

The Ecology of Sexuality in a Mauritian Internet Chat Room (ICR): An Internet Mediated Research (IMR)

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ABSTRACT

Mauritius is advancing, with a strong determination, towards a technology-based society. Consequently, many people are very much attracted by the new technologies, such as mobile phone, computer, and computer-based technologies. Recent data, for example the IT Household Survey - carried out by NCB¹ (2000) - clearly show that adolescents are the age group that uses Internet the most, at home²; and e-mail/chat is the top of the list of purposes for using the Internet. It is also a well-known fact, that sexuality³ is a dominant theme over the Internet, and especially on the Chat Rooms⁴. Personal observation, of the Mauritian Chat Rooms, has also revealed that sexuality is commonly expressed over the Internet. In this context, this research aims to explore how sexuality is being framed, communicated, deconstructed, and understood by the Mauritian chat users. The specific set research questions, for the qualitative study, are: (a) what types of sexuality related information are shared (b) how sexuality related information are framed, expressed, deconstructed and understood over the chat rooms, and (c) what are the implications of 'sexuality on the Internet' for the Mauritian policy-makers?

This paper also presents an innovative approach to qualitative social research using modern technological tools. Particularly, Hewson et al. (2003) point out that IMR offers researchers the potential to reach a vast number of participants from unlimited distance cheaply and time-efficiently. Moreover, the data, collected from the chat rooms, are directly being plugged into Atlas-ti⁵ for the content / discourse analysis purpose, thereby saving time and money incurred in transcribing. It is also worth noting that ethical issues such as informed consent of all stakeholders, no access and sharing of pornography related materials, and several other principles⁶ of social research, for example, autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and veracity, are being seriously considered, in this particular study.

Keywords: Internet, Sexuality, Internet-Mediated-Research, Content /Discourse Analysis

¹ National Computer Board

² It is worth to note that home is not the only place that adolescents have access to Internet; in fact, there are schools and Cyber-cafes that provide Internet services too.

³ Sexuality is broadly defined here. It incorporates sex as biology, gender, sexual orientation, sexual activities and behaviours, sexual health, pregnancy and contraception, among others

⁴ See for example, Cooper et al., 200; Griffiths, 2000; Barak and King, 2000; Wolack et al., 2002; Gross et al., 2002; Mileham, 2004; Kanuga and Rosenfeld, 2004.

⁵ A Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software - CAQDAS

⁶ Autonomy- respect participants' right to self-determination

Beneficence – adopt a positive view to do good to others

Non-maleficence – have the obligation not to inflict harm or expose people to unnecessary risks

Veracity – have the obligation to provide accurate information while carrying and reporting the research

Introduction

Since its first ever recorded use in 1962, the Internet has revolutionised the computer and communications world like nothing before (Leiner et al., 2003). Cooper et al. (2000) report that an estimated 9-15 million people access the Internet each day at a rate that is growing by an estimated 25% every 3 months. According to the Global Internet Statistics (2003 as referred in Mileham, 2004), the Internet population around the world has grown exceptionally fast in less than a decade, rising from 16 million users in 1995 to approximately 680 million in 2003. Basically, the Internet has become the most important tool in many areas of people's lives. The Internet is virtually used for almost all purposes nowadays; be it for shopping, driving, marketing, medical intervention, and even for sex. As Kanuga and Rosenfeld (2004: 117) put it: "the Internet is clearly a powerful tool that has become incorporated into many aspects of our daily lives".

In the field of communication, the Internet has become an indispensable tool and channel for many people. In fact, communication activities dominate the use of the Internet, primarily the use of e-mail, instant messaging, and ICRs (Beebe et al., 2004). More and more people are interacting virtually. Within the field of communication, the Internet chat has gained enormous popularity among many people who want to interact with others on the cyber-space. Within this context, Gross et al. (2002: 77) state: "... new technologies have been developed to further facilitate synchronous online interaction with known others...". Indeed, new Internet-based technologies, such as Instant Messages, Video Conferencing, ICRs, have given another dimension to human social interaction.

"Sexuality is one aspect of human social behaviour that is being dramatically impacted by the Internet" (Cooper et al., 2000: 521). In fact, millions of people interact in a sexual way on the Internet (Golberg, as referred in Putnam, 2000). Many people join the ICRs to discuss, enjoy, and

explore their sexuality⁷. It is also a well-known fact, that sexuality is a dominant theme over the Internet, and especially on the ICRs⁸. Sexuality has also gone ‘virtual’. According to Mileham (2004) the security of anonymity and the soothing allure of interpersonal connection, combined with the primordial enjoyment of sexuality, all add up to the captivating culture characteristic of ICRs, where having or looking for sex is not only permissible but normalised as well. Similarly, Cooper (1999) and Cooper et al. (2000) opine that the use of the Internet for sexual purposes is “turbo-charge” by three primary factors the “Triple – A – Engine”. They are accessibility, affordability, and anonymity. All these factors therefore in some ways affect the sexual life of millions of people around the world.

Mauritius is advancing, with a strong determination, towards a technology-based society. Consequently, many people are very much attracted by the new technologies, such as mobile phone, computer, and computer-based technologies. Recent data, for example the IT Household Survey - carried out by NCB⁹ (2000) - clearly show that e-mail/chat is the top of the list of purposes for using the Internet. According to Childnet International (2003) the most popular application given in the NCB survey of 2002 was e-mail/chat (66%). Personal observation, of the Mauritian ICRs, has revealed that sexuality is commonly expressed over the Internet. Mauritius is therefore not exception to the rest of the world, in the ways in which the Internet is impacting sexuality in the virtual space.

Given that Mauritius is planning its new development strategies, it is imperative for policy-makers to consider the implications of sexuality on the cyber-space. Perhaps, the total control of the virtual world might not be in the hand of Mauritian policy-makers; however, Mauritius should wisely protect its vulnerable populations, such as the children, in order to benefit from the good side of the

⁷ Sexuality is broadly defined here. It incorporates sex as biology, gender, sexual orientation, sexual activities and behaviours, sexual health, pregnancy and contraception, among others

⁸ See for example, Cooper et al., 200; Griffiths, 2000; Barak and King, 2000; Wolack et al., 2002; Gross et al., 2002; Mileham, 2004; Kanuga and Rosenfeld, 2004.

⁹ National Computer Board

Internet. In fact, the Internet is a vital tool for facilitating development by bettering communication, enhancing e-commerce, and sustaining efficiency and effectiveness. However, there is also dark side of the Internet. The ugly face of the Internet is sometimes presented as ‘the shock of the new’, its unethical use (such as for grooming, forgery, and pornography¹⁰), and its addiction aspect. It is therefore imperative for Mauritian researchers to look at how the growth of the Internet is impacting the daily lives of the Mauritian. Mauritius therefore should develop research-based strategies for the protection of vulnerable groups on the Internet.

In this connection, this research aims to explore and explain how sexuality is being framed, communicated, deconstructed, and understood by the Mauritian chat users. The specific set research questions, for the qualitative study, are: (a) what types of sexuality related information are shared (b) how sexuality related information are framed, expressed, deconstructed and understood over the ICRs, and (c) what are the implications of ‘sexuality on the Internet’ for the Mauritian policy-makers?

