooms; I will not discuss the logistics of the interviews any further here but refer back to the Interview section in the methods chapter where this is explained in detail. However, it is useful at this stage, before beginning analysis of the interview results to give a brief introduction to the interviewees. This is useful as it gives a background into the distribution of age, sex and location of those who were interviewed. The graph below looks at age.

Age

Legend:
- 16
- 17-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36-40
- 41-45
- 46-50
- 51-55
- 56-60
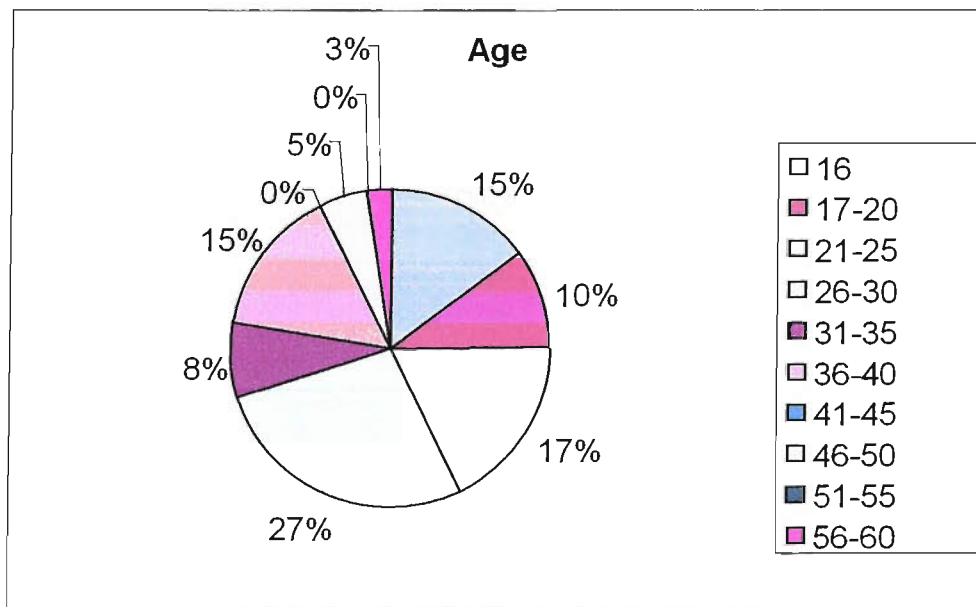
The majority of those interviewed being in the 26-30 age category and with significant numbers also aged 21-25, 17-20 and 36-40. During the latter stages of my observations I did actively search for interviewees at the later end of the age range but despite going into Aol and yahoo's specific chat rooms for older age ranges (these were the only two chat rooms that had this option) I was unable to find anyone willing to take part. It is quite probable that there are not as many older people using chat rooms as some of the younger age categories due to the technology required to use chat rooms. However, without carrying out a larger piece of statistical research into the ages of who uses the chat rooms looked at, I

am unable to comment any further of whether the older age category is underrepresented due to lack of participants or due to the users not wanting to take part.

The following graph looks at the gender distribution across the interviews. I was conscious of making sure I interviewed people who where both male and female as I wanted to interview a range of different people including men and women and across a multitude of ages, however I was not concerned about making sure it was an exact 50% split. Throughout the interviews I did check progress with regard to having near equal numbers but the split was never uneven enough to cause any concern; as you can see, with 57% of interviewees being male and 43% female.

Gender

43%

57%

☐ Male
■ Female
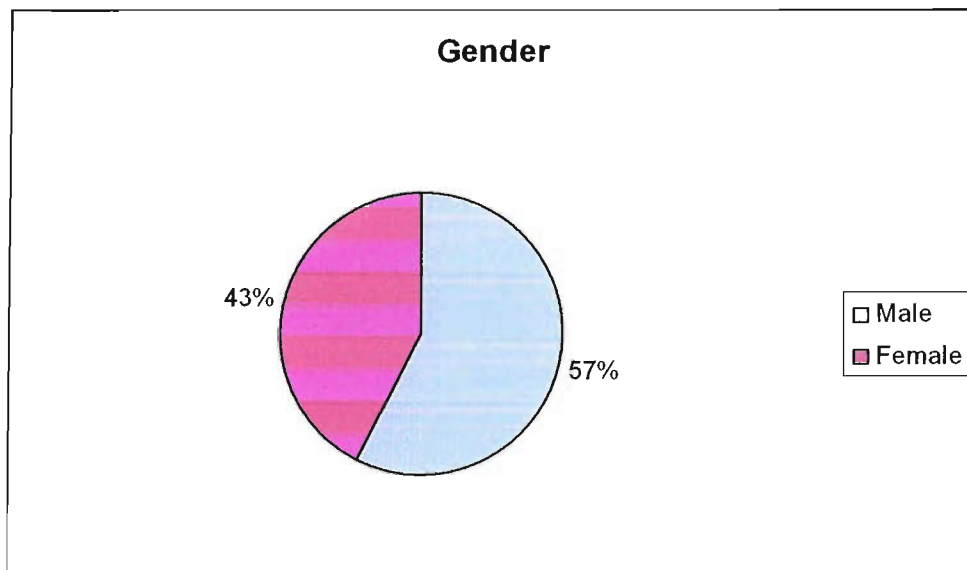
From the outset I knew there would be an uneven split with regard to location with the search engines at the taxonomy stage producing mainly UK and USA chat rooms, this was to be expected. I was not overly concerned about this mismatch as this is not a primarily statistical piece of research and as sample numbers at the taxonomy stage are not large enough to give a reliable global representation of chat rooms. However, regardless of the interviewees being disproportionately from the UK, there were still significant numbers of people interviewed from other countries; for example, there were participants from Canada, USA, Philippines, China and Australia.

Location

| Legend |
|--------|
| □ uk |
| ▣ usa |
| □ canada |
| □ phillipines |
| ▣ China |
| □ Australia |

3%
3%
5%
10%
12%
67%
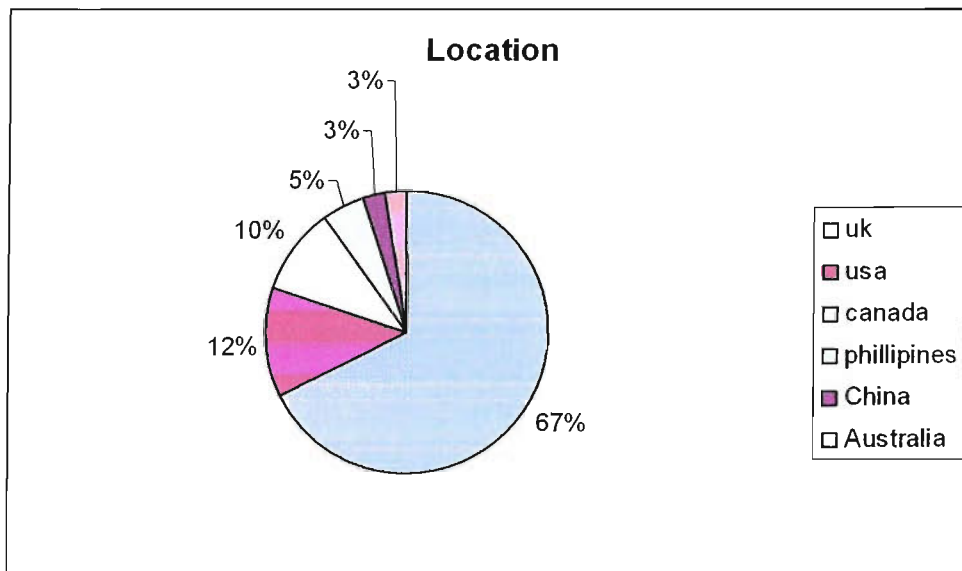
Now that we have a brief understanding of who the interviewees are, I can begin to explore the findings from the interviews. Observations of the chat rooms raised a number of important and interesting issues, as discussed earlier, many of which needed further exploration through interviews; one of the main topics being the significant finding with regard to the importance of everyday life with specific regard to escape and routine and this is where I begin my analysis.

Everyday Life

I asked the interviewees some very basic questions regarding time spent using chat rooms and how long participants had been using chat rooms for. It is interesting to look at the response to these questions, not just to give an idea of how much people use chat rooms, but more to give insight into the use of chat rooms in relation to user's everyday lives. How embedded are chat rooms in users everyday lives? What can this tell us about identity? As I previously mentioned, the aim of this research was not to gain statistical data as such, but more to analyse qualitatively the responses given. However, this data does give a broad background to the interviewees and helps with further understanding and analysis. The graph below shows the amount of time those interviewed had been using internet chat rooms at the time of interviewing. As you can easily see the peak is at two to three years of use although there are a fair number of interviewees who

have been using chat rooms for under a year and a few who have been using chat rooms for over 9 / 10 years.

How long Interviewees have been using chat rooms
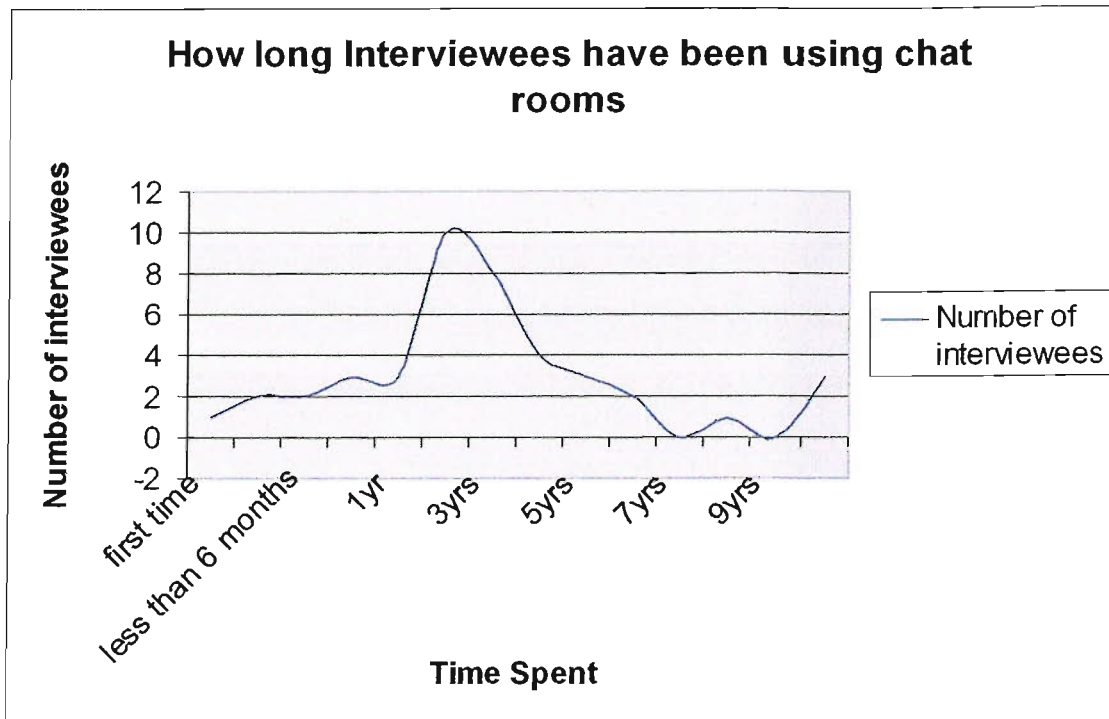
This graph is interesting as it gives us insight into how long people have been using chat rooms and in conjunction with later graphs, allows us to begin questioning the prevalence on chatting via chat rooms as part of user's everyday lives. The graph makes it clear that many of those interviewed are 'seasoned' chat room users (i.e. over a year and mainly between two and four years). It is fair to make two assumptions from this, the first is that the majority of the people interviewed, as they have been using chat rooms for a reasonable amount of time (for most between 2 and 4 years), have a clear view of the logistics of chat rooms use – by this I mean are aware of the language used, especially abbreviations. The second is that due to chat rooms being used for the number of years that for many of these chatters, such rooms could be a major part of their everyday lives. To gain more understanding of this, however we must look at how often these chatters use chat rooms. The next graph this clearly shows how integral chat rooms are to people everyday lives as I asked people how often they use chat rooms. As you can clearly see, although there is a small increase at about 2-3 times a week the graph makes a sharp increase at 6-7 times a week.

