Virtual Deviance: Swinging and Swapping in an On-Line Network

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The purpose of the current research is to study the virtual presentation of self in on-line profiles, specifically within a deviant subculture. The study explores the social construction of deviant identities using the on-line community of “swingers.” Our research explored what self-presentation strategies are employed by participants in their profiles to develop credibility to attract others to their profiles and what major concerns, expectations, and values characterize the profiles of the on-line swinger community. Most on-line profiles focus on developing credibility. We used Aristotle’s notions of goodwill, practical intelligence, and virtue to categorize the specific means used in profiles to develop credibility.

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of studies on swinging and swingers (Bartell 1970; Smith and Smith 1970; Walshock 1971; Stephenson 1973; Jenks 1985, 1998; Bergstrand and Williams 2000; de Visser and McDonald 2007). The current study does not attempt to either condemn or celebrate this particular lifestyle choice. Rather, studying this lifestyle offers a unique way of understanding the recruitment of people into what many would define as a deviant subculture. We acknowledge that while some may equate deviance with badness, our use of the term signifies differentness, while noting that some forms of differentness (athletic prowess) are valued more highly than others (sexual minority status).

Lee noted several strategies used by Internet users to “negotiate private/public boundaries in on-line self-presentation,” but also suggested that more behavioral strategies might be in use (2006:21). The focus on recruitment into the swinger subculture via the Internet moves beyond negotiating public/private boundaries in an attempt to reveal some strategies used by individuals involved in a deviant subculture to present layers of identity in virtual reality. This represents a
unique opportunity to place recruitment into, and participation in, a deviant subculture in an Internet-mediated context (Adler and Adler 2008; Holt 2007; Durkin et al. 2006) and to contribute to the existing literature regarding deviance in an on-line context (Durkin and Bryant 1995; Durkin 1997; Gauthier and Forsyth 1999; Lee 2006; Quinn and Forsyth 2005). Using a cross-disciplinary approach that combines the areas of sociology and rhetorical studies, we respond to the following questions: What unique strategies are used by deviant subcultures in a computer-mediated context? What self-presentation strategies are employed by participants in a deviant subculture to develop credibility to attract others to their profiles? Specifically, we focus on the deviant subculture of swingers as a group with distinct self-presentation strategies and a significant on-line presence. Our contribution to social deviance literature is twofold. First, we add to the literature on this specific subculture, identifying ways in which the forms of Internet self-presentation used by swingers differ from previously identified forms of self-presentation. Second, we use this particular group to illustrate the wider implications of how the Internet may facilitate and change the way that individuals and couples join deviant groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entering a Virtual Subculture

In 1955, Cohen identified a sequence of preconditions for the emergence of a deviant subculture: (1) experience of a problem, (2) sharing the problem with others, (3) interaction evolving into a collective solution, and (4) the creation of a tradition following joint action. To this, Weinberg (1966) contributes a way of understanding entry and involvement in deviant subcultures, as association with members of the deviant subculture relieves the anxiety of not fitting in, which reinforces involvement in the subculture while at the same time, weakens involvement with more conventional groups. Rubington and Weinberg (1999:226) suggest that “a subculture is apt to come into being when people are in contact with one another, suffer a common fate, and have common interests.”

When it comes to experimenting with the swinging subculture, particularly in an on-line environment, there is already a thriving on-line network of swingers. This is due in part to “the growth of computer technology,” and, in fact, “most swing clubs have their own web site” (Jenks 1998:519; see also Stephenson 1973). Many Internet-savvy swingers seem to use these club websites primarily for networking and/or meeting other swinging couples. Specifically, this may entail “seeking out sexual partners for a transitory relationship (e.g., escorts, prostitutes, and swingers) via on-line personal advertisements/lonely hearts’ columns, escort agencies, and/or chat rooms” (Griffiths 2001:333).

The World Wide Web (WWW) is especially suited for hosting the communications of the swinging subculture. The chief power of Computer Mediated Communication is its ability to work as a convergence medium, combining text, hypertext, image, audio, video, electronic mail, instant chat, group chat, and various other telephony together into one user-friendly environment. A second major appeal is the medium’s gift of presumed anonymity, offering users the opportunity to lose their inhibitions, communicate without fear of retribution, role play, and upload private pictures and video, among other inventive possibilities. Third, the medium delimits time and space such that it makes interlocutors appear closer rather than farther, fostering the
appearance of intimacy, personalization, and connectedness. Finally, users may create their own identities on-line (see Dubrovsky et al. 1991), equalizing power differentials that might otherwise limit conversational productivity. Walker (2000) concluded that “home pages, by virtue of their malleability into different formats, offer a flexible instrument with which people can announce their identity and interact with strangers” (2000:117).

For a swinger, this means that you have access to a range of tools for communication, empowered anonymity, the ability to communicate in a very personal and intimate way without the fear of physical threat, immediate and repeated access to given information about others, and the ability to shape your identity to attract and persuade others in the lifestyle. This last possibility, the presentation of self, may be the single most important factor for successful on-line swinging, and is the focus of this research.

Recent research reveals similar conclusions about the advantages afforded by Web interaction. Joineson (1998) argues that, in addition to facilitating entry into a subculture, the WWW encourages disinhibition—what might take weeks to reveal in a face-to-face interaction instead takes days. Creation of and involvement in a disinhibited on-line community may be especially attractive to swingers who are aware of few other spaces in which to meet like-minded couples. Similar to conclusions drawn by Brown and colleagues (2005:63) concerning the appeal of the Internet for gay men, swingers, “like other disenfranchised or marginalized groups . . . have relatively few places in which they can meet without fear of negative social consequences.” While it is true that the typical swinger is reportedly white and middle-class (Jenks 1985; Bergstrand and Williams 2000), it is also true that they feel sexually marginalized. Perhaps not to the same extent as groups disenfranchised and marginalized on a number of different levels, but certainly compared to members of the white middle-class who conform to the monogamy norm.