The following part of the paper start by outlining and explaining the theoretical framework of this particular study. Basically, the research adopts a symbolic interactionist approach to describe and theorise the processes by which sexual meanings are negotiated through the interactions in the MCR (Stein, 1989). After the theoretical framework, the paper presents the IMR as the methodology adopted for this particular research work. It explains and justifies the chat room observation and rapid semi-structured online interviews as the data collection techniques and the content/discourse data analysis for presenting the findings. The findings of the research work are presented in three main sections: the first on sexuality as identity; the second on sexuality as drives; and the third on sexuality as practices. Finally, the paper considers policy implications and the limitations of the research before making some general conclusions.

¹⁰ Pornography is generally defined as sexual materials that explicitly depict sexual genitals and sexual penetrations. For many social scientists, pornography degrades, dehumanises, and debases people, especially women (Russell, 1998; Zillmann and Bryant, 1989; Fisher, 2001; Gossett and Byrne, 2002). Such materials are believed to endorse, condone, or encourage abusive and degrading behaviours, especially towards women (Dworkin and McKinnon, 1988).

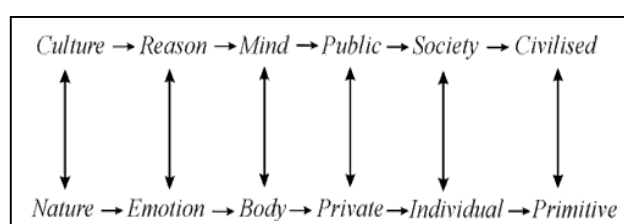
Theoretical Framework

Sexuality has various dimensions. It can mean identities, such as sexual orientation or gender. It can also mean drives, for example feeling horny or the desire to have sex. Finally, it can also mean practices, such as sexual intercourse, petting, caressing and so on. In fact, sexuality is more than just a biological act. It is also psychological, emotional and importantly social. However, it is only recently, that is around mid 1900s, that a sociological approach to the study of sex has emerged. Basically, sexuality is still very much dominated by its biological and psychological perspectives. In a similar vein, Stein (1989: 1) writes: "...the view that sexuality is concerned solely with the biological and psychological capacities of individuals somehow existing prior to social life continues to dominate the popular imagination, even as sex has increasingly become a matter of public discourse, and a viable area of sociological research". In particular, sexuality spans beyond private concerns as it is influenced by social roles and contexts and socially construed meanings (Warren, 1990; Kralik et al., 2001).

Perhaps, this is why it is vital for social scientists to bring additional layers of empirical evidence towards the making of solidified sociological theories of sexuality. Such endeavour will allow researchers to better structure debates and policy-makers to frame appropriate theory-based approaches in dealing with sexuality. As Baumeister and Tice (2001: 9) put it: "... a problem with the field of sexuality is that there are not enough theories to structure debate and give researchers ideas to prove and disapprove". At the same time that theories are being constructed, it is also important that social scientists critically look at the emerging theories. In a similar way, Weis (1998: 10) opines: "... in an era when postmodernists are challenging traditional views of science... it is also more important than ever to examine our own work critically, and this means examining the theories we use to explain sexuality". Hence, there is a felt-need in social discourses to focus on the social theories used to explain sexuality.

According to Ridgway (1997) the disciplinisation of sexuality within the natural sciences, along with its relative absence in sociology arises in part from the conceptual distinction between nature and culture. Basically, he argues that the distinction between nature and culture form part of much wider binary schema which has become enshrined in modern thought, language, concepts and commonsense understandings since the 18 & 19 centuries (Ibid). He therefore presents the binary oppositions as a network of concepts, as depicted below (Ibid).

Figure 1: Sexuality - Binary Oppositions



Source: (Ridgway, 1997: 2)

From the oppositions between nature and culture, two main bodies of sociological theory therefore attempt to explain sexuality. The first body, which focuses on nature, is that of the essentialists¹¹ who argue that one's sexuality is a core part of the self. From this perspective sexuality is seen as the essential part of self-image. In other words, the essentialist's view argues that sexuality is largely a matter of the way one is born (Baumeister and Tice, 2001). The second perspective, which focuses on the culture, is that of the social constructivists, who view sexuality as a product of history and culture; and opine that it is culture and the social environment that provide meaning to sexuality. Social constructivists, therefore, believe that sexuality is constructed through relations with others within a social context. According to DeLamater and Hyde (1998: 17) "social constructionist analyses have several strengths, such as (a) the central role given language provides a concrete mechanism by which culture influences individual thought and behaviour ... (b) social

¹¹ It is worth noting that there is a version of cultural essentialism. In this sense, DeLamater and Hyde (1998: 14) mention: "Although essentialism generally refers to views that are biologically deterministic, with gender studies there is also a cultural essentialist viewpoint." But, as far as sexuality (in general) is concerned, essentialists are well-known to stand-by their views on nature as a basis of sexuality

constructionism can represent the complexity within a single culture; it does not assume uniformity (c) it is consistent with variation across societies and over time”.

However, Baumeister and Tice (2001: 9) state: “Although the debate between the essentialists and the social constructivists is often bitter, we think there is room for peaceful coexistence – and indeed for more theories to join the party.” In fact, essentialist and social constructivist blocks provide a strong basis for several other social theories on sexuality. For example, a wide range of social theories has been discussed in an especial edition of the *Journal on Sex Research* (See Vol.35, No. 1).

From the social constructionist block, symbolic interactionists take up the notion that sexuality reflects one’s relationship to the world (Stein, 1989). According to symbolic interactionists sexual meanings are negotiated through social interactions, which provide the basis for ‘learning’ and ‘acquiring’. For example, Longmore (1998: 44) argues: “Sexual behaviour, like all human behaviour, is symbolic. Men and women use symbols and exist in a world of meaning created by those symbols. Sexual behaviour is associated with a variety of activities, each with different meanings, including but not limited to having children, attaining physical pleasure, having fun, creating intimacy, achieving spirituality, and exerting power.”

Basically, this study adopts the symbolic interactionsist framework. The central task therefore matches that of most symbolic interactionists, which is to describe and theorise the processes by which sexual meanings are negotiated through interaction (Stein, 1989). In particular, the research tries to provide meanings to sexuality on the Mauritian ICR through the interactions of the chat users. The study employs a systematic methodology of data collection.

Methodology

In social discourses, qualitative research has finally gained its well-deserved status. With the advent of new technological tools such as digital voice recorders and computer aided qualitative data analysis software, such as NUDIST, Nvivo and Atlas-ti, qualitative research has known unprecedented recognition and acceptance. Given the exploratory and explanatory natures of the research, a qualitative method is found to be more suitable. As Crabtree and Miller (1992) mention that the choice of the research method depends on the overarching aim that the research has; and qualitative methods are usually more suitable for exploratory research. In fact, this particular research, on the Mauritian ICR, mainly aims to explore the meanings and construction of sexuality on such a space. In this relation, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) note, the word “qualitative” implies an emphasis on process and an in-depth understanding of perceived meanings and interpretations. Therefore, qualitative research tries to go in-depth into the search of answers to the research questions. Hence, the appropriateness of a qualitative approach to the research can be easily justified.