How Often Interviewees use Chat Rooms
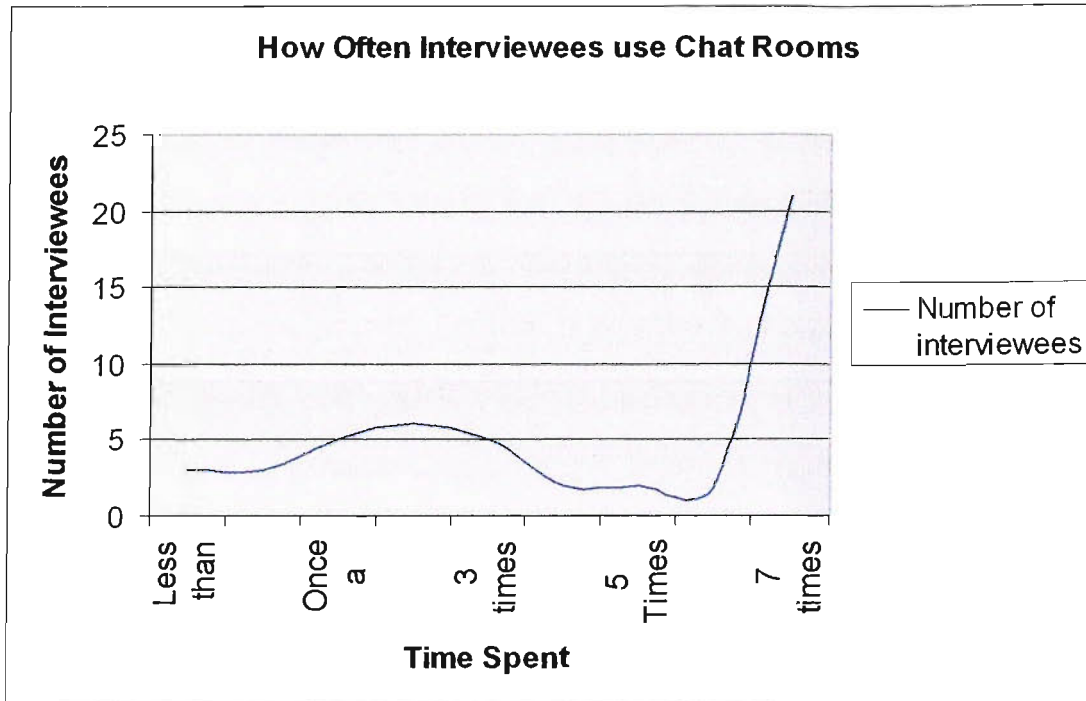
Many of the interviewees explained how they use chat rooms every day, for example:

> **PinkSatin:** Most days
>
> **tinykitty14:** every day for hours
>
> **XSpacebubblesx:** everyday
>
> **Hbomb313:** EVERYDAY EXCEPT SAT N SUN
>
> **Astrah:** most days
>
> **stevieboy_713:** most days
>
> **Bethlyn Myers:** I use almost daily
>
> **Rabbitsfoot:** i'm in a chartroom at least once a day, even if only to give someone crap for a few minutes

Chat room users not only stated that they used chat rooms daily, or nearly everyday, they also discussed the number of hours spent on chat rooms. The following graph shows that the majority of people interviewed use chat rooms for between one and three hours at a time, however there were also more people than expected who use chat rooms for more than five hours at a time.

102

Time Interviewees spend chatting

Chart: Number of Interviewees (y-axis, 0–12) versus Time Spent (x-axis: less than 1/2 hour, less than 1 hour, 1 hour, 1-2 hours, 2-3 hours, 3-4 hours, 4-5 hours, more than 5 hours). Legend: Number of interviewees.
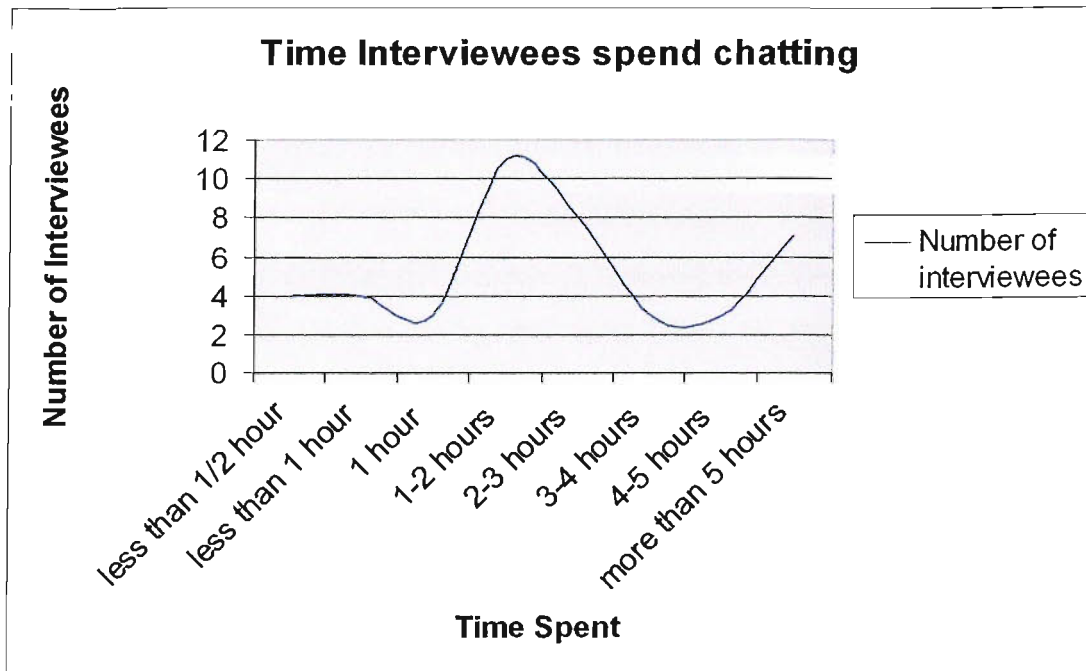
Many of the people who used chat rooms everyday, or most days, also used them for a large proportion of hours each day, for example:

> **bi2004:** mostly everyday, be here for hours at a time
>
> **DanGough22:** well I am online most evenings aprt from a wedness night, due to other commitments i spend between 4-5 hours an evening

Many of the chat room users interviewed have been using chat rooms for a number of years, use them on a regular basis and spend a significant amount of time on them. This data indicated that chat rooms are an integral part of people everyday lives. In cyberspace literature, chat rooms are portrayed as being a form of communication that is original and novel, the findings thus far are suggesting that chat rooms are increasingly part of users' daily routine. I asked a number of further questions looking into why people used chat rooms, what they enjoy about them and what kinds of things they talk about with people to explore these ideas further. I am especially interested in further exploring contrasting notions of how people use chat rooms with regard to escape and routine. These were areas highlighted at the observation stage of the research of which further research is needed in order to fully understand the reasons and thinking behind people use of chat rooms as grounded in, or escaping from, the routines of everyday life.

Understanding reasoning will allow me to explore chat rooms as grounded or as escape in relation to identity in more depth than the observations would allow. Through the observations I explored the way people talk about mundane and everyday events such as doing the laundry, taking the rubbish out, and preparing the evening meal, suggesting that not only is the process of using chat rooms routine but so to is the chat. I also explored the way people use chat rooms as a form of escape through sexual and fantasy chat as well as through flaming. It became apparent through observation that these two contrasting uses were not isolated from one another; they are in fact intertwined suggesting that chat can both be escape and routine. These ideas were explored in more detail through the interviews and analysis to gain more information about the use of chat rooms in these ways specifically with regard to the presentation of identity online. These ideas and findings will be discussed in detail by looking at some of the questions asked and responses given.

I asked people if using chat rooms was important to them and the results were both interesting and surprising. With interviewees spending so much of their time online I assumed that using chat rooms would be important to them but the results suggested otherwise. Over half the people interviewed (62%) said that chat rooms were not important to them. I initially thought that those who did not use chat rooms that often, for that long, or had not been using them for a long period of time would say that chat rooms were not important to them and those who used chat rooms on a much more regular basis would say that there are important to them. However, it made no difference how often people used chat rooms, how long they spent on them or how long they had been using them for. In fact many users who used chat rooms for long periods of time and on a regular basis said that chat rooms were not important to them. For example:

Interviewer: How Long have you been using chat rooms?
XSpacebubblesx: ive been using them for roughly 3yrs mostly brunch club or whingers
Interviewer: How often do you use chat rooms?

XSpacebubblesx: everyday

Interviewer: How long do you spend on chat rooms?

XSpacebubblesx: depends on work the next day if im on early its only for a couple of hours but if im on lates its about 5 hours a day

Interviewer: Is using chat rooms important to you?

XSpacebubblesx: nope

Interviewer: How Long have you been using chat rooms?

Hbomb313: BEEN USIN EM FOR BOUT 3 YEARS NOW

Interviewer: How often do you use chat rooms?

Hbomb313: EVERYDAY EXCEPT SAT N SUN

Interviewer: How long do you spend on chat rooms?

Hbomb313: ALL DAY TILL BOUT 3

Interviewer: Is using chat rooms important to you?

Hbomb313: NO NOT REALLY

People's feeling about the chat rooms did not reflect the amount of time spent on them. To gain some more insight into these answers I decided to look at why people use chat rooms, what they enjoy about them, who they talk to while using them and what they talk about, to try and gain understanding of not only why more than half of people interviewed said that chat rooms were not important to them but also to explore why people use chat rooms and relate these ideas to concepts of identity, everyday life, escape and routine.

Interviewees gave a number of varying reasons for using internet chat rooms but the two main reasons were for fun, to mess around, 'have a laugh' and to meet new people. A number of people also mentioned that they use chat rooms when they are bored and it is 'something to do' to occupy them. The other three main reasons people stated for using chat rooms were: for sexual reasons, as a way of relaxing and to keep in contact with friends and family. Those who used chat rooms 'just for fun' did all say that using chat rooms was not important, however a high proportion of interviewees who stated other reasons for using chat rooms such as to meet new people, or to keep in contact with friends, also said that they were not important. There is no denying that many of the interviewees use chat

rooms for vast amounts of time, often every day, therefore suggesting that they must be an important part of their lives, however because chat rooms play such a central role in their everyday lives they may not perceive them as important.

When looking at the use of chat rooms in relation to everyday life, with regard to both escape and routine, it is useful to look at who people talk to and what kinds of things people talk about. This is useful because it gives insight into the diversity of chat room use, raising questions about the literature's suggestion that chat rooms are used in one particular way and that all aspects of chat room use are fluid and exciting. For, example, are people chatting to friends and family, people they know outside of the internet, or people they have got to know via the internet? Or are they chatting to people they have never met nor chatted to before? If the latter is the case, what is the decision process when choosing who to chat to, are there rules of who chats to who and how you initiate conversation?

When asked how they decide who they would like to talk to while using chat rooms, the three main answers people gave (in ascending order) were: if they were interesting in the main chat, their screen name, nick name or handle that they are using in the chat room and people who said they would talk to anyone at all. A number of people also said that they would talk to people they already knew in the chat rooms, they were often referred to as 'the regulars'. It seemed there were two interesting and contrasting answers to this question. There were the people who would chat to anyone, these respondents tended to use chat rooms as a way of meeting new people and a way of having some fun; they used chat rooms on a regular basis but for shorter periods of time, thus suggesting that they were looking for fleeting social interactions and friendships where they rarely chat to the same people twice. On the other side there were the 'regulars', they tended to use chat rooms also on a regular basis but for longer, building up friendships and relationships with the same people over a long period of time.

These forms of interaction and sociality raises interesting parallels about the way people use chat rooms for presenting identity. On the one hand there are the fleeting interactions, suggesting fluidity and fragmentation and on the other the regulars, suggesting more stability and fixed friendships. This shows the diversity

in which chat rooms are used and conflicts with much of the cyberspace literature. Respondents used chat rooms in different ways at different times and used different rooms for different needs and wants. For example, there were those who would go into one chat room where they knew people, where they were classed as a regular and where they could chat with people they classed as friends and then there were other times when they would go into a different room (often within the same server or network of rooms) and chat to people they did not know and often to numerous people at a time. This again, supports earlier claims about the diversity of chat room use and also the intertwining of contrasting concepts such as escape and routine, fixed and fluid. It also suggests the various ways people use chat rooms with regard to identity and the overlapping and intertwining of identity theory as fluid or stable.

There were also those who said they chose who to chat to based on their nickname. The use of nicknames to decide who to chat to was a result I was expecting as it is an easy way to chat to people without having to watch the room conversation first. People also placed importance on the nickname they chose in the hope that it would encourage others to chat to them.

> **time2flirt:** nicknames and asl
>
> **Mr Smith :** I choose by their screen names

It was suggested that a person's nickname can tell you a lot about them and can have a huge influence on whether they talk to them in a room. For example, some people chose to talk to people who had really 'wacky' names, or imaginative names and some chose to talk to people who had 'normal' names:

> **DIEEE RABBIT DIEEEEEEEE says:** by letting my little mouse hover over the names and double clicking on them...............i either pick good nicknames, random nicknames.. or REALLY bad nicknames... not the ones in between tho
>
> **Jack:** otherwise i talk to people with normal names
>
> **DayDreamer:** I like interesting or imaginative names!