Brown and colleagues (2005) found five themes to characterize the way that a stigmatized group (i.e., gay men) views the WWW:

1. Internet as a variety of venues with different purposes that act as alternatives to other more traditional venues;
2. Internet as a socialization tool for information, induction, and building networks or friendships;
3. Internet as a method of control over presentation of self and interaction through anonymity and discretion;
4. Internet as an experience of safety generated through the on-line interaction prior to any meeting; and
5. Internet as a source of novelty experiences, entertainment, and escape. (66, emphasis added).

In addition, Lee (2006:16) identified “‘Talking About Oneself’ and ‘Sharing Personal Experiences’” as ways that “individuals may reduce the degree of anonymity and deepen the depth of relations, helping enhance the intimacy between participants in virtual interaction.”

Presumably, just as suggested by Brown and colleagues (2005), the swinger subculture views the on-line swinger dating sites as spaces to acquire information about the subculture and build networks of like-minded couples with whom to engage in relationships. We believe that couples and singles with profiles on the swinger dating sites do talk about themselves and share personal experiences as part of their presentation of virtual self, while also exercising and requesting discretion in their potential meet-ups. Simultaneously, participants in this subculture acknowledge
that any sort of Internet-mediated communication has ‘become a stage for ‘actors’ to act out and communicate about sexual behavior and attitudes in sexual ways’ (Sannicolas 1997:2), so that they seek identity cues in deciding who to trust. More than one study suggests that individuals who would otherwise hide their sexual preferences for fear of social stigma can join an on-line community and discuss the lifestyle choices, all while remaining anonymous (McKenna and Bargh 1998; McKenna et al. 2001; DiMarco 2003). From this, we may conclude that anonymity and the opportunity to engage in both ‘‘front stage’’ and ‘‘back stage’’ identity work seems to be a major factor in the decision to use on-line communities to engage in swinging behavior (Goffman 1959:35). Participants are able to ‘‘layer’’ their identities, having, for example, a front stage Internet persona and a completely different front stage public persona.

Goffman (1959:35) proposes that people perform as actors on a stage. In this case, the stage is the Internet and the actors are swingers’ who attempt to create an idealized version of themselves as swingers, who’s ‘‘performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society.’’ In this sense, the swingers’ on-line profiles serve ‘‘as an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community’’ (p. 35).

The participants in the on-line swinger community are engaging simultaneously in front stage and back stage performance. Since this is a deviant community, participants who do not wish to compromise their front stage performance of conformity to the sexual norm of monogamy in public may freely engage in front stage performance of the virtues sought after in swinger relationships while on-line. Thus, the Internet serves as a back stage to the non-deviant presentation of self while also serving as a front stage for the deviant presentation of self.

Lee, in his study of an on-line discussion group, refers to the importance of Internet self-presentation, ‘‘In self-presentation theories, it [is considered]... morally high ground to present oneself ‘honestly’ and the presentation of private and risky personal identity cues may be considered advantageous in retaining strength’’ (2006:20). Here, this correlates with the Aristotelian concept of éthos, upon which we rely to delineate the categories that define attempts to develop front stage credibility in on-line swinger profiles. These written profiles attempt to exemplify virtues in the swinger subculture so that participants can engage with the on-line deviant community of swingers.

Eêthos as a Major Rhetorical Concept

For Aristotle, as written in his book On Rhetoric, rhetorical technique is a skill of observing in a given situation the available means of persuasion, and is connected to a long litany of concepts, including three basic proofs or appeals to persuasion (logos, pathos, and éthos). In his Rhetoric, he identifies the proof based on éthos as among the most important since persuasion cannot happen unless ‘‘the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of belief. For we believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others]’’ (Kennedy 1991:1.4). It matters little how logical or passionate a rhetor is unless that rhetor is able to establish the appearance of credibility. To gain éthos, Aristotle specifies three traits that one must strengthen. The first involves goodwill (eunoia), or being beneficial to others instead of self. The second involves practical intelligence (phronesis), or proving oneself to have relevant information or intelligence on the topic at hand. The third involves virtue (arête), or moral excellence (Kennedy 1991). The qualities of these traits are not determined by universal laws, but are instead dependent on the specific audience or community to which one speaks. For the swinging lifestyle,
for instance, a persuasive profile might focus on the special abilities of the swinger(s) to pleasure others (goodwill), the experience of the couple and knowledge and application of swinging etiquette (practical intelligence), and the willingness of the swinger(s) to be discreet and respectful of boundaries (virtue).

On the Web, these éthos-building traits take new shape as the technologies made available to users allow for more possibilities than just words alone. Pictures or video, for example, can provide additional evidence for claims made in the textual descriptions. Those that show the user(s) pleasuring others may support claims of sexual ability and willingness (goodwill), those that show the user(s) in a variety of settings—public and private—may indicate experience (practical intelligence), and those that mask the faces of others or have private galleries to protect the identities of others may support claims regarding respect for discretion (virtue). Meanwhile, a lack of pictures may indicate a certain unwillingness or lack of confidence (diminished goodwill), a less than recent “last on-line” date may suggest a lack of seriousness about the lifestyle (diminished practical intelligence), and showing lots of face pictures of self and especially others, or being critical of past swinger associates, especially if they are named, could reflect a lack of respect and discretion (diminished virtue). By analyzing the rhetorical strategies used by swingers in their on-line profiles, we may begin to understand the factors of a persuasive profile that can build the trust and credibility needed for the start of a relationship.