The Internet communities, especially chat-users, are rich sources of qualitative research (Eysenbach and Till, 2001). In fact, Hewson et al. (2003) point out that IMR offers researchers the potential to reach a vast number of participants from unlimited distance cheaply and time-efficiently. Indeed, this methodology has the advantage of being ‘time-efficient’ in the sense that data collected from the ICRs can be directly plugged into the Atlas-ti software for analysis purpose, thereby saving time and money incurred in transcribing. Moreover, Cooper et al. (2001) state that the Internet offers a sense of anonymity, freedom from discomfort of face to face questioning or other social cues that discourage sexually explicit communications and increase socially desirable responses. However, Hewson et al. (2003) opine that internet-user population constitutes a dramatically skewed sample of the ‘population at large’ and for this reason IMR is immediately subject to serious problems

concerning sample representativeness and validity of data. Mainly for this reason, many social scientists are sceptical in using the main advantages that such communities can offer, for some research. To this particular research, such issue is not problematic as this study is carried out in the natural setting of the participants (the chat users) and the research is specifically targeted to such a population.

Discourse analysis has also gained popularity, as a qualitative data analysis technique in social sciences (Willig, 2003). The term discourse is used to refer “to the manner in which individuals and institutions communicate through written texts and spoken interaction” (Lupton, as quoted in Horsfall and Cleary, 2000: 1292). Discourse analysis approaches have been developed to examine ways in which knowledge and meanings are socially constructed (Gee and Green, 1998). In discourse analysis, researchers, therefore, try to discern textual and oral communication and their relationship to society and social structures (Lupton 1992). Discourse analysis is about making a critical analysis of the use of language and the reproduction of dominant ideologies (belief systems) in discourse (as a group of ideas or patterned way of thinking which can be identified both in textual and verbal communications and located in wider social structures) (Lupton 1992, Horsfall and Cleary, 2000). As Banister et al. (1994: 103) put it: “Discourse analysis is concerned with the ways in which meaning is reproduced and transformed in texts, and when such reproduction and transformation concerns institutions and power relations we are led inevitably to a consideration of the role of ideology”.

Discourse analysis is sometimes used together with another technique of qualitative data analysis, which is referred as ‘qualitative content analysis’. Content analysis has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Stemler, 2001). Basically, qualitative content analysis defines itself within this framework as an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of

texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step-by-step models, without rash quantification (Mayring, 2000). In fact, it is the critical discourse analysis approach that combines traditional content analysis with an interpretive analysis of language and discourse in text, placing the texts within their wider context (Lupton & McLean 1998, Horsfall and Cleary, 2000). Critical discourse analysis is thus a systematic technique of finding out meaning, motivation, and power dynamics behind texts. For this particular study, on the Mauritian ICR, a critical analysis as a technique of data analysis is found to be the most appropriate way of looking for the answers to the research questions.

For the data collection, some 300 chat log-files (chat-snapshots approximately 2 minutes long) from a Mauritian ICR, were randomly recorded over a month for observation purpose. It is worth noting, that the text messages, from the ICR, were recorded at different time from 9.00 a.m. to 11.00 p.m. On an average, there are about 120 chat users at any time, on this particular Mauritian ICR. In order to triangulate these data, 30 rapid semi-structured online interviews, in private chat room, were carried out with some volunteer chat-users, from the same Mauritian public chat room, over a month. In particular, the interviews had to be rapid as chat-users usually enter a ICR for other purposes. Therefore, most of the chat users do not want to waste their time and money by being online for any other reason than to chat with their peers and others on what they usually have on agenda. Similarly, Levine (2000) writes that in the virtual world the socialization is most of the time arranged by regularly setting meeting times and agenda for discussion. Moreover, chat users are also aware when their buddies are online through the 'buddy lists' (Ibid). Therefore, for IMR in the ICRs it is advisable to take the very minimum possible time of the chat users. In addition, it is very important for researchers on ICR to initiate some icebreaking conversation. It is only after establishing a rapport with the chat users that the intended interviews on specific research questions could be asked. However, it is important that before embarking on the intended interviews

researchers get the informed consent and set some ethical guidelines for the interviews. The ethical issues should be discussed with and understood by the participants before starting the interviews.

Finally, given the sensitive nature of this particular research careful considerations were given to the following ethical issues. Firstly, informed consent from all the stakeholders was sought. Secondly, cautions for no access and sharing of pornography related materials were presented to the participants. Thirdly, several other principles¹² of social research, for example, autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and veracity, were also seriously considered, in this particular study. Finally, as it is generally well-known, the pseudo identities on the ICR already ensure for anonymity.

Findings

The fascination people have with sexuality and sexual communications is prominently manifested on the Internet in a multitude of ways (Cooper, 1997; Cooper et al., 2000). Mauritian chat users are not different from the chat users from other parts of the world. This study confirms the findings of many other previous studies, that sexuality is indeed a dominant theme over the Internet, and especially in the ICRs¹³. Therefore, the finding of Cooper (1997) that approximately 20% of all Internet users engage in some kind of online sexual activity is not surprising at all. The followings are some examples to support that sexuality is a dominant theme in this Mauritian ICR.

¹² Autonomy- respect participants' right to self-determination

Beneficence – adopt a positive view to do good to others

Non-maleficence – have the obligation not to inflict harm or expose people to unnecessary risks

Veracity – have the obligation to provide accurate information while carrying and reporting the research

¹³ See for example, Cooper et al., 200; Griffiths, 2000; Barak and King, 2000; Wolack et al., 2002; Gross et al., 2002; Mileham, 2004; Kanuga and Rosenfeld, 2004.

<~Interviewer> Do u chat about sexuality?
 <~Married_woman> sometimes yes
 <~Interviewer> what do u chat about on sexuality?
 <~Married_woman> oh so many things

<~Interviewer> Do people chat about sexuality in this chat room?
 <~sexy_mermaid> ya
 <~Interviewer> What do they chat about related to sexuality?
 <~sexy_mermaid> well infact they r very disgusting

<~Interviewer> what do they chat about on sexuality?
 <~groscop> on everyting
 <~Interviewer> Like what?
 <~Interviewer> Sexual acts, masturbation, websites, porno films what exactly?
 <~groscop> everting concerning sex
 <~groscop> hard sex
 <~groscop> hardcore
 <~groscop> making love
 <~groscop> and animal sex also

<~popotlal> ez zot banne toutounes mo fine dire salam malai kum
 <~pimp_uk_dans_baze> suzane to encore viege
 <~wildguy> hi Sleeping_Beauty
 <~popotlal> ki sleeping ta pitin
 <~Sleeping_Beauty> hi wildguy
 <~deadsocK> wajaajajajajaja ~popotlal
 <~suzanne> AL.alle guette liki torma si li vierge pimp
 <~ghantagopala> bon soir tou ban dimounes
 <~popotlal> wajaajajajaja
 <~mr_loverrman> suzanne pas viege li, mo meme in exasse li
 <~pimp_uk_dans_baze> li pas viege ta

The main issue is about Suzanne’s virginity. There are many swearing slang that are really difficult to translate in English.