Brad said that you can tell people who are using the chat rooms for sexual reasons by their nicknames:

> **Bradd:** do a /whoall...it gives u list of names on this chat room...u can find sex players often by the nick they use...like...hottie4u etc....wetnready

The nicknames people choose are a major aspect of chat room use. I was informed during the interviews that some people do spend a lot of time choosing a nickname. I was also told by a few people during the interviews that some people have a number of nicknames and they choose which one to use depending on what chat room they are using, what mood they are in and who they want to talk to. Some of the chat rooms looked at allowed people to change their nickname every time they logged in, while others; to change your nickname you would have to go through the whole registration process again. You would assume that the rooms where it was easier to change names people would do so on a more regular basis but this was not in fact the case. As Danet (2001) found during his research, "While IRC players could change their nick at any time, they generally chose one carefully and used it consistently over time." (Danet 2001:33). I was told by many of the interviewees that they do not often, if ever, change their nickname. I became aware of this also, not only through the observations but also as I was looking for people who were willing to be interviewed, I began to recognise nicknames and also began to notice that certain people were always present at certain times and others at other times. Towards the latter stages of the interviews, most times I entered a chat room there would be at least one, and often more, nicknames that I recognised.

There are a number of interesting areas to discuss with regard to peoples nicknames and the process of picking a nickname with regard to identity. Firstly choosing a nickname is a conscious process. You can pick whatever name you want, the only exception to this is if the name is already registered with another user. This happens quite frequently on the larger chat rooms such as Aol and yahoo and consequently a number of peoples nicknames have numbers after then to make them slightly different from other peoples, for example: 'Sandybaby1406536' and 'stevieboy_713'. However, I have never seen two

people with the same nickname across any of the interviewees or observations. Individuals take ownership for the nickname they choose to present to other chatters and much the same as the research conduct by Cheung (2000) and Chandlers (1998) and Roberts-Young (1998) into personal WebPages, the nickname they choose is a projection of how they wish to be perceived by other chat room users. There are those who choose sexual names, as Bradd mentions above, there are those who choose to use their own name like Anna, Chloe and Jack and there may be those who use a name like Mike or James but it not actually be their own name. Then there are those who integrate a name with other things like 'sandybaby', 'stevieboy' and 'jeffbo' and then there are those which are more abstract like 'DayDreamer', 'Hate More', 'Canuckqt' and 'Dieee Rabbit Dieeeeeeee'. All of these name choices present the chatter in a certain way to others. I will not go into detail about each name and what this can tell us about the identity of the chatter for two reasons, firstly this could be a thesis on its own and secondly the focus of the interview was not on name choice. However this does show that from the moment a person enters a chat room, even if they choose to say nothing at all within the room, others know that they are there and their name is present for all to see. Choice of name is the first, and a significant, way that chatters use chat rooms to present themselves and their identity to others in a particular way.

The decision to change a name on a regular basis can also tell us about the identity of the user and again draws parallels with the contrasting notions of fluidity and fragmentation versus fixed and solid identities. The literature portrays online identities as fluid and changeable. Reid (1995) argues that computer mediated communication, due to its anonymity lends itself to fluidity and fragmentation in identity construction. This anonymity is re-enforced by participants having the ability to choose a nick name rather than having to use their own name (Reid 1995). Myers (1987) and Baym (1995) say that nicknames are trademarks and used as a way of defining individual identity. On this basis you would make the assumption that in chat rooms people would change nicknames on a regular basis, especially on chat rooms where each time you logged on you could change your name. However the interviews suggested otherwise; although some people did change their names, the majority stuck with the same name each time or had a

small number of different nicknames that they chose from. This raises questions about the fluidity of identity online if something as simple as a name is relatively fixed, what relation does this have to the identity of the person?

When looking at the fixed state of nicknames it is also useful to look at some comments made by interviewees about recognising others by nicknames and the importance of recognition. It was stated by a number of participants that by always using the same nickname and the same chat room you can become a regular.

> **DayDreamer:** ......you do tend to get the same people frequenting the same chat rooms on a regular basis.........When I was at uni, I used to go in the same chat room everyday for hours, and you build up a relationship with other 'regulars'.
>
> **Bebi1st:** ....a lot of my friends are regulars in the chat rooms I use and I can chat to them all at once............you get the same people in the same rooms, hence the term regulars
>
> **Hate More:** .... most of the people in this rooms are regulars, we don't get many newcomers in here.
>
> **Star:** .... where most people know each other like the regulars.
>
> **Manx:** .... alot of the people that come to chat rooms are regulars and so talk to eachother all of the time.
>
> **canuckqt:** .... regulars come and know each other and it's hard to be a newcomer

As you can see, the term 'regular' is frequently used to refer to those who use chat rooms on a 'regular' basis and the interviews and responses given suggested that a number of people interviewed classed themselves as regulars and that all chat rooms had a group of 'regulars' strongly suggesting, despite earlier claims that chat rooms are not an important part of their lives that they do take up a significant proportion of their time. Perhaps chat rooms had become so integral to their everyday lives that they were no longer seen as important. For example, I may check my e-mail once a day (often more), but I'm not sure that I would class it as being important to me. Maybe chat room users felt the same. Chat rooms

have become part of what they do on a daily basis so much so that it is mundane and consequently not perceived as being an important part of their lives. Using chat rooms has become a routine in their lives just like eating, drinking, brushing their teeth and so on. It is not something that is perceived as important to them as it is so ingrained in their everyday lives. This is true for many things, if asked if something so routine as brushing our hair was important to us we may say no but if asked after it had been taken away it is likely our answer will change.

There may also be a common assumption that for something to be important it must be interesting. For many, chat rooms are routine and therefore may not be perceived as important in the same way as other things. This is a very complex issue tied up confusion surrounding what people perceive to be important, what they understand by the word importance and not forgetting perceptions about what it would mean if they said chat rooms were important to them. This question was asked relatively near the start of the interviews and therefore trust and a form of rapport may not have built up between interviewer and interviewee and therefore if asked towards the end of the interview maybe a different result would have been obtained. This was not a question I had deemed as sensitive but I was surprised by the answers and through analysis, conclude that maybe a different approach, multiple questions to gauge importance or asking later on could have yielded different results. Regardless, the responses given raised issues that may not have been discussed otherwise.

The importance of routine is reflected in the responses people gave when asked what kinds of things they talked about with people. Most people said they would talk about anything with other chat room users, interviewees often embellished on this by saying they would talk about everyday things, or general things, for example:

> **Bebi1st:** Just general everyday things, the weather, what we've done since we last spoke, things like that
> **Star:** anything and everything like from music and movies work and general stuff to more personal things if we are getting on or I'm talking to people I know well

These ideas parallel the results from the observations that people talk about very mundane and routine events thus embedding the routines of their everyday lives in chat rooms. The observations, however, were unable to allow me to develop these ideas further and explore why chat rooms may become a form of routine, or escape, from everyday life. People are often not using chat rooms as a way of escaping the routines of everyday life; chat rooms are part of these routines. Many of the interviewees use chat rooms for long periods of time, significant numbers of them everyday. They were seen as regulars in the rooms, or at least knew who the regulars were. They discussed mundane events and issues, or merely talked about "anything". As Silverstone (2005) suggests,

"It is within the sphere of everyday life that the ordinariness of the world is displayed, where minor and often taken-for-granted activities emerge as significant" (Silverstone 2005:2)

These results used in conjunction with the observations of people talking about things such as taking the rubbish out, doing the laundry, being bored, eating food and so on; clearly shows that for many people chat rooms are grounded and mundane and strongly part of the routines of their everyday lives. These ideas suggest that identity too, is more about stability and routine that fluidity and change. Identity and chat room use is embedded in routine with many interactions centralised around solid friendships and relationships. However, it is still important, to look at the use of chat rooms as more of an escape from routine through sexual chat, fantasy and flaming. Although this was looked at during the observations, I was not able to gain understanding into why people flamed and the feelings and reasoning behind, it as well as the use of chat rooms for more sexual and fantasy based reasons and the impact this has upon identity.

Escape the Routine: Sex, Fantasy and Flaming

When asking people why they use chat rooms a number of people referred to them as a way of relaxing, as a stress release and to 'chill out'. For them, chat rooms are a way of escaping the stresses of everyday life, taking time out for themselves and just enjoying chatting.

> **Sandybaby1406536:** its gd it takes you away from the usual day to day
> its a gd stress release as long as you dont take it to serious
>
> **XxGemmy84xX:** chills me out
>
> **DayDreamer:** I use chat rooms as a way of chilling out I suppose. .....It's
> a good way to get to know people with a certain amount of anonymity,
> which makes it safe.

For chat rooms to be a way of escaping they do not necessarily have to be exciting and novel, they can be relaxing and clam; a place where people are able to chat with others with relative anonymity and when they choose they can switch it off. For a number of the chat rooms users this is how they see chat rooms; however, a significant number of people (24%) said that they used chat rooms for fun and to have a laugh.

> **stevieboy_713:** just to chat and have some fun
>
> **Jack:** just for a bit of fun
>
> **Niki:** 2 chat 2 ppl and have a laff

For many of the interviewees chat rooms are a way of having fun and enjoying themselves without consequence, on their terms and with them in control of how long they spend, what they say, where they go, what they talk about and with whom. Although this kind of control was not specifically mentioned by the interviewees a number of them mentioned enjoying the anonymity of chat rooms and the openness of them. Chat rooms are much freer forums of communication than face to face interactions allowing users to explore themselves to a much greater extent . This freeness stems from the anonymity and control gained in chat rooms in comparison to face to face interactions and could suggest that chat rooms would allow freer and more fluid opportunities for the development of identity. Interviewees commented on enjoying the anonymity of chat rooms and the ability to leave chats if they did not like the person they were talking to, they did not like the way the conversation was heading or they simply wanted to leave with no explanation. Through exploration of the sexual nature of online chat, including sexual and other kinds of fantasies as well as the phenomenon of flaming online, I

will discuss the notions of escape and routine followed on and developed from the findings in the observations, as well as linking these findings to the presentation of identity of those interviewed.

A number of people interviewed said that they used chat rooms for purely sexual reasons. For some they viewed chat rooms as a fun place to flirt, for others they were looking for a partner and some used them for cybersex ("Cybersex or computer sex is a virtual sex encounter in which two or more persons connected remotely via a computer network send one another sexually explicit messages describing a sexual experience. It is a form of role-playing in which the participants pretend they are having actual sexual intercourse, by describing their actions and responding to their chat partners in a mostly written form designed to stimulate their own sexual feelings and fantasies")
(http://www.google.co.uk/search?hl=en&lr=&ie=UTF-8&oi=defmore&defl=en&q=define:Cyber+sex 3/3/06). For example:

> **time2flirt:** to flirt
>
> **JacknJr:** it is sexual for me
>
> **bi2004:** love stroking my cock as i chat with people about sex....met a guy online thru here
>
> **Bradd:** i'm older....40's...my wife had cancer ..she's fine but lost interest in sex...i do sex chatting here for fun....its been 4 years since the real thing..i just got horny...

As you can see, for some, chat rooms are a fun place to flirt with people and have a 'bit of fun' but for others, like Bradd and bi2004, it is more than a 'bit of fun'. Bi2004, along with a number of others, referred to looking for someone online, wanting to form a relationship. In fact over three quarters of all those interviewed said that they have or would meet up with someone they had met online, one of the people interviewed was married to someone they had met online and another two were either living with someone they had met online or were in a relationship with them. For many of the interviewees who use chat rooms for sexual reasons they are an escape from the routines of their everyday lives, from the confines and taboos of society and an outlet though which they can explore their sexual and

other kinds of fantasies. To explore these ideas further I will first look at Bradd as he was the most explicit in his description of chat rooms use with regard to sex and explained to me that he uses chat rooms as an outlet for his sexual frustration at home, as since his wife got over cancer she has not been interested in sex. Bradd uses chat rooms as an outlet for sexual frustration without actually having sex, he says that this way he feels like he's being faithful to his wife:

> **Bradd:** wife doesn't approve of chat rooms so i do it in secret when i get the chance alone.....dont feel like i'm cheating .... i'm dont think i'm a bad person...have no intentions for real sex ...just get some enjoyment out of the fantasy roleplays

Bradd explained to me that role play is a large part of the fun of chat rooms for him and told me that a number of other people use chat rooms in this way, he said:

> **Bradd:** a lot of gays and lez's in here...probably most guys do it...many girls are put off...want clean chat....some ask for clean chat but sometimes come around to it after they think they know you or u turn them on somehow ....some are pretty gross...cant believe how many gals want it in the ass...ugh

Bradd also talked me through the kinds of things he says to people and gave me a sample of what he might say to a girl:

> **Bradd:** u come to my place..i'm alone...we french kiss...tongues go a bit wild then i lead u to my master bath...i turn on the water and slowly undress you...mmmmmmmmmmm..i kneel unsnap your jeans...u kick them off and i lean in...blow hot breath on your thong center patch...then roll it slowly to the floor .... i take a lot of time at leading up to it

By role playing he gets the outlet he needs for his sexual frustration without actually having intercourse and by being online he can do this whenever he wants. Bradd only uses chat for this purpose and does this two to three times a week, it

could be argued then that regardless of this being seemingly escapism from his lack of sexual activity at home, at the same time it has become a weekly routine.