Swingers: A Demographic Profile

Jenks (1985:199) offers the simplest definition of swinging, “the consensual exchange of marital partners for sexual purposes.” First, we wish to use Jenks’s definition with one alteration. Rather than restricting ideas of who constitutes a swinger to marital partners only, we will define swingers as those who consensually exchange partners for sexual purposes without seeking long-term romantic love. For the purposes of the current study, note that we define swinging and polyamory as two different categories, since polyamory consists of participation in multiple, long-term, love relationships while by our definition swingers do not equate physical intimacy with emotional intimacy. Therefore, we will define as swingers individuals and couples (married or not) who define themselves as swingers in an on-line profile, regardless of the level of activity, participation, or acculturation in the lifestyle.

Proceeding from our definition, how does one become a swinger? Bartell (1971) suggests that boredom serves as the impetus to engage in swinging. Piet (1994:1–2) finds that initial contact with other swingers may facilitate entry into the lifestyle, and that swingers may meet other swingers through “items placed in various swinger’s publications, off-premise swinger’s club, on-premise swinger’s clubs, and/or through acquaintances.” According to Ramey (1972:444), “an essential ingredient is to see one’s self as a swinger. Many people who switch partners occasionally do not consider themselves swingers . . . some who do not actually swing, like to believe they are swingers although they would not be so classified by others.”

So what qualities, if any, are shared by most swingers? Research from the first cycle of interest in swingers (the late sixties and early seventies) suggests that they are generally politically conservative middle-income individuals of average to above average education working in technical occupations with relatively high incomes (Bartell 1970; Smith and Smith 1970; Walshok 1971; Stephenson 1973; Piet 1994). Cole and Spaniard (1974) found that while swinging
couples may feel strong filial ties, they also value personal autonomy and individuality. In his quantitative analysis, which included 342 swingers, Jenks (1985:201) found that most were “white, between the ages of 28–45, with above average levels of education and income... middle-class and moderate Republicans.” Bergstrand and Williams (2000) also reported that swingers consist primarily of white, middle-class, middle-aged church-goers, while also finding that they are less racist, less sexist, and less heterosexist than the general population. Their results suggested that most swingers’ marriages were happier, and their levels of life satisfaction were higher, than non-swingers. Overall, researchers have demonstrated a mixed bag of positive and negative experiences for those engaged in this lifestyle.

Relationship Structure

Most research finds that men initiate swinging (Bartell 1970; Smith and Smith 1970; Bartell 1971; Denfeld 1974). Denfeld suggests that these reports “challenge the argument that swinging demonstrates the realization of equality of the sexes. Husbands often forced wives into swinging and wives were more dissatisfied with swinging and more frequently initiated the dropping out.” So, rather than being egalitarian, Denfeld argues that swinging is more likely to be a truly “sexist” activity” (1974:48–49). However, at least one qualitative study found that the female partner was more often the initiator, or, at least, took credit for initiating the activity (de Visser and McDonald 2007). However, the de Visser and McDonald study used a very small convenience sample of four couples, and they admit their findings probably reflect a biased sample.

There are rules guiding these extra-partner relationships. Knapp (1976) found that swingers created ground rules to guide their interactions in extra-marital relationships. These rules included honesty, the acceptance of emotional involvement with other partners, and the desire for the extra-marital partner to be informed that the spouse was to remain the primary relationship. Denfeld and Gordon (1970) found that rules centered on avoiding emotional involvement with any participant other than the primary partner, while Knapp and Whitehurst (1977) found that the most important rule was honesty with one’s primary partner. Smith and Smith (1973) found that most ground rules focused on time, place, and person rather than placing any limits on the sexual act itself. Piet (1994) found the swingers adopted a wide variety of guidelines for their extra-relationship encounters, and more than half the respondents reported that if a ground rule were broken, there would be serious consequences to the primary relationship.

On-Line Subculture

Those who participate in the swinging lifestyle face several risks. Those who enter the subculture may find that those they encounter do not meet their expectations (Rubenstein and Margolis 1971) or those who offer a bad experience of some kind—emotional drama, sexual hang-ups, or sexually transmitted disease, for example (Bartell 1971; Rubenstein and Margolis 1971). This is one advantage of engaging with the Internet community, partners may screen each other for weeks via on-line chats, comments from other couples in the form of “certifications,” and one-on-one telephone calls before actually meeting in person.

Another advantage of using the Internet to participate in this subculture is the promise of anonymity. Bartell (1971) proposes that the constant fear of being outed as a swinger and the
consequent stigmatization is of no small concern (see also Goffman 1963). However, the use of the Internet allows private experimentation while minimizing the risk of disclosure. For example, DiMarco (2003:54) points out that

Internet chat spaces and web communities are used by individuals who have constructed deviant identities and wish to make contact with others who share their sexual proclivities but whose activities may be censured by society. For example, swingers...use such spaces to find willing participants for real life encounters. ...The Internet provides a means of meeting like-minded people, but from behind a mask of anonymity.

Bartell (1971, 1974) suggest that participating in the subculture also brings with it the risk of failing to attract a new partner. This risk may be reduced through the use of mediating technology, since if a participant fails to attract someone they can readily expand their geographic parameters or adjust their profile. At least one study found that some swingers fear lacking the ability to perform sexually with a different partner, and experiencing sexual jealousy (Bartell 1971) or losing the primary relationship (Piet 1994). There is little the Internet can offer in the way of ameliorating these concerns, but participants in the subculture can certainly look to the content of on-line profiles to minimize the risk of becoming involved with couples for whom these things have proven a problem in the past.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Studies on deviant subcultures from the past sixty years suggest that deviant individuals will find a group that shares their interests. Increasingly, that means the use of on-line networks by individuals to find partners for their activities. Our study seeks to understand this on-line phenomenon so that we may better understand how deviant populations present themselves on-line and how the on-line subculture facilitates the individual pursuit of stigmatized lifestyles.