<~IVY> sans nous voir ont sera toujours fidel a toi CRONOS surtout moi je suis
 là rien pour toi belle avec ma mini jupe et un Bikini
 <@cronos-> a bon?
 <@cronos-> moin gm bien bikini
 <@cronos-> mais monokini nest pas mal

Ivy: without seeing each other we will always be faithful to you CRONOS especially me I am here only for you in my mini skirt and a Bikini
 @cronos> really?
 @cronos> I like very much bikini.
 @cronos>but monokini is not bad

In fact, the majority of the chat snapshots (almost 1 in 3) had something related to sexuality. Almost all the interviewers replied that they have regularly (almost every time they are online) encountered sexual messages in this particular Mauritian ICR. The sexual contents in this Mauritian ICR vary from pornographic websites and materials to some mild conversation on views about sexuality. The following sub-sections consider the type of sexuality related information in the Mauritian chat in room in details.

(a) Sexuality Identities

Sexual identity¹⁴ is an integrated and important aspect of self-image, yet it is perhaps the most difficult aspect of self for an individual to express, to explore and to have positively validated (McKenna et. al., 2001). In fact, sexual identity is defined with respect to the factors, which make up a person's self-image and expression as a sexual being. One of the important factors is the environment where people explore, express, and perform their sexual identity. In this particular study, it is found that the ICR is an important space for chat users to express and explore their sexual identity. The Internet provides a safe and secure environment, through its anonymous characteristic, for people to explore, express, and perform their true sexual identity.

In fact, the ICR provides an anonymous environment for the users through the choice of pseudonym. This pseudonym capability creates, what is usually referred to, plasticity in sexual identity. In other words, people can change their sexual identity at any time they want. In this Mauritian ICR, chat users are found to be either (a) serious or (b) confused or (c) fun seeking with their chosen sexual identity. For example, some of the interviewees when asked whether they are serious about their chosen sexual identity in this Mauritian ICR provided the following answers:

```
<~interviewer> Why u have chosen gay in ur pseudo?
<~gay> 2 hv sex chat
<~gay> 2 excite others
<~gay> 2 get a high
<~interviewer> R u seriously gay or just having fun?
<~gay> im gay
<~gay> but i com on chat 2 get fnd
<~interviewer> How do u know that u r gay?
<~gay> or 2 excite others
<~gay> coz i dnt feel attd 2 gals
<~gay> bt sometimes to man
<~gay> sometimes nt @ all
<~gay> 2 any of em
<~gay> im quite confused
<~gay> 2 b truthful
```

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<~interviewer> why did u choose bi_boy as ur pseudo?
<~bi_boy> i like both girl n boy
<~interviewer> how do u know that?
<~bi_boy> it's matral
<~bi_boy> natural
<~interviewer> r u serious or just having fun?
<~bi_boy> serious
<~interviewer> In reality to others know that u r bi?
<~bi_boy> no
<~interviewer> Why u don't let others around u know?
<~bi_boy> i was too discrete n wa afraid
<~bi_boy> now i'm letting other know it by using char
<~interviewer> What r u afraid of?
<~bi_boy> to affirm my identity
```

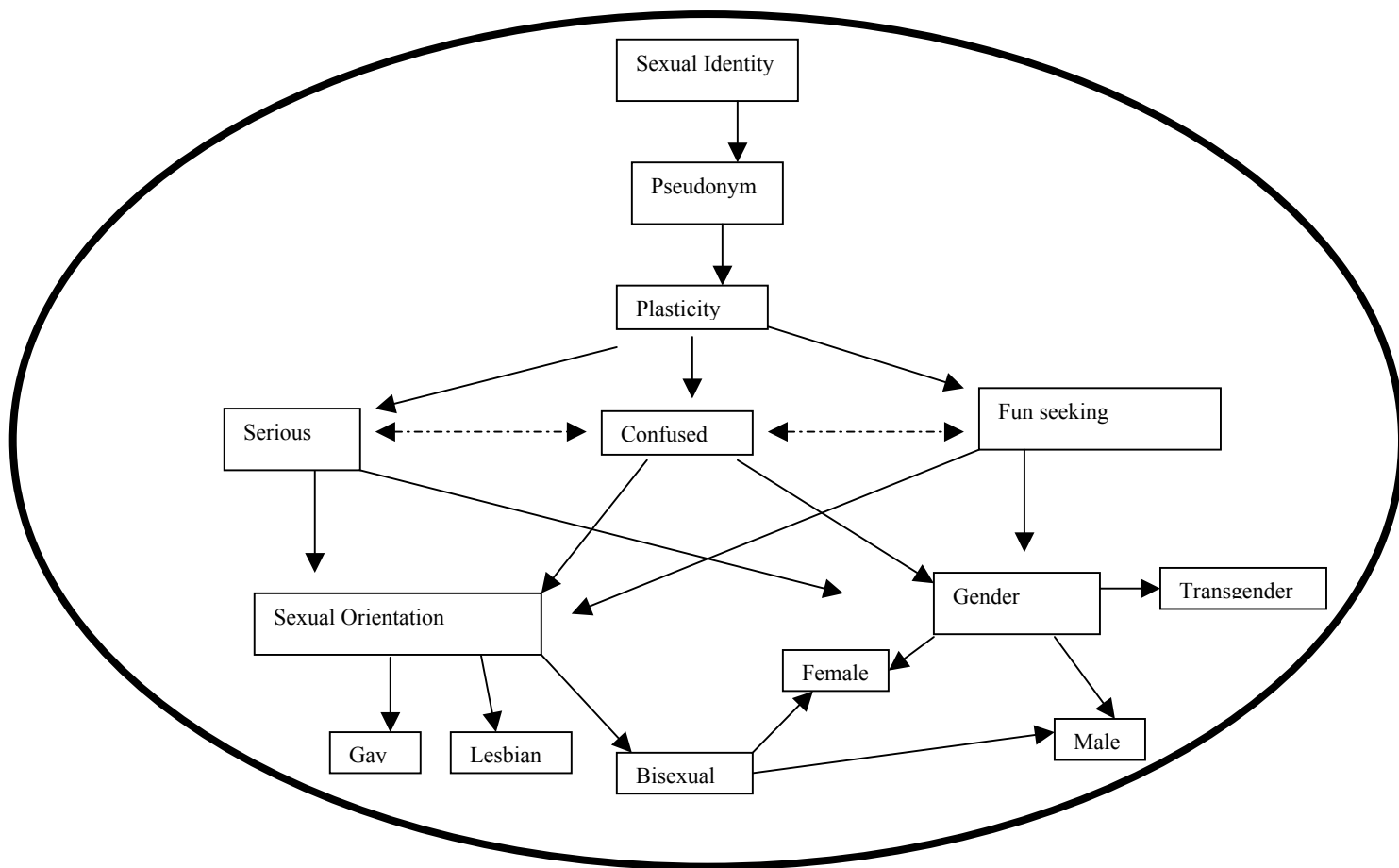
¹⁴ Sexual identity has many dimensions such as sexual orientation, gender, and sex itself. In this section, the paper focuses only on the sexual orientation dimension of sexual identity.

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<-Interviewer> why do u have gay in ur psedo?
<-Gay_mi> coz im gay!!
<-Gay_mi> logical no??
<-Interviewer> r u seriously gay or is it for fun. Please be honest it is important for my research
<-Gay_mi> seriously gay!
    
```

Basically, chat users in this particular study, chose their sexual identity in terms of sexual orientation as gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB); and also in terms of gender as male or female. It is worth noting that (i.) gays are more common than lesbian, and (ii) bisexual males are more common than bisexual females in this Mauritian ICR. Perhaps, this reflects the gendered nature of the Mauritian society, where females are most of the time non-assertive and suppressive with regard to sexuality. Another important point which is also important to note is that on an average of 130 chat users, in this particular Mauritian ICR, at any time between 9.00 a.m. to 11.00 p.m.