Bradd told me he also changes what he says to people depending on their age and admits to changing his age accordingly, for example:

> **Bradd:** younger..i take them to the beach in my convertible and we warm up on the way
>
> **Bradd:** older...we go to a 5star restaurant in my limo...i fuck them in a glass elevator on the way up...then eat them under the table...long table cloth...lol....

This raises a number of implications regarding identity, primarily with regard to Bradd changing what he says according to who he is talking to. Bradd plays a role, the surfer, the sophisticated, the romantic, for each person depending on what he thinks they want and at the same time ensuring that he gets what he wants. He presents a different identity to each girl, and performs for each until he is satisfied and then he goes back to his wife and his everyday life. For Bradd identity online is a performance but even Bradd has structure to his performances. He told me about the kinds of things he says to women and the parts he plays, mainly depending on their age. So Bradd has set identities and performs each one with ease depending on the woman. His identity is not free, fluid and cycling through continuous change it is calculated and fixed within a certain number of roles; each role being a performance.

Bradd's use of role play suggests the importance of this kind of identity performance online and shows how the openness of chat rooms allows much easier exploration of fantasies and roles. Chat rooms not being face to face interactions means that people are able to explore sides of themselves and/or fantasies that they may not be able to outside of the internet, such as being a Californian surfer. This does not mean, however that identity is necessarily fluid, as Bradd shows us, his roles are calculated, thought through and fixed within each particular role. Bradd is not the only person interviewed who uses chat rooms on a sexual basis, a number of the other interviewees said they used chat rooms in

this way. A number of interviewees also told me how they use chat rooms to explore sexual fantasies and those who said they did not use chat rooms in this way said that many other people did. Many interviewees were also embarrassed to say that they used chat rooms in this way, for example:

> **DayDreamer:** Oh god! Erm.... *blushes* once or twice. DayDreamer >>
> It's fun, and nobody has to know who you are!
> **XxGemmy84xX:** no comment lolol

When discussing sexual chat interviewees often referred to it as something other people do using words such as 'they', 'them' and 'people'. So although chat rooms are anonymous people still felt embarrassed about admitting to doing things that may be seen as taboo if discussed in a face to face conversation, suggesting that chat rooms may not be as open and free as much of the cyberspace literature suggests. However, an area where it seemed, from the observations, that there was freedom and openness was in the area of flaming (purposely arguing with users and starting heated discussions for fun). I explored this further when interviewing chat room users as although the observations showed that flaming was part of chat rooms the observations did not give me insight into why people flamed.

Although only just over one quarter of people knew the term flaming, nearly 90% had some level of experience of it. I asked people why they thought it was so common, then asked if they ever flamed and if they did why. I got some very varied responses with the majority portraying flaming as something negative, something that people do because they are bored, to annoy people and get a rise out of them, to feel more important, and because while online you cannot get hurt, i.e. get hit by someone that you are annoying.

> **Anna:** some people love to get a reaction out of others and cant get caught and get in trouble for it on the internet cos its not real life its like messing around in school when the teachers are out of the room
> **Sandybaby1406536:** that happens all the time its mostly kids who think its funny they get to swear and be rude to adults so they get a kick out of it

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> Star: people like to argue and piss people off makes them feel big
>
> **Jeffbo:** because of that fact they won't be traced and no way apprehended for such abuse. if its a fantasy to argue, then this is one of such
>
> **DayDreamer:** Because....... it's easier to pick a fight with someone when you're not face to face........Some people think it's a way of getting more people to like them!

The comments given were, again, often written as if flaming is something that other people do, it was therefore interesting to find out that just under half of all those interviewed said that they do, or have flamed in a chat room. Maybe this was something people did not want to admit until asked directly. People gave a number of reasons for flaming such as it amuses them and it is fun. Interviewees also claimed that they often flame when they are bored, the conversation is boring or someone is dominating it, just to make things a little more interesting. This freedom of expression can be related to identity in the fact that through flaming people could be exploring identities that they cannot express, or express as easily, outside of an online forum. However, as suggested above, when looking at Bradd's use of chat rooms, perhaps flaming is more of a role people play when they feel bored or frustrated and not so much that they are exploring multiple and fluid selves. As Colettediane said it's fun to go into rooms such as the Christian room and say things that are really liberal to get a rise out of people and start a big debate. For many of those who flame, they refer to particular times they flame and in particular rooms and therefore rather than being a free and spontaneous expressions and exploration of self, it is more regulated and for some premeditated as saying liberal things to stir up the Christian chat room.

> **colettediane:** sometimes i will go into a conservative or Christian chat room and stir things up through, say liberal things that get them freaked out that's fun......people do it to entertain themselves
>
> **Rabbitsfoot:** i do it sometimes ....i do it because the conversation is rather boring or someone is dominating it with the minutia of their life......there are others who seem to do it because that's the only way they know how to interact

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It was also raised a number of times, as mentioned above, that in a chat room people feel much safer because they cannot be physically hurt and therefore winding other people up, as Chloe says, is fun because you are always safe and there is no chance they can hurt you.

> **Chloe:** Because sometimes it's funny to see how much you can wind someone up and you can't get physically hurt as you could if you argued with someone in the street.

The most interesting reason however, was raised by Astrah, among others, and that is about control. As mentioned above, and in the some of the other interviews, people flame to make themselves feel more important, to make themselves more popular with other chat rooms users and because it is a way of being in control; being in control of the conversation, the other people in there and often the entire room. Looking back at the observations of the chat rooms to when DreamCatcher was arguing, in particular with Jannece, this conversation, although only a snippet is given in the chapter, went on for a long while and dominated the entire chat room so that all the chatters were caught up in it and DreamCatcher was centre of the conversation, of attention and in control of the room conversation.

> **Astrah:** Its all about control - generally the ppl that seem to love to engage in that seem to have little control in their real lives...little power. The teens do it just for the reaction *L* ....I have friend who does it here - a lovely decent person in real life....but likes to come and make an ass of himself here - its a challenge to him

Many of the interviewees who claimed they do flame or have done, and also for many who discussed why they think other people flame, the central issues are anonymity, control and power. Respondents claim that the anonymity online means there are no repercussions both physically and emotionally. Interviewees refer to not being able to be physically hurt as they are online and also if others are saying things that they do not like then leaving the conversation, the chat room or the entire internet takes one click of a button. In this respect interviewees also

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referred to being in much more control not only with regard to what they say but also in control of when they enter the room and when they leave. As suggested earlier, this freedom and control could lead to much freer exploration of identity but interviewees suggested that there are rules and regulations to when they flame and with whom, suggesting a more fixed approach to identity with presentations of various selves as opposed freely cycling through multiple selves. Those who do flame and those who were just reflecting on why they think others do also referred to the power it gives people; it was suggested that flaming makes people feel important and it may gain people respect. After talking with those who do not flame there seemed to be two responses to those who do flame, the first of these is to ignore them either by just not reading what they are saying or by physically blocking them so that their comments no longer appear on their screen. The other response, and from the observations the most common response, is to argue back. By arguing back this fuels the flaming and consequently gains the control and power that the flamer is looking for. Interactions such as these often ended with the initiator telling the others in the room that they had enjoyed arguing and then leaving. At this moment the flaming is over, but within the room discussion of the incident always continues for a while after the flamer has left. In this respect there is not only a discourse of power but a discourse of order and rules, other members of the room feel the need to maintain order and once the flamer has left a discussion must ensue about the disruption it caused.

Flaming can be seen as a form of escape especially as those who flame often enter a room, start an argument, and when they have had enough they leave. This is similar to Bradd, he enters the room finds a girl, has cybersex and then leaves. Chat rooms are acting as an outlet, an escape. I have looked at chat rooms as routine as well as escape and discussed these ideas in relation to the presentation of online identity. I have explored identity as being fixed in the routines of everyday life as well as exploring interviewees such as Bradd, who although comes across initially as having a very fluid identity, is governed by roles and various presentations of self. I have not yet explored the concepts of disembodiment and the importance of place in detail. These are two areas that need exploration; the literature suggests that we are living in a placeless world and that the body and location in cyberspace are of little importance. The following

section will look at escape with regard to disembodiment as well as looking at space, place and globalisation with regard to escape and routine and the impact upon the presentation of self online.

Space and Place / Globalisation and Disembodiment

During the observations of chat rooms, with regard to space and place, I focused on looking at the theoretical idea that the internet fuels a global community which spans a number of geographical boundaries (Harvey 1989; Massey 1994). The observations contradicted the theories stated in the literature about chat rooms being global (Thomsen, Straubhaar and Bolyard 1998; Gillespie and Williams 1988). To follow up the idea raised in the observations about place still being important in chat room use, I asked people about their use of asl, the importance of chatters location, meeting face to face with fellow chatters and the interaction with those from different countries. I also asked interviewees to discuss the differences with online chatting and face to face interaction. The following section will look at the answers to these questions in order to gain understanding into importance of place, space, the concept of disembodiment and the globality of chat rooms use as well as looking at what these findings mean for the use of chat rooms with regard to identity.

One of the routines of chat room use highlighted in the observations was the significant use of asl. The importance of asl in the observations suggested grounding in place, in the locale, thus suggesting that identity may be more fixed in determinants such as place than suggested in much of the literature (Peet 1998). However, it was not clear from the observations who was asking asl, was it the same people asking each time or was everyone asking? Why do people use asl and why do some people not? How routine is this question in people's use of internet chat rooms and what can it tell us about the significance of determinants such as age, sex and location in chat room use? These issues needed further questioning and exploration through interviews of chat rooms users. I asked people in the interviews if they asked asl; approximately half of the people interviewed said yes and half said no. Those who said no said that asl was boring and predictable and many of them said they did not care what the asl of the people

they were talking to was. The analysis of the interviews showed that those who asked asl tended to be the younger people; those who use chat rooms primarily for sexual reasons and those who claim to use chat rooms just for fun or to mess around. People who said using chat rooms were important to them, classed themselves as regulars and those who used chat rooms to keep in contact with friends and family tended not to ask asl. The majority of people interviewed, however did say that asl was an extremely common question. I asked people why they thought it was so common and the responses I received were as follows: firstly, so they could gain a little bit of information about the person they are chatting to, secondly, so people then could decide if they wanted to continue talking to them, for example:

> **Short:** yea u can quickly and easily find out where peeps r from etc etc and then decide if u wanna chat further

Thirdly, and linked to the previous two, it was the information people deemed as important when deciding if they could pair up with that person, or chat to them on a sexual basis, for example:

> **Bradd:** i do ask sometimes....i'm not into child abuse..lol.....I'm male/44/s. calif usa....i often say i'm younger in order to get more action....like..19-mid20's like the calif surfer bit
>
> **Bebi1st:** I personally don't like the question ASL, it's a cheap pick up line. I like to chat to someone over time and learn things about them gradually. I don't see what reason I need to know someone's age sex and location instantly. Again, it's mostly the kids who use ASL

Fourthly, interviewees said that asl was universal that it was easy for people to ask, it was suggested it was used because it was routine, perhaps so much so that is had become discursive; this will be discussed in more detail later on.

> **Chloe:** Yes its just routine so that you know a bit about who you are talking to

A number of interviewees had very strong feelings regarding asl, claiming it was boring and that they were not interested in people's asl and that they just wanted to chat to someone that they regarded as 'nice', 'kind' 'fun', 'interesting' regardless of age, sex and location.

> **DayDreamer:** Not very often really, I reply to the question, but I don't really ask it myself. I'm not really interested in who people are, but more in what they have to say.

Some interviewees also gave me their responses to asl, for example:

> **Prez:** I am so tired of that question I just say I broke my asl or I am sitting on my asl. If I do answer it I say 100 not lately and tenessee
> **tinykitty14:** nope never ever ever Age never as a lady SEx.... you wish!!..Location.. sense your not gettin sex you dont need to know

This, on the one hand, shows a break away from the norm of asking asl, from chatting to people who are of the same or similar asl as them or fit into a certain asl. However, at the same time, do the people who do not ask asl have different rules on which to base who they talk to; as DayDreamer says it is not about 'who they are, but what they say'? This assumes that what someone says is not necessarily linked to who they are; (when DayDreamer refers to who they are she is referring to determinants such as their age, sex and location). Others also say that what is important to them is what people have to say, if they can enjoy a conversation with them. This raises a significant point that for many of the interviewees, chat rooms are not just about sex, they are not just about 'having a laugh' or 'getting enjoyment out of making fun of others' that it is important for people that they have a interactions with people on a higher level than just liking the look of their response to asl. Again, this suggests that identity is not as free flowing and open as suggested in the literature, that it is more fixed and regulated in the routines of each chat room.