There are a number of studies on swinging and swingers (Bartell 1970; Smith and Smith 1970; Walshock 1971; Stephenson 1973; Jenks 1985, 1998; Bergstrand and Williams 2000; de Visser and McDonald 2007). There are also a number of studies describing how the Internet offers a unique advantage for recruitment into, and participation in, deviant subcultures (Durkin and Bryant 1995; Durkin 1997; Gauthier and Forsyth 1999; Lee 2006; Quinn and Forsyth 2005). We add to the contributions of these studies by focusing on participation in deviant subcultures via the Internet to reveal the way that individuals involved present themselves in virtual reality. Quinn and Forsyth (2005:203) suggest that the intersection of sexuality and the Internet “is an area of study that unites communications researchers with those focused on sexuality.” Consistent with the idea that communications is a field that furthers understanding of Internet self-presentation, we suggest that a communications perspective facilitates a sociological understanding of on-line identity work. Therefore, we use a cross-disciplinary approach that combines the areas of sociology and rhetorical studies. Our approach finds that participants in this particular subculture use self-presentation, recruitment, and participation strategies specific to a computer-mediated context and suggest that this particular group illustrates the wider implications of how the Internet may facilitate and change the way that individuals and couples join deviant groups.
METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to better understand the social community known as swingers, this study explores the various patterns of social expectations, rules, traits, and behaviors within the lifestyle as evidenced from secondary data in the form of personal swinger advertisements on a national, on-line swinger networking site. It also analyzes the discursive strategies assumed by these lifestyleers to find other swingers. Both Aristotle’s ideas regarding *ethos* and sociological theories offer perspective on the self-presentation strategies used by swingers. Because our methodology was informed by both sociological and rhetorical theories, we employed a combination of content analysis and close textual analysis to better assess the scope of what it means to be an on-line swinger.

Data Analysis

We used both content analysis and close textual analysis. During preliminary content analysis, the codes and coding categories evolved, consistent with the use of the grounded theory methodology (Berg 2001; Glaser and Strauss 1967). From the general coding categories suggested through close textual analysis informed by the Aristotelian concept of *ethos*, more specific coding categories developed until no new coding categories were readily apparent in the data. As suggested by the inductive/deductive combination common to the development of grounded theory, we continued coding and refining our codes until we were left with three main categories of self-presentation strategies used in the swinger community (Developing Goodwill, Virtue and Discretion, and Practical Intelligence) roughly analogous to the major components of *ethos*.

Close textual analysis is complementary to the content analysis. A close textual analysis as a form of rhetorical analysis focuses on evaluating the strategic use of symbols within discourse, the persuasive possibilities of those symbols, and the possible motivations behind the employment of those strategies. As stated by Osborn (1994:86), close textual criticism

aspires to an enlightened understanding of the challenges confronted by rhetors in the moment, the options available in confronting these challenges, an assessment of the rhetoric’s performance, a description of the rhetoric as consummated in that moment when rhetor, audience, and message converge, and the various consequences of the interaction.

By examining a rhetor’s persuasive choices, such as logical (logos), emotional (pathos), and character-based appeals (*ethos*), placement of those appeals, attempts at identification, and stylistic and delivery choices, a rhetorical critic may begin to assess the possible meaning and impact of the discourse.

It is apparent that the purpose of the profiles under examination in this article is to attract other swingers for the possibility of starting an on-line and, more importantly, an off-line relationship. This part of the analysis employs a close textual analysis to evaluate the persuasiveness of on-line swinger profiles. One of the most basic appeals of persuasion—*ethos*—will be examined as the central theoretical concept. In classical rhetorical theory, often called Neo-Aristotelian Criticism, appeals to *ethos* attempt to gain the speaker the appearance of character. As trust and security are vitally important issues when establishing new relationships, especially when those relationships begin on-line, establishing *ethos* is a very necessary exercise and one that even Aristotle believed
to the most persuasive if done well. This basic appeal forms the basis of all persuasion, according to Neo-Aristotelian Criticism, and can be especially useful as a focus in rhetorical analysis.

The public profiles used as the data source were printed and rendered completely confidential through the application of a numerical coding system in place of identifying information. The elimination of identifiers associating the survey with any respondent profiles ensured respondent confidentiality. There were no attempts to identify the authors of the publicly available profiles used in the study. When profiles specifically indicated in any way that they do not wish to be part of research, those profiles were removed from our sample (as did occur in one instance) and replaced by the next appearing profile. Since there are no individual interview respondents involved, we did not collect informed consent forms. No images that might potentially violate the privacy of the profile authors are involved in the presentation of data.

Population

The target population for this Swinging and Swapping study (SaS) consisted of members of the online swinging community with publicly available profiles on the swinger networking site, Swing Lifestyle, as of fall 2011. Profiles are for those 18 years and older who have chosen to seek extra-marital or extra-relationship partners online. We make the assumption that most people who reported ages (not everyone did) were honest. We consider this an exploratory study using a convenience sample of limited generalizability that, nevertheless, reveals important self-presentation strategies used in an online deviant subculture.

Our cross-disciplinary approach combined with the nature of the target sample resulted in a relatively small sample size of 100 publicly available profiles. To allow for some randomization, we selected the first two profiles that appeared in a search of each state’s capital (with one exception, noted above), from the website, http://www.swinglifestyle.com. While state capitals represent multiple demographics and range from rural to urban with regional variations, this use of a sampling strategy may have resulted in an urban sampling bias. While it is hard to determine exactly how many members are active on the website in any given time period, a recent visit to the site in the middle of the afternoon on a Wednesday listed 6,924 individuals currently online, with 640 new members on that day alone, and 11,562 new members from the last seven days (Swing Life Style 2012). We believe that our sample of 100 online profiles were rich enough in data to provide enough significant content to justify our chosen methodology.