Figure 2: Sexual Identity in a Mauritian ICR



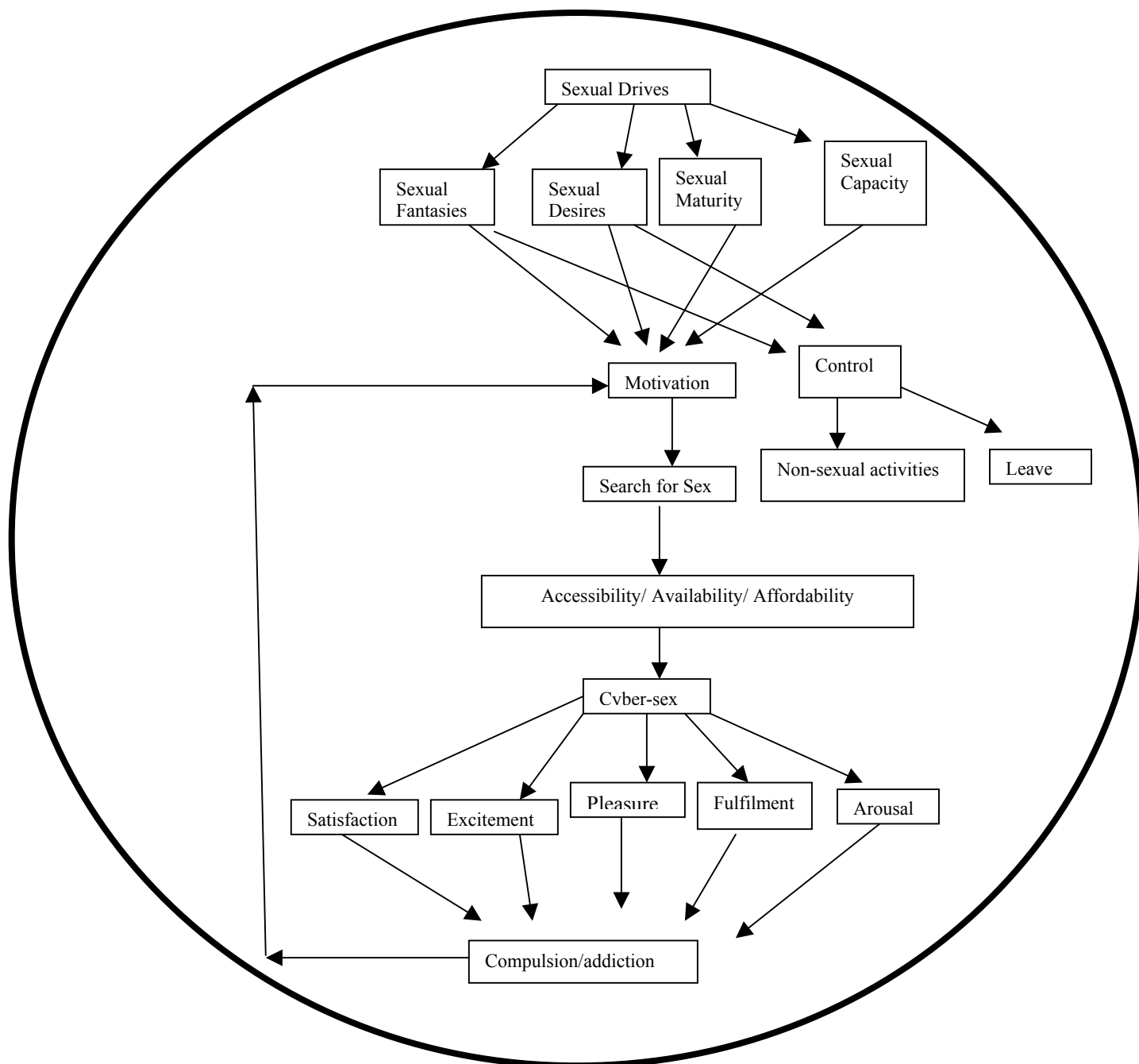
In a somewhat conservative society like Mauritius, perhaps it is difficult for someone to be identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) in the real space. However, the virtual space in the Mauritian ICR provides a safe environment for many people to be identified as GLB. In a similar vein, Woodland (1999) opines that GLBs have been impacted particularly by computer-mediated communication. In fact, it is very common to find people with chosen pseudonyms such as *'gay_mec'*, *'gay_free'*, *'Fem_bi'*, *'gay_30'*, *'f_bi_cherche_f'* and so in this Mauritian ICR. Basically, the virtual space permits some chat users to explore and affirm their true sexual self. In particular, their anonymous identity gives many GLBs the required and needed space to converse about and express their sexuality. As Markley and Wells (2002: 136) put it: "Because of the anonymity in an ICR environment, it has been suggested that people using the Internet are less concerned about social sanctions than are people in face-to-face interactions. Therefore, people communicating via ICRs may put forth less effort to control what they say and, as a result, will act in accordance with how they view themselves". From a similar perspective, Cooper et al. (2000: 525) write: "The Internet offers the opportunity for formation of online or virtual communities in which isolated or disfranchised individuals can communicate with each other around sexual topics of shared interest (e.g. gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues, transgender issues, and rape survivors)". According to Cooper et al. (2000) gay, lesbians, and bisexuals use the Internet more often than their heterosexual counterparts for experimentation, networking, communication, and expression of a variety of sexual behaviours. In a repressive society, Internet therefore (i) allows GLBs and Transsexuals to come out without the fear of being rejected and (ii) helps GLBs and Transsexuals to deal with their internal pressure of coming out and ventilate their feelings more openly to others. In fact, organisations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust of UK strongly advice gay men to go on chat as a supportive strategy for the well-being of GLBs (Terrence Higgins Trust, 2004).

(b) Sexual Drives

The schema below (Fig.3) depicts the main findings regarded to sexual drives. (Please follow the figure for the explanation).