The observations suggested that asl was used on an extremely regular basis and although it was confirmed by most of the interviewees that asl is used frequently in chat rooms some of the comments about asl were not only interesting but

surprising. It was confirmed that asl is a routine and universal way of getting a small amount of knowledge about a person and used by people mainly to break the ice and start a conversation and to decide if they want to continue talking to that person on the basis of the answers to asl. However I was surprised by the amount of people who said they did not ask asl and more surprised by the numbers of people who found it both annoying, boring and refused to answer when asked or answered with an amusing or false answer. This suggests that age, sex and location is not as important as originally thought, this has implications with regard to identity and the importance of such determinants when exploring identity. I think that the main reason why there has been such a difference in the perceived importance of asl in observations and interviews is that in the observations I was looking overall at the chat room and with a number of people coming and going on a regular basis those who did ask asl, were asking it on a regular basis to all new entries to the room. After looking back at some of the observations it is clear that in some cases where asl is asked regularly within room chat, it is the same person or people asking it. This caused me to perceive asl as being important to chat rooms but in reality it is only used by a select number of chatters. At this stage it is also important to raise that there could be a correlation between those who do not ask asl and those who offered to be interviewed, therefore I could have a misrepresented sample of chatters.

The literature argues that identity online is fluid, fragmented and without boundary (Kitchin 1998; Featherstone and Burrows 1995) and the observations suggested that chat rooms were in fact much more grounded in fixed determinants such as age, sex and location. The interviews, however, suggest that age, sex and location is not as important to chatters as initially thought and shouldn't necessarily be taken at face value. This does not mean that identity is necessarily fluid and without boundary, is suggests that identity may be grounded in other things. As we have already discussed, for many identity is embedded and grounded in the routines of their daily life and chat rooms have become central to these routines. The interviews have already shown that chat rooms are an integral part of people's everyday life, that chat rooms are grounded and bound up with everyday life and routine. Through discussions about nicknames we have explored the way people could be embedding identity in a nickname grounding

their identity within something solid such as a name in a forum where it is suggested that not only is exploration of identity limitless that people are not confined by constraints and boundaries. Chat rooms are so bound up in everyday life and routine that interviewees can no longer separate it from their daily routine to deem it as important to them, this clearly suggests that the identity of many of the interviewees is grounded and more solid that the literature claims, it is just grounded in a different way for different people, across different rooms and maybe even at different times.

From the findings regarding asl, it would appear on the one hand that determinants such as age, sex and location were not as important as suggested from the observations. However, at the beginning of the interviews, and throughout, I asked interviewees a number of questions about them selves such as 'Can you tell me a bit about yourself?' and 'How would you describe yourself?' and the responses of these questions clearly shows the importance of place and the body online. When asked to tell me about themselves the most common replies were interviewees age, sex, location, marital status, appearance, hobbies and work and when later asked to describe themselves people most commonly told me about their appearance. I did ask people if they were telling the truth but a huge majority said that they were not only telling me the truth that they nearly always tell the truth; some said if they do not want to tell someone something that they have asked they refuse to answer the question rather than making something up. However, even if people were not telling the truth about their age, location, appearance or whatever it happened to be, the very fact that they are using such determinants to tell people about themselves shows that they are important to them regardless of whether they are accurate or not. The literature suggests that computer mediated communication is a much freer and open form of communication and not limited by social determinants such as age, sex and location (Stone 1991). However, the people who use these rooms clearly find these things of great importance as when asked if they would tell other chat rooms users the same things they had told me nearly all of them said yes. Some said they would not tell other users anything too personal until they had chatted to them for a while but that they would tell them the general determinants as listed above. So I have found that place and the body are still important factors when chatting

online, suggesting, again that identity may be grounded in place and other determinants such as age and gender. However, I still needed to explore the notion that chat rooms are not global because this is another claim in the literature that the observations began to suggest was not supported.

The observation results suggested that global interaction was not that high among chat room users. However, the observations firstly could not take into account any private chats outside of the main chat room forum. It was also not possible to know the physical location of all the chatters that were being observed. Analysis of the observations with regard to global interaction was based on the frequency of asl which has now been brought into question. It is important to address these issues further to find out if the results were misrepresented in the observations and if there was in fact much more global interaction than initially though.

I asked the interviewees if they chatted to people from different countries and the majority of people said yes. However, after chatting to interviewees further it became clear that although people do chat to people from other countries, the majority of people interviewed do not chat to people from other countries on a regular basis. When they do chat to people from other countries they tend to be countries that speak English – the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zeeland. The majority of people who actively spoke to people from a variety of countries were usually from a country where English was not the first language. The majority of people interviewed were from the UK, then the USA and Canada, however so it is difficult to look representatively at this as the English speaking countries were over represented due to the types of chat rooms researched. This was a problem from the beginning as looking back at the taxonomy it was clear that the search engines were producing primarily UK and USA chat rooms. However, to carry out a representative taxonomy of all chat rooms across the globe is a huge undertaking and not one that could have been fitted into the time limit.

I also asked people if the possibility of meeting up with someone, so hence questions about their location, had any impact on who they decided to chat to. There were a few people who said that they actively seek out people who live in

close proximity to them but the majority said this had no impact on them and their chat room use. The observations along with the majority of interviewees also admitted that they did not actively seek people from different countries to chat to and when they did they were very much Western countries. This suggests that there is not global interaction among chat rooms users and that the locale is still importance. In day to day life, physical proximity is much more of an issue. It is difficult if all the people you interact with, have relationships and friendships with, live great distances from you. Online, the literature would suggest that distance is no object (Rheingold 1993), however I would argue that place is still important but the space has got larger. For example, it is important to a lot of people that they have friends who live close by that they can visit, when you are younger and transportation is harder, it is more important that these distances are small. As you grow older, become more independent, maybe have your own transportation these spaces can widen. Online you would think that the space would be limitless, but it is not, it is much larger but not without boundary, it is just that these boundaries are created and enforced by each individual and may change from person to person.

It was not possible to understand all the rules and boundaries behind global interactions, as often these differ for different people but it is possible to say that boundaries do exist and that on the whole the boundaries are within where people feel safe and comfortable. People from the UK feel safe talking to other from the UK, they have the same culture, the same language, they may even have common ground with regard to location that they can discuss. There is a discourse of safety and comfort built into online communication. Boundaries such as physical proximity may not be present but even so people enforce them. Perhaps the boundaries placed there by chat rooms users are to do with community. By placing boundaries that mean participants on the whole are all from the same country or have at least some common ground that is easier to form some level of community thus making the chat experience much more enjoyable. The following section will look at people's discussions of community as well as the phenomenon of care within chat rooms.

Community and Care

There has been much research into the subject of online communities with many researchers suggesting that online communities are becoming a more integral part of people's lives. According to Kollock and Smith (1996) and Wellman (1988) online communication has caused a shift in the way that we define community. Community is no longer conceptualised in terms of physical space but is defined in terms of social networks. These ideas are supported by Everard (2000) who also says that online communities are no different from offline communities:

"Virtual communities are real communities that exist in a virtual space. People are still talking to people, albeit mediated by computers. It is no different from people talking on the telephone, except that the technology interface is different." (Everard 2000:133)

I asked those interviewed if they felt part of an online community; the majority of people said that they did think chat rooms were like communities and those who said they were not like communities often said that they were not like a community for them but they could see how others felt that they were. Many of the participants who said they were not like a community also used chat rooms on an irregular and less often basis. Most of these respondents said they only used chat rooms for fun, when they were bored or for purely sexual reasons. I will not spend any time on looking into why people do not refer to chat rooms as a type of community as we have already discussed a number of reasons why these interviewees may use chat rooms when discussing escape with specific reference to sexual chat, fantasy and flaming. What is interesting is those who did claim that chat rooms were like a community to them. There were a number of reasons for people referring to chat rooms as community and the following section will work through these reasons as well as looking at some examples and exploring what they can tell us about people's use of chat rooms.

A number of interviewees said that chat rooms were like a community to them because the same people come in the rooms on a regular basis, 'the regulars' and people get to know one another:

> **Bebi1st:** Yes, you get the same people in the same rooms, hence the term regulars
>
> **Jeffbo:** a gathering of people all wanting to interact, yes definitely!
>
> **Manx:** Yes... because alot of the people that come to chat rooms are regulars and so talk to each other all of the time.
>
> **DayDreamer:** Yes, definitely. You do tend to get the same people frequenting the same chat rooms on a regular basis. .....When I was at uni, I used to go in the same chat room everyday for hours, and you build up a relationship with other 'regulars'.....It's a whole other social circle/

The importance of regulars has been a theme throughout the interviews and is a significant aspect of feeling part of a community for these interviewees. For these interviewees, and many others, the importance here is on friendship and familiarity. Recognising others nicknames and being recognised back gave interviewees a sense of belonging. Interviewees also referred to the involvement they have in each others lives, they care about each other, and they share common interests:

> **Astrah:** oh god yes! They are very much their own little community.....u see the same ppl day after day and develop relationships with them - friendships and connections. When ppl are sick we send them get well cards, wish them happy birthday, take an interest in their lives and problems........the room i chat in is like that - more cohesive than this room we are in now........oh that is the 40plus room....makes (this room) is less cohesive because its often the landing spot for ppl when they first come in
>
> **colettediane:** i define a community as a group of people who converse and form bonds together, and who share common interests. i think some chat rooms are communities (if people go to the room regularly) and others, where the people vary from day to day, are less like communities)
>
> **Prez:** Well sure people who are like minded go to rooms they feel comfortable so it does become a big community where people from all over the world come and enjoy other conversations and learn of their cultures

I was very interested to find that interviewees referred to other chat rooms users in this way. This discourse of care that was referred to by a number of interviewees showed the extent to which friendships and relationships were created within the chat rooms and the importance of the rooms. A number of interviewees also referred to another side of the communities, that of rejection and exclusion.

> **Rabbitsfoot:** it's true to a point ....people can are accepted and rejected based on unwritten rules for each chat room ....and the people coming into the chat room have to find their way around the rules ......but once you're accepted, you tend to make friends and people do seem to care what's going on in your life ......that all being said, once you leave, you're pretty much forgotten after a while
>
> **VelvetvermeeFr:** yep , people get little groups going , saying hello to all the mates and getting pissed of if newbie's come in like its thee own house or sommat like you need an invite

As discussed by 'Rabbitsfoot' and 'VelvetvermeerFr' among others, chat rooms can be exclusive and are not always as open and accepting as the literature may suggest. As Rabbitsfoot says, there are rules upon which you are accepted and/or rejected within the chat room and chat community. She says that these rules are different from room to room and it is up to the new chatter to work out the rules to gain acceptance. In my experience of interviewing I very much found that some rooms were far more accepting of me as an interviewer than others. Although being an interviewer is a very different position to be in than if I was just entering the room wishing to chat, if I was given a hard time in a room for asking if there was anyone who wanted to be interviewed there was always at least one or two people (always new to the room) who would tell me in private chat that this was not a very accepting room. For example, one of the interviewees in Gay.com, angeleye22, after I was given a hard time by a number of the chat room users about looking for people to interview, said that people could be quite rude in some of the rooms and also 'harsh to newcomers'. My thoughts after conducting the interviews and the observations was that it was important that people began to recognise you online and that you contributed to the conversation but were careful

not to dominate it and then after time you would be accepted into the room and with more time deemed as a regular. It would require a much more longitudinal study to gain a full understanding of the unwritten rules for each chat room and to understand the rules of acceptance and rejection. It is also probable that as time moves on the people in the chat room may change and so too may the rules. What is important that we take away from this is that within chat rooms there is a discourse of rules, as well as rules of engagement about what people should say and do, not just with regard to community but various other areas previously discussed in this chapter and throughout the observation results surrounding who people should be and how they should act online. It is based on these rules that people are accepted into the chat community.

One of the interviewees also said that chat rooms were self-policing which was very interesting, especially with regard to the importance of the truth in chat rooms.

> **time2flirt:** i think its true cos many people visit frequently and u can get to know individuals and its also self policing which is a char of a community

Self policing chat rooms, again implies rules and regulations which the literature argues are not present in chat rooms. This is important not only in reference to the previous paragraph concerning rules and regulations within chat rooms but also with regard to the importance of telling the truth online. I asked respondents a number of questions about themselves as well as asking asl and then later asked them not only if they were telling the truth but also if another chat room user asked them the same questions would they have given the same response. The majority of interviewees said that they were telling the truth and also that they would tell other people the same things. The main exception to this was people saying that they would not necessarily tell others such in-depth information about them personally at such an initial stage until they got to know them better.