Sample

Not every profile in our sample included responses to all profile questions, but most of the profiles included a response to most of the questions. When reviewing our sample, we found that the age of female swingers ranged from 21 to 47, with an average age of 32. The age of male swingers ranged from 23 to 54, with an average age of 37. Fifty-six female respondents and 78 male respondents did not identify their race explicitly. Of the profiles which identified race, 38 women identified as white and 10 men identified as white, with only seven women and four men identifying themselves as a race other than white. Of 100 profiles, 92 featured male/female couples. One profile was of a female/female couple, the other seven profiles were of women without a male partner. There were no single male profiles. Most profiles indicated the self-described
We analyzed our sample to understand the choices made by on-line swingers in their presentation of self. Specifically, we examined the textual, visual, and Web-based elements of these profiles and how, if at all, these elements may contribute to the persuasiveness of the profile. Since being persuasive means being perceived as credible, we evaluated these elements as they related to Aristotle’s notions of goodwill, practical intelligence, and virtue. Within these elements, we identified specific strategies employed by posters in their presentation of self: (1) Attempts to develop goodwill by presenting the self as attractive or fun; (2) Attempts to present the self as discreet and virtuous by referring to their health and/or desire to maintain secrecy/friendship; (3) Attempts to present the self as experienced via discussion of past involvements and by discussing common concerns. Note that all quotations are reproduced exactly, maintaining the original spelling and grammar. Where necessary, clarification appears in brackets within the quotation.

Developing Goodwill (We’re Sexy and Fun!)

The predominant theme in the profiles was developing goodwill. To develop goodwill, swinger profiles used some combination of physical, sexual, and mental promotion, to sell themselves as attractive, fit, fun, and willing to engage in a variety of acts. In addition, items were coded as an attempt to develop goodwill if they expressed a sense of camaraderie or helping. Of all the possible ways to present the self in an on-line profile, there were a total of 207 appeals related to goodwill.

Certain key phrases appeared that were indicative of the wish to develop goodwill and curry favor with potential swinging partners, including references to their relative attractiveness,
overall mental stability, and willingness to engage in specific sex acts/skill in specific sex acts. In some instances, appeals to goodwill were made on multiple levels. For example, some profiles combined descriptions of physical attractiveness with mental stability, or physical attractiveness with sexual skill.

Of 100 total profiles, there were 68 references to mental stability. These typically took the form of emphasizing the overall intelligence of the couple and promoting the fact that they were easygoing or open minded. For example, “We are very intellectual and love to have open discussions” (CA2), and “We are very laid back and no drama. We enjoy new experiences and trying new things. We are very open minded” (KS2).

There were 55 references to physical attractiveness. This category included phrases like, “Him; good looking clean cut professional guy next door type. Tall strong... with gorgeous brown eyes... and very athletic. Her; good looking... girl next door type” (AR2). Interestingly, references to physical attractiveness and mental stability far outnumbered references to sexual skill, of which there were only 18. For example, “Extremely talented at giving oral, I’m always all about pleasing the woman” (TX1).

Some swinger profiles focused on specific sexual abilities and their willingness to perform certain sexual acts. Most of the textual statements concentrated on what the female of the couple can do sexually for others. These comments ranged from “She is willing to try almost anything” (HI1) to “She has a rocking body in a small package and an amazing talent when she is on top, under, or whatever position we seem to end up in” (ID1).

Less frequently, the male’s abilities were highlighted. One profile stated that “He has above average endowment with great stamina to go the distance” (GA1) and another mentioned “He is athletic in build with strong yet gentle hands and knows how to please” (MI1). Comments about the couple’s joint ability to please were even less common: “We will just about try anything once LOL!!” (NH1) and “please be able to give great head throughout as we love to do the same” (TX1).

Some comments were relatively generic: “I simply love sucking, fucking, and pleasing women” (TX1). Some were very specific: “She...loves to pleasure you orally” (NY1) and “She is curvy, tight and gives out-of-this-world oral” (WA1). Written fantasies can also work to develop goodwill since it establishes the degree of willingness to perform certain acts. One female swinger wrote:

I have a bi-sexual fantasy of having a women join us during sex. I enjoy going down on a woman, and would love to be doing that while he is taking me from behind. I think that this would be a great ending, but not before myself and another woman had hours of fun while he could do nothing but watch. (PA2)

Another profile even went so far as to specify that the female’s situational fantasy was for a “MMMMFMMM” experience (IN1). Given the sample, it is not possible to know how much of what appeared was written fantasy employed to develop goodwill. Nor is it possible to determine much about the difference between expectation and reality for those either posting or responding.

Appeals to develop only sexual, physical, or mental goodwill were far more common than appeals based on multiple categories. There were 26 references promoting the development of a combination of mental and physical goodwill. For example, “A couple that is not bad to look at (smart and fun)” (MT1). Twenty references combined mental and sexual attempts to develop
goodwill into a single statement. For example, “She is erotic, romantic, and loving. She is very into pleasing her partner, loves to pleasure you orally” (NY1). Another 17 appeals for goodwill combined references to positive physical and sexual features of the swinger/s featured in the profile, “Her talking about him: Rockin’ body. In shape fairly hung” (CT2). Only three attempts to generate goodwill included a combination of physical, sexual, and mental features in one statement, such as “We are groovy baby yeah! We are both clean, clean shaven, and disease free” (UT2).

Note that the first sentence in the statement above refers to a sense of humor and enthusiasm (mental), the reference to being clean shaven is an attempt to generate goodwill from a sexual standpoint (sexual), and this profile also indicates that the couple is both clean (hygiene) and disease free (physical). Perhaps the tactic of attempting to generate mental goodwill was the most common because swingers did not wish to appear shallow; perhaps combined attempts to generate goodwill were the least common because they were too complex for the majority of swingers to develop fully in the space allocated.