Fantasies, desires, sexual maturity, and sexual capacity were found to be at the base of sexual drives for the participants of this study. All these factors create the motivation for the search for sex on the Internet, and especially in the ICR. As Wilson (1997: 27) puts it: “Sexual fantasies provide an interesting window to the evolutionary instincts underlying sexual behaviour because they are less subject to constraints of civilisation, morality, and social convention than sexual behaviour itself”. However, it is important to note that those who manage to control their sexual fantasies and desires either leave the ICR or they get engaged in non-sexual activities on the Internet. Whereas, those who are motivated for search of sex usually look for cyber-sex. Döring (2000) defines cyber-sex as a social interaction between at least two persons who are exchanging real-time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused and satisfied. As one of the Interviewees rightly guessed:

```
<-Interviewer> Do u get sexual msgs on this chat room?  
<-Lady007> yea... very often...  
<-Interviewer> What sorts of msgs?  
<-Lady007> messages like 'hot chats?'  
<-Interviewer> Why people do engage in hot chat?  
<-Lady007> well, how would I know???  
<-Lady007> may be to get aroused or stuff like that
```

Figure 2: Sexual Drives in a Mauritian ICR

Given the availability, accessibility, and affordability of new technologies, software, and services such as broadband, people can enhance cyber-sex by adding the video and the audio capabilities. Basically, the participants in this Mauritian ICR mentioned that cyber-sex give them a sense of fulfilment, excitement, satisfaction, together with arousal and pleasure. In a similar vein, Putnam (2000: 555) opines: “Interacting with sexual material or others in a sexual way on the Internet is

positively reinforced by sexual arousal. Sexual arousal may then lead to masturbation and orgasm, which further reinforces interacting in a sexual way online. Thus, the most obvious reason why online sexual behaviour is maintained is because it leads to sexual release". Some of the interviewees' responses related to this particular section are presented as shown below:

<-Interviewer> What is cybersex?
 <-Interviewer> Do people send porn pics and websites to u?
 <-HardClit> It having sexual pleasure on the net..by chat, or small camera on the pc, or sometimes even by voice
 <-HardClit> yes i get some fotos..but its not exciting..Ive seen all b4
 <-Interviewer> Do u have cam or voice tech in ur computer?
 <-HardClit> yes..but its not my pc..so i dont use cam too often

<-Interviewer> How people get the desire for sex on the chat?
 <-Interviewer> what create that desire?
 <-HardClit> maybe cos they dont get enough sex, its frustrating ..so they release that sexual tention on the net
 <-Interviewer> what else u think?

Many of them, especially females said that cyber-sex caters for their sexual drives, as in the real space it is less permissible for them to have sexual gratifications with others. By having sexual gratifications in the ICR, many of the chat users feel that they still maintain a respected image and identity in the society. Sex is therefore still somewhat taboo in Mauritius, and many people (even those who are fully mature) especially females cannot present themselves as being sexually active to others in the society. Within this context, Döring (2000: 872) opines: "Cyber-sex not only makes it easier for women to put their more conventional sexual preferences into practice, but it also encourages them to manifest those sexual aspects they have kept hidden because of shame, guilt, fear or uncertainty. In virtual gestures and actions we can mutually live out even those fantasies that would be socially, emotionally, and/or bodily impossible or unpleasant to live out in real life".

The most important of the points to be noted, here, is the compulsive and addictive nature of the cyber-sex. Given that people finds relative easy way of satisfying their sexual drives in the ICR, they find themselves to be in a compulsive and addictive state for sex on the Internet. The Internet,

especially chat, becomes an attractive and irresistible social and sexual function, that caters for the sexual gratification of many chat users' sexual drives. In fact in some other studies, it has been reported that those termed 'cyber sex addicts' spend 15-25 hours per week online viewing and interacting with sexual materials or partners (Yang and Tung, 2004; Li and Chung, 2004; Putnam, 2000). In fact, the addiction reinforces the motivation for the search for sex and people find themselves stuck to sex online.

(c) Sexual Practices

The figure 4 tries to depict the sexual practices in the Mauritian ICR (Please follow the sketch together with the explanation provided).

Sexual practices on the ICR depend to a large extent on availability, affordability, and accessibility of sex on the Internet. In particular, the ICR has a variety of sex materials, partners and even 'cyber-prostitutes'. According to Döring (2000: 867): "In prostitutive cyber-sex men, women and couples offer to participate in actions that primarily or exclusively serve to sexually stimulate the client in exchange for money. Video-based cyber-sex prostitution consists of peepshows or online sex-shows. In some cases the action taking place in front of the camera directly follows the client's wishes or commands." Basically, video-and text-based cyber-sex have created a new branch of prostitution that can be partaken of at home in the protection of anonymity and thus create an increased demand for prostitution (Ibid). Like many other ICRs, this particular Mauritian ICR is also bombarded by marketed cyber-prostitution. One example of a cyber-prostitution website circulated on the Mauritian ICR is shown below:

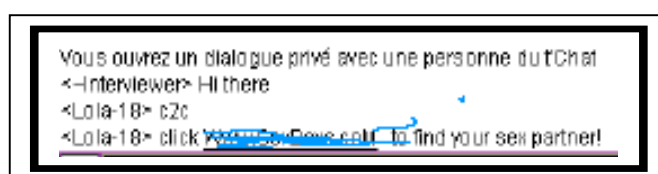
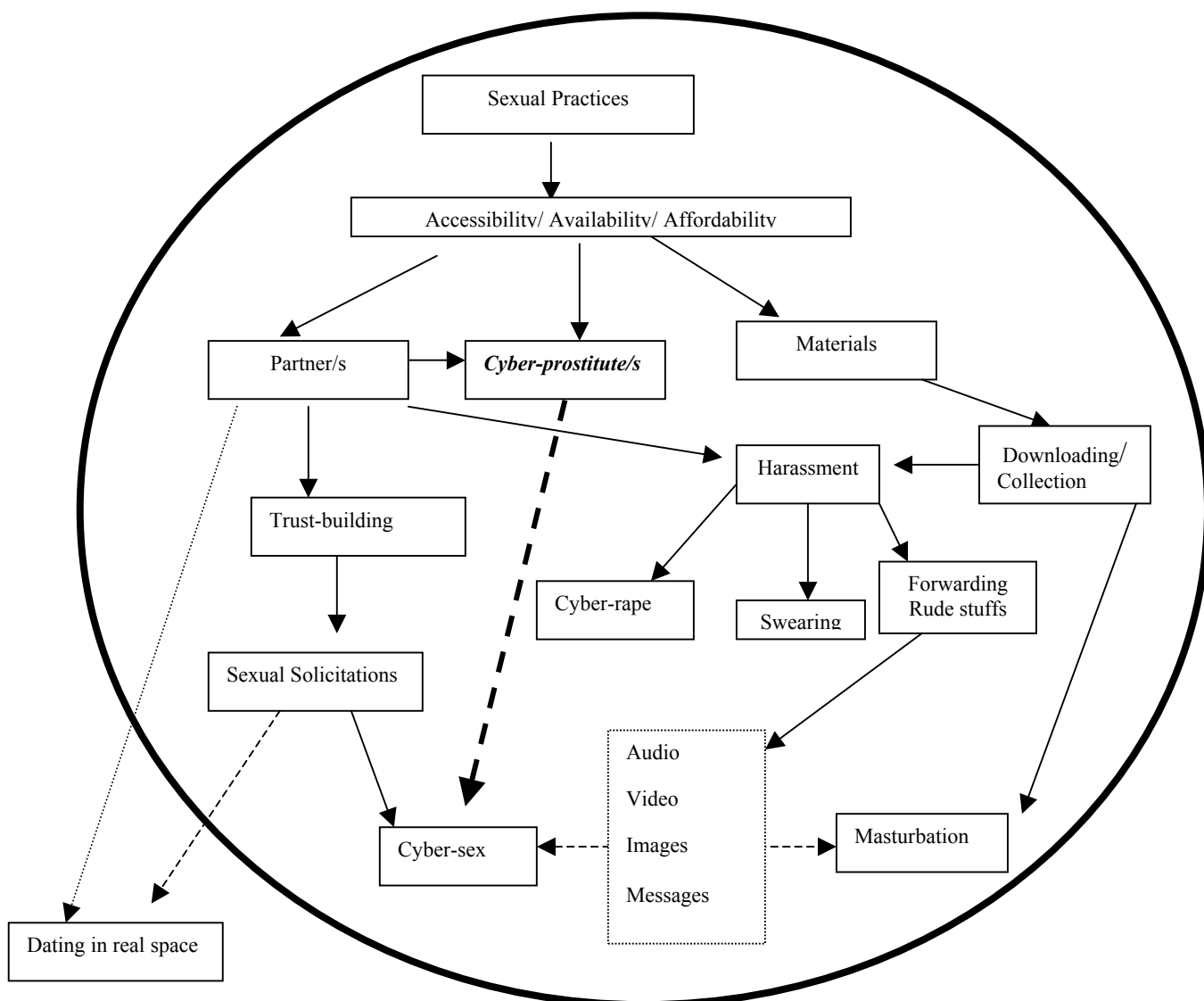