Anna: i cant be arsed to lie to people in chatrooms

Hbomb313: YEAH ITS TRUTH WOTS POINT IN LIEN

Sandybaby1406536: as long as it aint to personal i tell i dont see the point in lying im here to be me no one else

Fred: yes, whats the point of lying it sucks, i want them to chat because its me not someone imaginary.

Interviewees say there is little point in lying but also say that firstly they have nothing to hide and secondly they are who they are so why would they want to hide it by lying. It is Bebi1st's comments that I find most interesting:

Bebi1st: I try to be honest online........If I wanted to tell someone anything more sensitive I'd tell them on IM after getting to know them better...... I don't see the point in lying lol I am who I am

It is the fact that she says 'I try to be honest' as if it is wrong not to be. Society's rules deem lying as being wrong, online it is suggested that there are no implications when lying about who you are, where you live, what you do and so on and interviewees often claim that they think many people do this but there still seems to be an underlying thought for many chatters that they 'should' tell the truth. This discourse of truth is very strong among a number of the interviewees and backed up by the observations where we saw how people got annoyed with others if they were not telling the truth about their asl or someone picked up that they had changed it from previously. These ideas are backed up by the work of Whitty (2002) who found that people mainly tell the truth online and when they do not the reasons are due to their own personal safety and security. As an interviewer, I also felt that there was pressure on me to tell the truth about who I was and what I was doing, some people asking for proof of what I was doing even though they had no interest in being interviewed and others being very suspicious of me. When I interviewed TinyKitty, for example, I got a number of messages from others in the room telling me that she was not that old and was still at school and not to take advantage of her. These events made me think about the pressure put on me as well as other chat room users in many of the chat rooms by other chatters to tell the truth and secondly, especially with TinyKitty, the sense of care and community, looking out for one another as well as friendship. In a forum where supposedly there are no rules, no regulations, no boundaries; analysis was

showing that many of the rules and regulations in place in society are also present online and re-enforced by the users.

This chapter has looked at a number of themes from the observations and explored them further as well as looking at some new findings with regard to the way people use chat rooms. Chat rooms are clearly used with far more diversity that often suggested and are increasingly embedded in people's everyday lives. Identity online is grounded in everyday life, in routine, in place and in determinants such as appearance and age. When chat rooms are used in ways that would be seen as escaping the routines of everyday life and communications were much freer and exploratory, it would be expected that chat room users may use the rooms as a more open and fluid exploration of identity. However, the interviews found that this is not the case. Chat rooms are governed by rules and regulations with many of the chat room users maintaining at least a certain level of stability with regard to identity. There are still questions about identity that remain unanswered and throughout the interviews I asked interviewees a number of specific questions with regard to their use of chat rooms and identity. The following chapter will look at the answers to these questions and will continue to explore identity in order to gain a more understanding into the use of chat rooms for presenting the self.

Presenting Identity through Chat

Online Identity

Although throughout the previous chapter I looked at the presentation of online identity, this chapter will look specifically at interview questions relating to identity and the way interviewees present and/or perform identity online to gain a more in-depth understanding into the use of chat rooms with regard to identity. This chapter will not just focus on the analysis of the answers given to specific identity related questions, during the second section of this chapter I will conduct a number of case studies looking in detail at interviewees and their interviews to gain more in depth understanding into the use of chat rooms with regard to identity. The case studies will be discussed more later on.

I began exploring identity from the beginning of the interviews asking people to tell me a bit about their chat room history and themselves. Results of these questions were interesting in themselves. When asked to tell me about their chat room history nearly 100% of interviewees chose to tell me facts and figures about when they started using chat rooms, what rooms they use and how often they chat. Only a minimal percentage referred to any chat experiences or why they use chat rooms, when they chat and how much, the responses given were on a very superficial level. As this was the initial interview question it was not that surprising that people were a little hesitant and did give a long explanation. However, this kind of response was replicated later on in the interview when I asked respondents to tell me about themselves. The majority of people interviewed told me their age, sex, location, marital status, job and a hobby or two, for example:

> **XSpacebubblesx:** im 34, work full time divorced
>
> **canuckqt:** 25, canadian, female, university student...
>
> **DanGough22:** well im 5ft 8in defined build i have a very active lifestyle, i work for the local council and im also an adult instructor at the local army cadets.....short brown hair clean shaven, no body piercing
>
> **XxGemmy84xX:** well i'm 22, live in norfolk and i'm female.

> **Anna:** im 16, i go to school, i love my friends and anything challenging and extreme.

Often the responses were very standardised and the response time was also fast, it was as if people did not have to think about their reply, it was something they said all the time. I asked interviewees if they would give the same response to another chat room user if had they asked the same or similar questions. Nearly all of the interviewees said they would give the same response. This raised two issues, firstly it re-enforced the importance people place on determinants such as age, sex, location, their job and appearance, but also it showed that in chat rooms people are asking questions similar, or the same, as would be asked in a face to face interaction or questions that allow them to create a basic mental picture about the person, as if they really had met fact to face. Although not everyone discussed appearance, many at least gave age and sex in their response. Determinants that are meant to be of little importance in such a forum, according to cyberspace literature (Suler 2002), are clearly important to the chat rooms users interviewed and could be seen as central to their identity.

I also asked people what the term identity meant to them and their thoughts about identity as multiple and fluid. I got some varied responses from both questions. With regard to what the term identity meant to interviewees, the most common response was that it was who they are, what is inside them, what make them who they are:

> **Anna:** argh thats a bit deep and thought-requiring ermmm yourself, who you are what you are
>
> **tinykitty14:** well identity is like who you arr and what makes you you
>
> **Chloe:** Who you are inside, not really your appearance but your personality and what and who are important to you.
>
> **Fred:** its who i am and what i like its me basically
>
> **Starlight:** What makes me me!
>
> **Velvetvermeer:** identity is who i am
>
> **XxGemmy84xX:** identity means..ur you...like it or lump it
>
> **DayDreamer:** Identity is me, it is who I am, what I believe, what I do.

Jayne3850: Identity means who I am what I am

This kind of response was common across those interviewed but also shows that there is common belief that identity is integral to who we are, implying that it is something that is fixed; as many of the interviewees go on to comment that their identity does not change and that they do not have different identities for different situations, or people:

> **Chloe:** If I'm feeling depressed I'm probably more honest but I don't ever say I'm someone different.
>
> **Sandybaby1406536:** nope im me
>
> **Star:** dunno really. Guess I'm me all the time but how close I let people get to me depends on how well in know them, like do I show them all of me right away usually get to know people better before telling them all about me and letting them get to know me well
>
> **XSpacebubblesx:** no i always stay the same
>
> **Manx:** Mostly who I'm talking to. I would say its always the same identity (true identity) but depending on who I talk to I'll talk about different things
>
> **canuckqt:** no, i'm just me when i'm in the chat room...sometimes it just allows me to be more outgoing and goof compared to what i'd be in other situations, but i don't lie about who i am and most of the time, my mood is always just that i'm bored when i come to a chatroom.

Interviewees stated that they did not change who they are within the chat room even though some of them claim that they do not divulge certain areas or aspects of themselves until they have got to know a person much better, or not at all in some cases. Some interviewees such as 'Canuckqt', say that although they have the same identity online as offline, they find it easier to be more outgoing in chat rooms; but as 'Manx' says, he may talk to different people about different things with regard to his identity his "true identity" remains the same. Not all interviewees felt this way regarding identity and felt that it was a much more fluid process to varying extents. For example, some refer to identity as a performance, as presenting themselves a certain way in certain situations:

Sandybaby1406536: its the person ye are or would like ppl to think ye are

Astrah: Identity....mmmm I wld say that is our personal beliefs about what makes us, us. The persona that we present to the world and our sense of self.....beliefs we hold about ourselves i guess.

Rabbitsfoot: interesting question......identity is the face you present to a particular audience..... the specifics of an identity can change based on your audience

These ideas echo the work of Goffman (1969) who argues that although people have a core identity they have various performances of self that they present to different people and at varying times. As Rabbitsfoot says "identity is the face you present to a particular audience", she goes on to say that these faces or performances can change depending on who the audience is. As you can see from the examples listed below, especially Astrah's comments, these ideas were fairly common across those interviewed.

Ian: Yes various identities and also different degrees to which I vary them – can range from changing what I do and my age to my name where I live etc etc

Astrah: Personally I have different identifies in real life - like anyone. I am a different person with friends than with work colleagues. The essence of me however is probably the same. I dont change what I say about myself here, the basic information is the same, however I might provide slightly more or less information about me to some chatters. I might be more open with some than others.

Bradd: yes...surfer for the younger hoties...more myself...stock player/golfer/sports enthusiast for the 30's dash 40's

DIEEE RABBIT DIEEEEEEEE: yeh well... of course i do doesnt everyone? theres one side that pretends to my boss that im a respectable professional employee and theres another part thatll be off shagging some guy in the office loo

Rabbitsfoot: of course.....in the general room, i'm a stubborn political button-pusher ......in private with friends i'm my normal self - updating

each other on lives, giving receiving ideas....in real life with strangers i'm
kind of aloof until i know them more

DanGough22: yes i have different identities at various points in the week,
i more or less change what i say about myself on a regular basis depending
on my mood

Interviewees varied their identity to differing degrees some, such as Bradd saying
that he changes from a surfer to a golfer and so on depending on what woman he
is talking to; mainly based on the age of the woman. Others, such as Ian say they
change things like their age and were he lives. A number of interviewees, such as
Rabbitsfoot and DanGough22 say they have various identities, for Dan depending
on mood and for Rabbitsfoot depending on who he is talking to. Astrah and Dieee
Rabbit Dieeeeeeee assume that everyone has various identities and refer to the
different sides of themselves that they present whilst at work, at home and online.
To explore these concepts further and to gain deeper understanding into the way
people use chat rooms with regard to presenting various identities, as suggested by
Goffman (1969), in contrast with more postmodern concepts of identity with
regard to fluidity, as suggested by researchers such as Butler (1990) (see chapter
one for a more in depth discussion of identity according to postmodern theories
and Goffman), I will focus on four specific interviews, each which raise
interesting issues around the way people use chat rooms with regard to identity.

Presenting Identities?

By focusing on four specific interviews and conducting a case study and narrative
style analysis with regard to the interviews themselves, as well as their comments
about their use of chat rooms, I am able to look beyond participant's responses to
specific questions about identity but explore chat rooms use and identity in far
more depth; (see Chapter two for more detail on the narrative methodology). This
section allows me to look in more depth at the way interviewees use chat rooms
with regard to identity and to reach further understanding into the way
interviewees use chat and chat rooms for the presentation of identity.

The interviewees I have chosen are as follows: Jayne3850, interviewed in the evening from the Christian Chat room, Astrah, interviewed in the afternoon from Alamak chat, Canuckqt, interviewed in the evening from Gay.com and Rabbitsfoot, interviewed in the afternoon also from Gay.com. The reasons for choosing these four interviewees is that all of them gave longer and more in-depth interviews than some of the other participants, they discuss identity in more detail than others and show a range of opinions and views with regard to identity and their chat experiences. Before looking specifically at analysing the interviews chosen, it is first useful to give some information about each one of the interviewees with regard to how often they chat, how long they have been chatting for and so on.

Rabbitsfoot has been using chat rooms for approximately ten years, uses them on a daily basis and spends anything from a couple of minutes to a couple of hours in chat rooms. Canuckqt has been using chat rooms on and off for seven years, she has not used chat rooms for a while and has recently started using them again. She used to use chat rooms on a very regular basis but now uses them every so often. Astrah has been using chat rooms for about eighteen months and chats most days for about two to three hours at a time. Finally Jayne3850 has been using chat rooms for about a year and a half and chats everyday for a minimum of four hours a day. All of the interviewees chosen have been using chat rooms for varied amounts of time and also use chat rooms for very different amounts of time. I will work through each interview individually and explore the interviewee's comments, thoughts, opinions and ideas with regard to identity, with particular reference to the way interviewees use narrative to explain their use of chat rooms and more importantly the use of narrative in chat room interactions as a way for chat room users to explore identity.