**Virtue and Discretion (Friendly, Smart, and Good at Keeping Secrets!)**

In the swinger profiles, the second most common form of self-presentation was the attempt to sell themselves as virtuous and/or discreet, and therefore trustworthy. All told, there were 142 references to some form of virtue or discretion. Some attempts focused on the existing relationship, other attempts promoted friendship seeking over the mere accumulation of sexual partners; some even emphasized that looks were a secondary concern. To a lesser extent, some swingers tried to develop their virtue in terms of their newness to the lifestyle, by pointing out their interesting hobbies, or focusing on their own selectivity in choosing potential swing partners.

To develop virtue, swingers must be able to convince readers that they possess the qualities respected by the general swinger community, to portray themselves as like-minded. Commonly valued qualities for the lifestyle include respect for boundaries, an ability to be discreet, and a preference for clean living. The most common way of developing virtue, with 39 references, was to reference the stability of one’s own relationship, “We are very much in love. This lifestyle is not needed for our sex life. It is a mutual agreement that We both believe is fun and exciting” (GA1).

While attempts to generate a virtuous image via claims of friendship were not as common as the former, with only 24 references, the individual descriptions of wanting to be friends or desiring friendship along with sexual relations were among the lengthiest statements. For example,

Our first priority is friendship. We don’t want to rush into things. If you can’t understand that then we are no interested. We want someone or people that we can hangout with and have a good time, not someone who just wants to jump in bed and get it over with. (GA2)

And,

Hi. We are looking to make some new friends from this website. We would like to be friends first and if things happen from there cool but is not that’s okay too. We would like to meet people who wont put any pressure on us to do anything and are just cool with being friends if that’s all it amounts to. We are open to taking things to the next level but definitely want to be comfortable before going there. (KY1)
One fairly large group of profiles focused on the issue of discretion, with 23 specific references to the wish for discretion or the promise of discretion. These statements are not much varied, “We have professional careers, are discreet, and don’t kiss and tell” (CT2) and “Professional and discreet on the outside” and “Wild and sexy on the inside” (SC2). Some statements offer reciprocal discretion, “We are honest and discrete and expect the same” (AL2).

Twenty-one statements on these profiles referenced being drug and disease free. For example, “We are, however, Clean of STD’s and can obtain recent papers to prove it” (TX1) while another stated “We are D&D free and expect the same” (TX2). One has to wonder about the profiles that do not include the statement and whether its absence generates a lack of interest on the part of readers and affects the profile’s persuasiveness as questions about the other’s health may generate concern.

Efforts to present the self as virtuous via the discussion of personal lives occurred 15 times, as did efforts to present the self as new to the lifestyle. Both of these types of self-presentation risk backfiring. If, for example, potential swing partners prefer experienced partners who know how to navigate potentially complex emotions and relationships, then a statement such as “We really don’t have any experience with this and I’m not sure if we could actually do it” (ND1) might result in a dismissal of the profile as overly naïve or uncommitted and therefore unwilling to actually engage in swinging as much as it may attract those who are new themselves, or enjoy the experience of introducing others to the lifestyle. Profiles that attempt to generate virtue by emphasizing personal details may also reveal someone looking for a long-term relationship rather than a swinging encounter. It is perhaps for this reason that lengthy statements such as the one below are very unusual.

Movies, dinning out, traveling & road trips, sightseeing, swimming bicycling, hiking, lake fun, tent camping, cooking, grilling, entertaining, lounging/relaxing, live music shows, coffee houses & bookstores, spending time with our awesome dog, and finding new things to do in and around the damn town! We like relaxing at the house as much as getting out and being active. When not going out, settling in for a good book or watching some cool satellite or a good movie (love movies) can be just the ticket. Just as much as we like our Playstation & 54” HD TV, we love being out in nature & tent camping as much as possible. We also go out just to people watch, window shop, or to search for good food spots. Culinarians unite! We are foodies and love to cook! . . . We have a healthy sense of humor . . . Have very eclectic musical and movie tastes . . . We’re also animal lovers and have Cats and Dog. (TX1)

Practical Intelligence/Experience (Trust Us, We Know What We’re Doing)

To develop practical intelligence, profiles frequently included details about sexual or lifestyle experience, and also focused on answering common lifestyle concerns. Comments about the swingers’ own happy, successful, and long-term relationships were also common. These tactics are likely to build trust with others because the fear that someone you have swapped with previously may try to steal your partner or that an emotional attachment may be created that could strain both relationships are very real threats. There is also the fear that a couple may be too pushy, play games, or have too much drama or jealousy, and touting one’s experience may help offset those sorts of anxieties.

To prove that they were no threat to others’ relationships, many couple profiles included notes about the number of years they had been married and how happy they were: “”together
for 18 years and married 12 years so something is working’’ (AZ1), “Married couple, 40 s, Solid Relationship” (WY2), and “Married for 24 years and committed to each other. We are not looking to replace each other just bring a little extra something to our relationship” (AL1). One profile was very specific, writing “We are very much in love. This lifestyle is not needed for our sex life. It is a mutual agreement that we both believe is fun and exciting” (GA2). Many profiles also commented on their lifestyle experience. For example, “We have swung several times with couples and singles” (MI1) and “We have enjoyed the pleasures of the lifestyle and are very comfortable in exploring our fantasies” (NM1). Others mentioned their participation with lifestyle clubs and communities: “We are a member of other sites and have been around since 2004” (HI1) and “It all started at Hedo!!! We were introduced to the lifestyle there in 2002, and have been making friends and memories every since” (NC1).

Under the theme of Practical Intelligence/Experience, five key categories emerged, actual swinging experience, familiarity with clubs, socials, and house parties, familiarity with swinging vocabulary, familiarity with sexual safety, and general familiarity/length of time in the lifestyle. There were 78 references to some form of practical intelligence or experience.