Fig 4: Sexual Practices in a Mauritian ICR

While sex pictures and photos are readily and freely circulated on the ICR, many websites charge money through credit card for some special pay per view services. Porn videos and magazines are also commonly advertised in the ICR. Many of the web sites offer bogus advices and services such as penis enlargement and sex enhancing portions and pills. According to some of the chat users who have been on such web sites, such web sites are made for cheating people's money. Those who find sexual materials on the ICR and Internet in general, usually downloads and collect them for masturbation purpose. Some others use the downloaded sexual materials to harass others on the

ICR. Sexual harassment takes different form in the ICR. Most common form sexual harassments are the forwarding of rude stuffs such as web sites, 'hot text' messages, porn pictures and clips and also swearing. Sometimes, online sexual harassment turns into cyber-rape. In fact, people "can be sexually molested and raped online in situations in which they engage in cyber-sex with illusionary feeling of safety" (Döring, 2000: 869). As one of the respondent mentioned below:

```

:~researcher> what sort of harass do u encounter?
:~researcher> heloo
:~nadiana> want to have sex n they r gross. i don't answer they call me name they r crazy
:~nadiana> got it?
:~researcher> ok
:~nadiana> i can't belive the way mauritian guys n girl chatt in this room

```

In principle the conventional cyber-sex on this Mauritian ICR does not happen directly. There are two main ways that cyber-sex takes place on the ICR: firstly, people go through a process of trust-building and then solicitation for sex; secondly, cyber-sex just happen as a result of gradual move towards flirting and sexual communications. In a similar vein, Longmore (1998) writes that the Internet provides an important medium for Cyber-sex, through which people do go beyond flirting and sex talk

What is interesting to find out is that most people who chat in this ICR admit meeting people through the chat. Some people use this ICR to look for sex partners. After identifying sexual/dating partner/s people go out of the cyber-space to meet/date in real-space. Surprisingly, some people even mentioned about travelling abroad for meeting people who they have been chatting with. In relation to this issue, some of the responses gathered from the interviews are given below.

```

<~researcher> Do u meet people who u chat with?
<~like_a_virgin_> yep
<~researcher> How many times have u met people who u chat with?
<~like_a_virgin_> well 5 times
<~researcher> How was ur meeting experience?
<~like_a_virgin_> exciting
<~researcher> was it with same sex or opposite sex?
<~like_a_virgin_> oppo
<~researcher> why was it exciting and what made it exciting?
<~like_a_virgin_> hvng sex

```

```

<-Interviewer> Have u met someone after chatting with ?
<-Lady007> yea.. i even went abroad for that
<-Interviewer> where did u go?
<-Lady007> India

```

```

<-Interviewer> Did u meet him in reality?
<-HardClit> yes
<-Interviewer> How was ur experience?
<-HardClit> we met in caudan...had lunch together in caudan..went 4 a movie in caudan..
<-Interviewer> What happen next?
<-HardClit> then we said goodbye n went home..but we continue to email sometimes..or sms
<-Interviewer> did he ask for sex?
<-HardClit> yes..we did some touching and caress...but i was not ready n i was scared..he respected my decision

```

```

<-researcher> what does g looking means
<-researcher> mean rather
<-white_g_looking> guy
<-researcher> what does looking mean
<-white_g_looking> it mean looking
<-researcher> what r u looking for?
<-white_g_looking> sex
<-researcher> Have u ever been successful
<-white_g_looking> yes

```

So, it can be said that sex is dominant on this particular Mauritian ICR. In fact, sex is indeed constructed, expressed, communicated, and deconstructed as identities, drives, and practices. Sexuality as identity is present in the Mauritian ICR as either sexual orientation or gender. Sexuality as drives in the MCR is present as desires for cyber-sex and sexual materials that are mainly used for arousal. Finally, sexuality as practices is there on the MCR as mainly cyber-sex. However, some other interesting points to note is the presence of cyber-rape, cyber-sexual harassment, and cyber-prostitution as sexual practices. All these findings therefore have some important policy-implications for Mauritius as a small state. These policy implications are considered next.

Policy Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion

(a) Policy Implications

The citizens of Mauritius are probably the main assets of the Mauritian economy, as the country relies heavily on its human capital. As Bunwaree (2001: 264) puts it: “Human capital in Mauritius has for more than 30 years been officially recognised as a critical component in the country’s development”. Thus for Mauritius it is not only an obligation but also a vital requirement to protect its citizens from the negative consequences of its current technological investment. Particularly, small states cannot afford to waste their vital human capital (Bray and Packer, as referred in Bunwaree, 2001). In fact, in order to succeed as a technology-based society, the main challenge for Mauritius is to continuously ensure that its citizens are empowered, healthy, and productive. In this endeavour, Mauritius needs to wisely cater for the social needs of its citizens – in terms of their basic resources, security, and opportunity. In other words, the economic investment towards the move for a technology-based society should go together with social investment for people to feel safe, secure, and protected in the currently changing environment. Given that Mauritius is planning its new development strategies, it is imperative for policy-makers to consider the implications of sexuality on the cyber-space. Perhaps, the control of the virtual world might not be entirely in the hand of Mauritian policy-makers; however, Mauritius should wisely make sure to protect its vulnerable populations, such as the children, in order to benefit from the good side of the Internet. Within this particular context, this research paper proposes several policy options and recommendations.