I will begin with Astrah, who told me she was 27, female from Australia. The interview with Astrah was very free flowing and open with her expressing views and opinions openly without further probing from the interviewer. Through the interview I gained an understanding of how Astrah uses chat rooms, what kinds of things she talks about with people and why she uses them. Astrah said that she uses chat rooms most days and for a about two to three hours at a time but that she

tends to only chat to one or two people at a time. When Astrah first started using chat rooms she chatted within the room to multiple people but now she prefers to chat on a private basis with one or two people maximum. The reason for this shift is due to changes in her own life. When she began using chat rooms she was lonely, had just ended a long term relationship and was working long and late hours on the computer. Chat rooms were a good way to gain some social interaction and to ease the loneliness. Astrah admits that nowadays she uses chat rooms as more of an outlet, a form of release, from a demanding job. She uses them when she wants some social contact with others but purely on her terms, she can log on and off as she wants as well as have more control over who she talks to and what they talk about than in face to face interactions. She enjoys chatting to people that she can hold a stimulating conversation with as well as keeping in contact with old and new friends, many of which she has met online. Astrah said that chat rooms are an important part of her life, although says she could live without them. She goes on to say that on chat rooms people can be more open and honest and in a way chat online can be as 'real' as 'real' life:

> **Astrah:**....its like here you get to know ppl inside-out ...its more intimate more quickly without the physical presence. It lets ppl relax more in some senses - I tell friends here things I might not reveal to my friends in real life because at the end of the day u don't have to face them! I used to think chat wasn't very "real" but its as real as real life in some senses......altho many ppl lie on chat, I think that many ppl are actually more themselves if that makes sense - because no one will judge them for it - the ppl here dont matter in the sense that the ppl in our real lives do - they have less power over us.

Over time Astrah's views and chat experiences have changed, where she did use chat rooms to have fun and to combat loneliness, whereas now relationships and friendships formed online are far more meaningful. Astrah's comments about chat being such an open and free forum with the ability to express oneself with more freedom than in a face to face interaction; this suggests that if friendships, relationships and interactions can take place with such fluidity and openness that the process of exploring identity or the way that people present themselves online

can and does happen with this ease and fluidity. Astrah discuss with me her views on identity, saying that although she has a number of different identities that she presents to people in 'real' life as well as online the core identity remains the same:

> **Astrah:** Personally I have different identifies in real life - like anyone. I am a different person with friends than with work colleagues. The essence of me however is probably the same. I dont change what I say about myself here, the basic information is the same, however I might provide slightly more or less information about me to some chatters. I might be more open with some than others.

Later on in the interview, while discussing memorable moments or experiences she has had online, she returns to this point saying that often her friends have tried to trick her by logging on with a different name and she has tried to do the same back, but they have never managed it because their 'identity always shines through'.

> **Astrah:** occasionally for fun friends here have tried to trick me using diff names and pretending to be diff ppl - I have tried the same thing with them! But our real identities always seem to shine thru - u develop a persona here, the way u chat, ur syntax.

Although Astrah refers to presenting different identities at different times and to different people, including holding back certain things about the self until you have developed a certain level of friendship with the other person, she also continually refers back to her 'true identity'. When she talks about her chat experiences, what she enjoys about chatting and the history of her chat room use it becomes clear that Astrah uses chat rooms to develop friendships and relationships and through doing so she is able to express herself openly and honestly as much, or even more so, than in a face to face interaction, but with more ownership and control of when she chats and to whom. Astrah makes numerous references to situations and interactions in chat being the same or similar to 'real life' throughout the interview. This suggests that for her chat

rooms are not that far removed from 'real life' interactions, merely more accessible, more controllable and to some extent a way of escaping the demands of her job and people around her in day to day living but for short periods of time, as she claims that although chat rooms are enjoyable the ease of logging off when she wants to is an important factor. Although Astrah does have meaningful conversations with others online and refers to developing strong friendships and relationships she does not discuss or show any evidence that she uses chat rooms as a means of exploring multiple identities but more that they are used as a way of expressing herself with ease and freedom via meaningful conversations and interactions with others, much the same, she says, as in 'real life'.

Canuckqt, a Canadian, 27 year old, female University student raises some similar views as Astrah with regard to the openness of chat and says that she has the ability to be more outgoing in chat rooms than face to face. Canuckqt has not chatted on chat rooms for quite some time but has been using them on and off for about seven years. She used to use chat rooms a lot when she first discovered them, but like Astrah, now tends to chat on a more one on one basis. She claims to only use chat rooms when she is bored and uses them in a fairly superficial way, to have fun, relieve the boredom and joke around with people. She says conversations vary but mostly they chat about 'random stuff':

> **canuckqt:** random stuff. nothing specific. where everyone is from,
> interests we might have in common..

Although she has met up with one person via the internet, it was not through a chat room that they met; they chatted via an instant messenger service for over two years before meeting, so for Canuckqt chat rooms are more of an outlet for boredom than a means through which she develops relationships and friendships. Canuckqt has not formed any meaningful relationships or friendships via internet chat rooms and although she does recognise that others do when as she refers to regular chatters and how they form bonds with each other. When talking about identity Canuckqt says that although chat rooms can help you to be more outgoing than in other situations that she is always the same person inside.

> **canuckqt:** no, i'm just me when i'm in the chat room...sometimes it just
> allows me to be more outgoing and goof compared to what i'd be in
> other situations, but i don't lie about who i am and most of the time, my
> mood is always just that i'm bored when i come to a chatroom.

Again, although she refers to herself as being able to express certain sides of herself much more easily in chat rooms, she maintains the view that her identity is fundamentally fixed, although does discuss others use of chat rooms with regard to identity when discussing why other people use chat rooms, including referring to others hiding their identity while online.

> **canuckqt:** i'm not really sure. i'd like to say that they're just bored like me
> and use it once in a blue moon, but some people get addicted, some
> people like to hide their identity and be someone else, some people
> date in them...all kinds of different motives for using them i guess

Canuckqt refers to always being bored when she uses chat rooms and therefore her focus is very different from Astrah's, which was on friendship and to unwind, therefore the interactions carried out are very different. Although both prefer to interact with other chatters on a one to one basis, Astrah's interactions are far more in depth and she has built up friendships and relationships with other chatters over time. Canuckqt, however, uses chat rooms as a way of alleviating boredom and throughout the interview show little sign of anything other than a fundamentally superficial relationship with other chat room users. With interactions being short and without significant thought Canuckqt use of chat rooms is more about expressing part of her identity that may be somewhat suppressed in day to day life but she does not show signs of any deeper exploration of identity or any signs that chat rooms allow more fluidity in the presentation of her identity, merely that they allow her to express parts of her identity with more ease than in face to face interactions.

Rabbitsfoot, a 37 year old male from Chicago, also uses them for similar reasons as Canuckqt, although has been using chat rooms on a more regular basis, for about ten years and uses them on a daily basis from a couple of minutes at a time

to a few hours at a time. He says his main reasons for using chat rooms are to stay in contact with friends who he knows from outside chat rooms and for what he calls 'entertainment purposes'. Rabbitsfoot says unless he is talking to one of his friends then he tends to talk in the main room rather than one to one and enjoys using chat rooms while working on other things on the computer. Similar to Canuckqt, chat room use for Rabbitsfoot is about alleviating boredom, which he does by flaming, occasionally flirting and 'stirring up trouble':

> **Rabbitsfoot:** most of my chat is in the general room responding to comments or stirring up trouble

Rabbitsfoot refers to being far more 'abrasive' in the main room but much more 'himself' when talking to friend's one on one. In this respect, it would be suggested that chat rooms allow him to express this more abrasive and disruptive side without consequence, it is a way of releasing some aggression or frustration. When discussing identity he does refer to the presentation of self in various ways depending on the audience:

> **Rabbitsfoot:** identity is the face you present to a particular audience
>
> **Rabbitsfoot:** the specifics of an identity can change based on your audience

He goes on to say that he is different in the main chat room, with friends, in private and in 'real life'. Rabbitsfoot refers to being his normal self when he is with friends and says that many of the friends he has online he has either known for years or knows from outside of chat room and just uses chat to remain in contact with them.

> **Rabbitsfoot:** in the general room, i'm a stubborn political button-pusher
>
> **Rabbitsfoot:** in private with friends i'm my normal self - updating each other on lives, giving receiving ideas
>
> **Rabbitsfoot:** in real life with strangers i'm kind of aloof until i know them more

For Rabbitsfoot, although the chat rooms allow him to express various identities that he may not be able to express outside the room he does not refer, or give any indication, that he uses chat rooms as a way of further exploring identity but more a way of expressing a certain side of himself in a forum where it is far easier and without the same consequences as in a face to face situation. For Jayne3850, however, chat rooms are used far more as an exploration of self. Jayne talked to me at length throughout the interview about her chat room experiences including how she became involved in chat rooms and the process she has gone through with regard to good and bad experiences in the year to two years that she has been using them. Jayne is a 48 year old female from Milton Keynes. She told me why she came to chat rooms in the first place:

> **Jayne3850:** I came into chat rooms in the first place because I had fallen for a guy at work who had made a pass at me and I had resisted temptation and resigned from my job so I had a big gap in my life, a void and chat rooms filled it.... Very much so. The flirting and stuff I had at work were here and that's why I came here and that's being honest.

Although Astrah places importance on chat rooms and has formed meaningful friendships through them, none of the interviewees refer to chat rooms in the same way as Jayne. For Jayne chat rooms are of great importance to her and have helped her through some hard times in her life as well as giving her some challenges to overcome which she claims have made her stronger. She talked me through one particular part of her life and a subsequent online relationship:

> **Jayne3850:** I was a domestic at a hospital for a number of years then God called me out and made it impossible to carry on. I ended up in October 2003 doing a diploma in social work and qualified last Aug/sept time most of the course I passed everything until the last assignment then I failed the last assignment and it was awful and I had to redo. The tutor I had was a dragon she pulled me at every opportunity and I was at the point of giving up and there I became very vulnerable in a chat room and fell hook line and sinker for someone who made me feel good about myself instead of a failure I was a sitting duck in a chat rooms just waiting to be killed.

Anyway god got me through it somehow and I passed. Well the relationship lasted until Nov 2005 then it all ended and I was in a worse state than at the beginning but got through it and now I feel stronger for it and do not feel the need for someone special and ☺ that's the end!

Two very interesting points from Jayne's chat experience are that, firstly she looked to chat rooms to fill the void in her life at a difficult and lonely time and that she feels stronger for experiencing, not only hard times outside of chat but also within the chat, (the relationship was purely online Jayne informed me they never met face to face) suggesting that chat rooms were a meaningful part of her life and helped her to make some life changing decisions regarding her career path and other aspects of her life. The second point is how she refers to chat rooms as somewhere where you need to be, almost on guard, she refers to herself as being 'vulnerable' within the chat room and as 'a sitting suck waiting to be killed'. She refers to chat rooms throughout the interview as not only a place that helped her to make life changing decisions but to combat low periods in her life and become a stronger person because of it. Most significantly the way she combated one of these low periods was due to a bad experience online. Jayne said in the interview that she enjoys sharing her experiences with others so that they may learn and take comfort from them. Jayne uses chat rooms for meaningful interactions with others not only to fill a void in her life but to share her experiences with others and through this process feels that she too has changed; chat rooms allow her to explore herself, her identity.

When discussing identity with Jayne, I asked her if she presents different identities to different people online, she replied with:

> **Jayne3850:** Yes. It will depend on who I'm talking to. If I'm speaking to someone who is abusive and angry I will be authoritative and challenging and will not be scared or anything and if I'm speaking to a hurting person I will try and speak little and listen and sum up put options to them but not control or help them decide the options that's learned through my course lol, If I'm chatting to a fun person will mess around and joke that is how I

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am most of the time now however if I'm hurting will seek out someone to cry with.

Jayne refers to identity almost in the same way as Bradd and a number of other interviewees, as having a number of set identities that they present to others, situation dependent. Bradd would present himself as a young Californian surfer, or sophisticated sports enthusiast depending on whom he was trying to impress at the time. Jayne refers to being authoritative if someone is being abusive, understanding if she is talking to someone who is upset and to joke around if she is chatting to a fun person. These are set roles which we all present in day to day life, we act differently with family and friends than we do with our boss, we present a different side of our identity when someone is hurt or crying than if someone is laughing or telling a joke. Bradd is not exploring identity he is performing a role to get what he wants. When Jayne discusses identity, she too is performing roles, presenting different sides of her identity depending on the situation. For Bradd to perform these roles offline would be practically impossible as he changes his age, appearance and drives around in cars he does not own, so chat rooms are an outlet for this kind of expression, but for Bradd chat rooms are not about identity exploration, multiple identities or the fluidity of identity they are about escapism, an outlet for sexual desire and frustration. Jayne, on the other hand refers to identity in a way that is familiar to us all but throughout her interview shows that for her chat rooms have been much more about identity exploration. She shares experiences with others and enjoys meaningful discussions which allow her to explore identity.

Although chat rooms have allowed the exploration of identity for Jayne and a number of other interviewees there is no evidence to suggest that this exploration is unique to chat rooms. Interviewees often refer to the ease at which they can chat online but at the same time referring to being 'more themselves' showing their 'true' or 'real' identity offline or when chatting to close friends online. There is no denying that the anonymity online, alongside the control each individual holds with the ability to end conversations, move rooms or block someone at the click of a button adds to the freedom of online expression which theoretically should lead to more fluid and exploratory expressions of identity .