Actual swinging experience, which include stories of what couples have tried and/or enjoyed as well as descriptions of first encounters or what led people into the subculture predominated this theme. For example, “Wife . . . has had a couple of experiences with females but is definitely interested in more” (AL1), and “We have swung several times with couples and singles enjoyed that immensely” (MI1). There were 22 references that fit this category, the most of any category in this theme.

Comments coded into the next most frequent category, familiarity with swinger vocabulary, totaled 18. For example, “We enjoy same room sex, light to full swap, if all four are compatible” (ME1), and “This is the male on here primarily. I have been given the official title of ‘Admin-Stud’ and have been charged with the duty of screening all people we talk to before exposing her to potential crazies, impolite horny net geeks, unicorn hunters and so on’” (FL1). In the former, “light swap” refers to casual sexual contact with someone other than your partner while “full swap” refers to having intercourse with someone other than your primary partner. In the latter, a “unicorn hunter” is a swinger trying to find a “unicorn,” an unattached bisexual female, referred to as a unicorn for their relative rarity in the swinging scene.

References to familiarity with clubs, socials, and house parties appeared 16 times. For example, “We have been to clubs and had great times, in San Diego, Chicago, & Dekalb. We like the sexy rooms. Smile!!! Can not wait to do Hedo!!!” (VA2), and “We have gone to club chameleon in phx. Have had a few full swap encounters” (AZ1). Presumably, anyone familiar enough to reference specific argot and/or specific swinger clubs was attempting to demonstrate insider knowledge of the subculture, thereby legitimizing their attempts to find partners on-line.

There were 14 references to some form of sexual safety, including condom use, being “clean,” and not using drugs. Five references to sexual safety included some variation of the argot “D&D free,” referring to the couples being free of both sexually transmitted diseases and abstaining from drug use, often including the provision that potential partners should also be D&D free. For example,

IF RELATIONSHIP PROGRESSED TO SOFT SWAP OR FULL SWAP, WOULD INSIST ON SAFE SEX PRACTICES, DRUG/DISEASE FREE, EXPECT SAME.” (WY2) and “SPECIAL
NOTE: We do prefer to ride “Bare Back” and test regularly. It’s not that we scoff at “safe” sex, though. People often forget or are unaware that STD’s are just as easily spread orally and by touch, like with fingers and toys, as they are with regular intercourse. So unless you cover your fingers, toys, and tongues, you’re/we’re not really protected and you really can’t call yourself “safe.” (TX1)

It is surprising that there are not more references to safer sex in the on-line profiles, which may suggest one or more of the following. First, it is possible that swingers proceed from the idea that safer sex is a non-negotiable, so much so that it does not warrant specific mention. Second, it is possible that swingers are less likely to practice safer sex than the general, non-swinging, population. Third, it is possible that many swingers prefer light swap to full swap, and only those who practice full swap mention safe sex practices. Finally, some swingers may view an upfront insistence on safer sex as too presumptuous, turning off potential swing partners.

Finally, there were nine references to general knowledge and experience with swinging. These nine did not get specific, merely noting that they knew what swinging was and attempting to demonstrate confidence and/or establish a history of participation in the subculture. For example, “We are not new at this, just new at meeting people on-line” (DE2) and “We are member of other site and have been around since 2004” (HI1). It is possible to conclude that (1) these couples were not specific because they developed caution in revealing personally identifying information over the years, (2) they were trying to appear more experienced than they actually were, and/or (3) they were waiting to see what kind of people responded, and intended to tailor the admitted experience to the expectations/desires of potential swinging partners.

Profiles also addressed matters of etiquette, which shows their understanding of common etiquette expectations within the lifestyle. For example, many wrote about their preference for action over talk and meeting over e-mailing, and certainly a disdain for those who fail to show up for off-line dates. One profile, for example, wrote that “Not interested in endless email. Be sure of what you want” (MA2). Another profile complained that “we really would like to know who is for real on this site…alot are playing games” (AL1). Regarding those who fail to show up for scheduled dates or meetings, one couple wrote that “We are very serious about this and don’t like ‘No Shows’. It just wastes our time. So if you don’t intend on going through with this then MOVE ON!” (MD2).

Even so, a few couples seemed satisfied with the more casual approach if things clicked: “That being said, we are also definitely okay to meet couples and/or singles for NSA [No Strings Attached] sex” (GA1). Only two profiles seemed to desire the latter as a first preference. The first wrote that “If a friendship results that’s fine, but really, we’re looking for someone that is fun to play with” (WA1) and the second wrote that “We are full swap, fun and love to fuck (last time we checked this is a swing site, not eharmony)” (CT2).

One profile seems to suggest possible problems with a previous encounter by writing “We don’t like pressure so if you try, you will be ignored. Respect will be met with equal respect” (IN2). Boundaries are very important in the swinging subculture, especially for new couples who are still testing limits and establishing their swinging identities. These couples are most likely looking for couples that can put them at ease, move slowly, and not push them to places beyond their comfort level. Many profiles indicated their understanding of this concern by writing comments such as the following: “very honest, respectful, patient… all boundaries will be respected” (TX1) and “Respecting everyone’s boundaries is important” (CO1).
Additional Considerations

Other issues may affect one’s perception of a profile’s trustworthiness or believability beyond textual descriptions of goodwill, practical intelligence, and virtue. For one, the number of certifications on your profile may indicate your level of experience in the lifestyle (practical intelligence), or it could lend evidence to claims of sexual ability (goodwill) if the feedback from others focused on the amount or type of pleasure received. Too many of these certifications, however, could imply that the swinger(s) are too casual, or, as it is commonly referred, bedpost notchers, and, possibly, a high risk for sexually-transmitted disease or infection. While many profiles had four or five certifications, one had ten (i.e., TN1). Having no certifications may, on the other hand, indicate a lack of experience, or, worse, that no swinger or swinging couple is willing to support your profile or testify to your abilities (i.e., MS1, MO2, and OR1).