However when we take into account the evidence produced from the observations and interviews regarding discourses of truth, safety and comfort, rules and routine it becomes clear that chat rooms are not always that far removed from everyday life and face to face interaction. Analysis of interviews and observations has shown that chat rooms are used in far more diverse ways than the literature suggest and that although they allow on the one hand escapism, freedom and fluidity that this goes hand in hand and often in-twined with routine, rules, truth and order. The following chapter will pull together all the themes explored throughout the analysis of observations and interviews to conclude the findings of this research.

Concluding Thoughts

Cyberspace and computer mediated communication have caused researches to question previously accepted theories about identity, space, place, globalisation, the body and community (Kitchen 1998; Shields 1996; Featherstone and Burrows 1995; Jones 1994 1997). It is claimed that society has moved from a modernist era of high stability to a postmodern era of fragmentation and destabilisation in space and place (Harvey 1989; Massey 1994; Lemert 1997; Hall 1992). Paralleling theories about increased fragmentation in space and place are changes in theoretical approaches identity theory; and associated with this shift arguments have been made that computer mediated communication has enabled identities to become fluid and changeable (Turkle 1995; Reid 1991; Poster 1995a, 1995b; Robins 1995; Hayles 1993). However, cyberspace has not just impacted upon identity theory alone, it has also caused research to question ideas about space, place, globalisation, the body and community (Massey 1994; Harvey 1989). Theory and arguments around identity are linked to associated claims about space, place, the body and community; new approaches towards identity theory rest on claims about place and space being of little importance, concepts of community changing and the body and other physical determinants being transcended within the cyberspace.

Computer mediated communication has led to space and place being of little importance (Peet 1998; Cairncross 1997). It is suggested in the cyberspace literature that the internet and computer mediated communication allows new modes of social interaction where constraints and boundaries of place, space gender, race and so on are transcended. It has been suggested that when entering the internet the body is transcended and participants have the ability and freedom to reconstruct their identity within cyberspace free from the constraints of an embodied existence (Morse 1994; Kroker and Weinstein 1994; Turkle 1995). Thus a clear picture is presented of cyberspace as a disembodied, fragmented and fluid form of communication where participants are able to explore multiple identities without constrain and boundaries. However, much of this research is unsupported by empirical research and leaves a number of assumptions and questions that need further investigation.

This thesis has used the empirical methods of observations within chat rooms, and interviews with chat room users to question these assumptions and to gain further understanding into how and why people use internet chat rooms to explore questions about identity. The main area focused on throughout this thesis was identity; however identity theory rests on, and is bound up with theories about the fragmentation of the postmodern era including concepts of globalisation, space and place, disembodiment and community. The aims of this thesis were to look at the ways in which chat rooms are used in order to find evidence to support or refute claims in the cyberspace literature that suggest computer mediated communication and cyberspace is a global and disembodied form of communication through which multiple and fluid identities are explored with ease. I focused on looking at how chat rooms are used with reference to identity which also meant exploring chat room space relating to theories about time-space compression and globalisation. I also looked at the diversity of chat rooms using the concepts of everyday life, escape and routine to explain identity and other related issues of space, place, globalisation, disembodiment and community.

Central to this thesis is an empirical exploration of theoretical approaches to identity. The findings of the observation and interviews suggested that identity is not as fluid, multiple and ever changing as suggested in the literature. As Kennedy (2006) argues, "in some cases, virtual identity is not fragmented but stable; in some forums relatively unified cyber-identities are presented." (Kennedy 2006: 863). My empirical findings echoed the work of Goffman (1969), with interviewees suggesting that they have a central core self as well as having a number of masks that they perform and present to other people depending on the situation, who they are talking to their mood and so on. These performances are part of their core self; contrasting with postmodern concepts of identity formation which suggest that identity is fluid and multiple and without boundary and that there is no core self just performances or streams of consciousness (Shotter 1988). Theory about identity rested on other postmodern changes within society such as changes in space and place. It is widely suggested that chat rooms are global, that place is of little importance and that communication is disembodied. However, the empirical research found that chat rooms are far more grounded in everyday

life, in place, in community and in routine. Chat rooms and other forms of computer mediated communication are portrayed as mediums of communication that are far removed from the structures and routines of people's everyday lives. However, the empirical research found that chat rooms can be as routine as everyday life, as well as becoming part of the routines of people's everyday lives. Even interactions where it would seem people are escaping the routines such as the sexual chat, fantasies and flaming can become a routine way of using chat rooms. As Carl (2006) and Silverstone (2005) suggest

"There is a growing recognition that everyday interactions are important and consequential to our lives. Mundane and ostensible trivial conversations with family, friends, acquaintances and colleagues reinforce those relationships and are missed if they don't happen." (Carl 2006:101).

These new technologies and the interactions and activities that occur within them are incorporated and part of peoples everyday lives (Silverstone 2005, Bakardjieva 2005).

These empirically grounded findings have critical implications for thinking about identity. Specifically, they are far removed from current postmodern identity theory. The empirical findings clearly show that although many of those interviewed refer to the presentation of self and often appear to be exploring multiple and fluid selves, these identities are in fact rooted and grounded within a core and stable self. Even Bradd, the most extreme example of those interviewed with regard to fluid identity, has a level of grounding; his identities are governed by rules and regulations. For Bradd, for example, the identities that he performs are not fluid but are pre-determined, based mainly on the age of the person he is talking to. Just like everyday and 'real' life, cyberspace has rules and regulation that people follow; they are unwritten like many of the rules in 'real' society but nevertheless quite clearly exist. Rules exist about the truth, about control, power, security, safety and comfort, inclusion, exclusion, escape and routine. Many of the chat room users interviewed talked strongly about the importance of telling the truth; chat rooms were referred to by one interviewee as 'self policing' and although people were not always asking people if they were telling the truth there

was an unwritten rule that it was expected that you did tell the truth. While using chat rooms participants had the ability to switch off whenever they wanted, to block people they did not want to talk to, say whatever they wanted to say without fear of being physically hurt. The concepts of control, power, security, safety and comfort therefore were linked to this feeling of control and power within the chat rooms. Participants felt able to express themselves freely (Subrahmanyam et al 2004), but at the same time many of them complying with the unwritten rule to tell the truth (Whitty 2002). Although sometimes contradictory and not universal, these rules show that cyberspace is embedded in the rules, regulation, constraints and conformities of everyday life. In this respect online identity is not that far removed from identity offline.

The empirical findings of this thesis also have implications for thinking about globalisation, disembodiment and community, which in turn can help to further explain identity theory in cyberspace. The internet is not a global phenomenon, there is not global participation and neither is there global interaction. Not all people have the facilities to chat to people across national and international boundaries and for those who do, many of them choose not to. For many, computer mediated communication is still very much bound up in the locale. However, chat rooms have allowed this locale to be extended to a wider area. Where in the past people may have been looking for relationships and friendships within their local town, the internet has allowed people to maintain friendships across a wider space. This space seems limitless but is constrained and given boundaries by those who use the chat rooms. Much the same as identity seems limitless, but is constrained by those who use the forum and not by the forum itself.

The interviews clearly showed that those who use chat rooms still see place and location as being important when forming relationships or friendships and although many of those interviewed said they did not chat with people with a specific intention to meet up with them, many of them had met up with people they had met on chat rooms. It also became clear throughout the observations and interviews that place was important in terms of what chat room people used. Chatters were not logging on to different chat rooms each time, for many of them

they used one or a select few chat rooms (if they used more then one then often the others would be on the same web page or chat room provider such as various yahoo chat rooms). Chatters went to the same 'place' each time they logged on; the place may have been a virtual reality room within cyberspace but for the chatters that particular place held importance for them. These findings are intertwined with findings about identity. Chatters often go to the same room each time they log on, they also use the same nick name, talk to the same people and often about the same kinds of things; their chat experience is routinized and fixed as is their identity.

With regard to theories about place, space and globalisation, in particular, it is not then that place is of no importance in cyberspace and that computer mediated communication has become globalised but more that we need to understand place differently within cyberspace. For example, "Even if we understand somewhere in the back of our minds that we are not really going anywhere, perhaps when we access the internet it seems so much like we are in a different physical space that for all intents and purposes we accept cyberspace as a "real" place." (Cranor and Wildman 2003:31). As Massey (1994) suggests when she refers to time space compression – in cyberspace space have become shorter; to some extent this is true but only on a small scale. The local is still important but the local has become larger. Theories of globalisation need to take into account virtual spaces as 'real spaces'. Murray (2006) refers to space as fitting into two categories 'geographic space' and 'absolute space' and argues not that cyberspace is placeless but that "Geographers need to work extra hard to keep up with the challenges of these new spaces" (Murray 2006:27). These ideas are further emphasised when we look at the importance of community for many of those interviewed. Many of those who use chat rooms classed themselves as regulars and many of those who did not class themselves as regulars were aware of the existence of regulars and often aware of who were the regulars in the room. For the regulars especially, and for some of the others interviewed, they referred to the chat room they used as a community. They discussed friendships they had made through the chat room and, for some, relationships that had developed; this is supported by the work of Whitty (2002) who found that meaningful and personal relationships can, and are, developed online through forums such as chat rooms.

Interviewees talked about people they had met up with and how, for many, those meetings had turned into sustained friendships. Two interviewees had even met their partners through a chat room and they were still together.

Much of the literature on communities in cyberspace suggests that there are new opportunities for community, for communities to be formed on the basis of interest and not on the basis of location. In the chat rooms I looked at, and the interviews I conducted, friendships, relationships and a sense of community were not necessarily built upon a sense of shared interest but more on a sense of location, physical location sometimes, but more often the location of being within the same chat room. All of the chat rooms users were in the same location, the interest they shared was using that particular chat room but often no more than that. Friendships were formed on the same basis as they would be in the local pub, village hall and other such local places often referred to when discussing community. Keleman and Smith (2001) argue that research on cyberspace and community has concentrated too much on theories of disembodiment and placelessness. As my research shows it is not the process through which friendships are created, through which community is formed and developed that needs to be re-though, but more the way we see cyberspace and the spaces and places within it.

Cyberspaces and the interactions that take place within them are very much grounded in place, as we have already discussed but they are also embedded in our everyday lives. The interactions that take place in cyberspace are similar to those in face to face interactions. Computer mediated communication is not disembodied; interactions are grounded through and within the body (Bakardjieva 2005, Leander and Mckim 2003). People ask others about their age and sex, not always through the specific question asl, but for many during conversations. When asked to tell me about themselves they responded by telling me about their age, sex, appearance and then for some about work and hobbies; they all said this is the kind of response they give to other chat rooms users. Despite chat rooms being a different kind of interaction, in that people type responses rather than talk, much of the rest of the interaction is the same. For many conversations and interactions chatters find out about the physical characteristics of those they are

talking to early on in a conversation and then continue in a similar fashion to a face to face interaction, asking about jobs, hobbies and so on. These ideas are supported by Greenfield (2006) who conducted research into teenagers use of chat rooms. She found that the teenagers researched

> "compensated for the text based chat environment by providing information about themselves that would be visible and obvious in face-to-face communication." (Greenfield 2006:1)

Chatters talk about the routine and mundane events of their everyday lives. For many of the chatters, they have built up friendships over the time using chat rooms and talk as you would with a group of friends. There is nothing special about these interactions, they are as routine and everyday as conversations outside of cyberspace, it is only the space that is different. The rules and regulations, the foundations upon which the chatting takes place and the friendships that occur because of this are as routine and everyday as outside of this space.

Chat does occur that is perhaps seen as more of an escape from the routine and the everyday interactions discussed above, for example, sexual and fantasy related chat and flaming. However, these too can become routine. It can become a routine for a certain chatter to flame in a particular room, for example a number of people who discussed flaming said that they has flamed in a Christian chat room. However, as we saw when looking at a flaming incident that occurred in a Christian chat room, for many of the chatters subjected to the flaming, this kind of event had become routine for them too. Even when seen as trying to break the norm, to escape the routines, chat can become routine. Enforcing this is the evidence that supported the number of rules of engagement / discourses that exist within chat rooms. Chat rooms are not free from boundary and constraint they merely have their own rules and regulations which more often than not are similar to that of 'real life' interactions. Chat rooms, and other forms of computer mediated communication, may be relatively new in terms of time, but they are not new with regard to the kinds of interactions that are carried out within them.

Postmodern theory and society is about breaking away from the rules that confine identity, about fragmentation, fluidity, globalisation and change. Cyberspace is meant to be the perfect forum through which participants can explore the freedom of postmodern identity theory to the fullest. However, this thesis and its empirical investigations into cyberspace and internet chat rooms have clearly shown that these forums are still governed. They are governed by rules and rituals; they are grounded and increasingly embedded in our everyday lives. Identity is not about increased fluidity and fragmentation but is about presenting masks of the self which are ultimately integral to a core and stable sense of self.

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