Second, while hidden pictures or pictures with faces blurred or cut-out are common and expected, sites with no pictures may communicate a lack of confidence, guarded secrecy, unwillingness to share, or a lack of effort (i.e., NE1, RI1, and SC2). In reaction to a common frustration, one couple wrote on their profile that “Please if you do not have pics I will not respond” (IN1). Third, for swinger profiles that fail to provide basic information, such as the weight of the advertised swingers (i.e., NV1, NJ1, and IL1), readers may perceive problems of confidence, or be turned off due to exaggerated guesses. Listing information about one’s age, height, and weight seem to be basic expectations for the start of a conversation as basic chemistry needs to be evaluated.

Fourth, one’s “last on-line” date might communicate something about seriousness and dedication. One that shows a last on-line date as “Today,” for instance, shows that the swinger or swinging couple is active, accessible, and probably checking messages on a regular basis (i.e., CA2, CT1, and VT1). One that indicates that the swinger or swinging couple was last on-line within the last seven or fewer days may show only that the couple is busy and responds (and maybe plays) only on weekends (i.e., IN1 with five days, LA2 with two days, NE1 with five days of inactivity). However, a profile that shows a “last on-line” date beyond a week may be problematic as it may represent a swinger or swinging couple that does not actively participate in the lifestyle (i.e., AR1 with 20 days, MN1 with 18 days, and VT1 with 26 days of inactivity).

As an example of a major violation of the rules of basic swinging etiquette, one female wrote on her profile that “I am looking for couples, single males and female. I am married and my husband does not know” (MO1). Such comments work only to show a lack of moral character, and are not likely to build a trustworthy identity. Further research into sanctioning those who violate subcultural norms on-line may yield interesting findings.

DISCUSSION

Our research focused on the following concerns: (1) developing an understanding of how an on-line deviant subculture uses the Internet to network (What self-presentation strategies are employed by participants in their profiles to develop credibility to attract others to their profiles?) and (2) seeking to understand what norms characterize swingers as a representation of an on-line
subculture (What major concerns, expectations, and values characterize the profiles of the on-line swinger community?).

Compared to the characteristics of previously studied swinger populations, our exploratory research on the Internet community of swingers showed a population between 21 and 54, with the male partners claiming an average age of 37 and the female partners claiming an average age of 32. While it might be expected that the swinger population is aging up as the original members of the 1970s subculture mature, the opposite has occurred. This may reflect the Internet using population, which tends to be younger, or it may reflect the “hooking up” aspects of youth subculture. Further research in this area is needed.

While earlier swinger research found the population to be predominantly white and less heterosexist than the general population without identifying specific race demographics or sexual orientations, the current research hints at a possible expansion in the subculture. In the on-line profiles, at least, 11 people identified themselves as a race other than white, while 87 profiles listed a sexual orientation other than straight. Thus, while the on-line population appears to reflect the predominantly white population discussed elsewhere, no other research has clearly identified so many non-Straight identifying swingers. This may reflect the expectation that women will engage in sexual activity as a preliminary stage in partner swapping, or the belief that presenting women as sexually open to experimentation with other women is enticing to potential swing partners.

It is certainly significant that relatively few male partners (seven) identified themselves as anything other than straight. It is equally possible that those using on-line sites represent a separate subculture within the swinging subculture, one that does indeed see (as suggested by Brown 2005) the Internet as a method of control over presentation of self. Additionally, the on-line profiles may represent a way to experiment with various identities, and possibly serve as a source of escape from societal norms regarding who one should be attracted to. That is, an on-line profile may present one or both halves of the couple as bisexual or Bicurious, but this may also be more presentation than actual self.

Finally, this analysis leads to a general conclusion as to what makes for the idealized swinger profile, one that is able to establish for the swingers an identity of trustworthiness, believability, authenticity, credibility, and character, leading to an ethos that makes the discourse more persuasive. Since Aristotle’s theory of ethos claims that any attempt to develop credibility within any subculture must reflect the values of the wider community, this implies that the on-line environment must reflect the values of the off-line environment. Ethos, then, is a necessary factor in persuasive communication—communication that generates the conditions for movement: rhetoric to rhetorical action, words to deeds, or, in this case, an on-line relationship to an off-line one. The idealized profile would be one that is able to present the self, through textual, visual, and technological appeals, as having an ethos and identity based on goodwill, practical intelligence, and virtue.

To create the appearance of goodwill, swingers need to construct profiles that tout their sexual abilities, willingness to perform, fantasies, and promised benefits to swinger partners. They should also encourage positive feedback from their previous partners or acquaintances in the form of profile certifications, as well as pictures or video that can show their ability to pleasure others. To present the self as having practical intelligence, swingers should specify their background sexual and lifestyle experiences, level of marital or relationship success, and certainly their level of seriousness or dedication to the lifestyle. Making sure that the profile is accessed
regularly, provable by the last date on-line, may also show dedication and accessibility. To create a virtuous self-presentation, swingers need to show their preference for and valuation of discretion, respect, hygiene, and safety, as well as specifying that all boundaries will be respected. Comments from swingers that indicate a willingness to manipulate their own partners in any way would not be work to build êthos, nor would manipulated photos, missing information, or overly long or short profile essays.

The current research suggests various means of self-presentation designed to enhance the credibility of participants in one on-line deviant subculture. For a group that initially meets on-line with the intention of eventually meeting in person, the development of credibility is key to attracting real-life partners. Are these methods of developing credibility common to all on-line deviant subcultures? Future research into the growing field of deviant behavior in on-line contexts should continue to reflect an interdisciplinary perspective, perhaps applying the ideas expressed here to other deviant on-line communities, such as necrophiles, zoophiles, and suicide facilitation groups.

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