Firstly, Mauritius should be quick in preparing and implementing policies and laws for child protection on the Internet. As it is found from this particular study, pornographic materials are easily, readily, and publicly available in the ICR (Internet Chat Room). As Fischer (2001) points

out, spectacular growth in availability of sexually explicit material on the Internet has created an unprecedented opportunity for individuals to have anonymously, cost-free, and unfettered access to an essentially unlimited range of explicit texts, still and moving images, audio and video materials. Given that pornography degrades, dehumanises, and debases people, especially women (Russell, 1998; Zillmann and Bryant, 1989; Fisher, 2001; Gossett and Byrne, 2002); at least, children should be protected from such materials.

According to social learning theory, a child who is exposed to certain unconventional behaviours usually adopts and internalises such behaviours as being the conventional ones. Another important finding of this study is that many people in the Mauritian ICR show their intention and/or actually meet others in reality after building ‘virtual trust’ through the chat. In this connection, it is therefore imperative that children should be protected. Given that Mauritius is only a small state with a fairly good transportation system, the vulnerability for ‘Grooming’¹⁵ is high. In fact, Barak and King (2000) write: “It (the Internet) is considered to be a ‘paradise’ for sex offenders who want to hook victims. It provides a convenient environment for cyber-stalkers and sexual harassers”. In relation to online child protection, a report carried out by Childnet International (2003) had strongly advised the Mauritian authorities to consider introducing legislation designed to protect children from abuse stemming from an original contact via an interactive Internet service similar to the ‘Grooming’ offence in the UK and laws that have been introduced in Canada, US, and Australia (See Childnet International, 2003). Basically, Childnet International (2003:3) mentions: “With more and more children going online more often it is clearly the right moment to consider and adopt a comprehensive Internet safety policy. It is essential that the policies are in place in order that children can get the best out of this exciting medium and ensure that they are safe while using it”.

¹⁵ According to Gillespie (2002: 143): “It should be remembered that grooming is not restricted to online behaviour, although this is certainly a new and major concern. It is nowadays accepted that there is something known as the ‘cycle of abuse’ through which a perpetrator and victim must travel in order for abuse to occur. Grooming is an essential part of this cycle because perpetrators are generally not interested in abducting a child and having ‘non-consensual’ activity with him or her, but rather wish to get the child ‘consent’ to the sexual contact”.

Indeed, the Internet has a positive face also, and children should therefore not be deprived from its use.

Secondly, Mauritius should have a policy on the promotion of an ethical use of the Internet at school, home and work places. As found from this study, the Internet - especially chat - could be addictive. According to many psychologists (Cooper, 1998; Griffiths, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Gross et al, 2002, Li and Chung, 2004; Yang, and Tung, 2004) many people are hooked on the Internet and consequently they become unproductive at work, disinterested in school activities, and unavailable for socialisation in the real space. Basically, cyber-addicts spend most of their time in the cyber space. For example, Mesch and Talmud (2003), in their study, state that adolescents who reported having fewer friends in general, and fewer friends who always listened to them, were likely to be frequent Internet users. Basically, the Internet/chat addiction has some severe social, psychological and economic consequences. In this connection, Putnam (2000: 553) argues: "The time spent online may be considered indicative of a disorder when it results in clinically significant impairment or distress. Indications of impairment include the failure to resist the impulse, drive, or temptation to engage in online sexual behaviour despite the negative effects of such behaviour on social, occupational, or recreational functioning".

The resulting Internet addiction can therefore become a waste of vital resources for Mauritius in terms of health and social spending. Thus, a policy on an ethical use of the Internet is a must for Mauritius. In line with this particular recommendation, Childnet International (2003) advises the Mauritian authorities on a resource for information and advice for schools on the subject of Internet safety and good practice. However, it would be better not only to focus on school children but on the public in general. The Internet, and even chat, can play an important role in the social and economic development of the country; but if it is wrongly use, the Internet could turn into a socio-economic burden for the country. People should therefore be trained and inculcated with the value of a safe, judicial, and respectable use of the Internet.

Thirdly, Mauritius should promote reproductive health information and services through the ICR in order to counter balance the dark side of sexuality, which is currently dominating the Internet. A number of researchers and educators have advocated the use of Internet-based educational interventions for sex education purposes (Barak, 2001, Barak and King, 2000; Cooper et. al., 2000, Cooper, 1998). Protection, advice, emergency contacts and services should be readily available to the chat users. Several studies have found that individuals who log onto the Internet with the intention of finding sex partners (referred to as “online seekers”) are at greater risk for Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) than those who do not seek sex partners online (Malu et al., 2004; McFarlane et al., 2002). As this particular study on the Mauritian chat users show, many people in Mauritius do log on in the Mauritian IRC with the intention to find sex partner/s. In the absence of a proper sexuality education, Mauritius could face an increase in the number of STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections). In addition, this research on the Mauritian ICRs also points out that many people are exposed to different types of information and materials on sexuality. However, it is sad and a shame to find that the undesirable face of sexuality dominates the Mauritian ICR. People are exposed to a range of pornographic materials and several chat users are either victims or perpetrators of sexual harassment. Some cyber-based activities and information might reinforce negative societal stereotypes around sexuality and/or be developmentally inappropriate (Cooper et al., 2000). To counter-balance such information and behaviours, Mauritius should imperatively promote sexuality education in the Mauritian ICR, which would focus on the true nature of human sexuality and encourage healthy behaviours among the chat users. In the past, emerging technologies such as film, television, and video have successfully been used for effective and engaging education (Barak, 2001). With the advent of the Internet technologies such as chat, instant messaging, and video conferencing, new medium and structure for sexuality education should be designed, innovated, improved, and adapted to date reality (Ibid).

Finally, this research also points out the need for further research on the social impact of the Internet. Mauritius should expand its periodic research from availability and usage of the Internet to look at the social, economic, and psychological consequences of the Internet on the Mauritian society and its citizens. With the number of people using the Internet to find love, develop relationships, and satisfy their sexual desires every day, it is important for psychologists and sociologists to have a clear understanding of the dynamic phenomena (Levine, 2000). In fact, research-based policies, programmes, and actions will allow scientists and policy-makers to be knowledgeable on the social impact of the Internet, and at the same time avoid the panic that could encourage parents, teachers, employers, and other guardians to bar people from accessing the Internet (Mitchell et al., 2001). Basically, people should be wary about pathologizing the Internet use and acting as social control agents without scientifically carried out in-depth studies (Cooper, 2002)

(b) Limitations

Like all the studies, this particular study on sexuality in the Mauritian ICR has some limitations. First of all, this research relies to a large extent on the reliability of the data provided by the chat users. Given that the research is totally based on the virtual space, the reliability is somewhat questionable. As Cooper et al. (2001: 438) rightly points out that reliability of sexual behavioural research on the Internet is an issue as “respondents may represent fantasy personae rather than true identities and thereby compromise the integrity of sample demographics”. But, even in face-to face interviews, there are few guarantees that subjects will be forthcoming or honest about their age, gender, sexual activities and preferences (Ibid). Nevertheless, this research has some major findings that could be triangulated with some methodologies used in the real space. However, given the limitation of resources this research has opened some avenues for further explorations.

The second limitation of such studies that are conducted online is about generalisability. In fact, there are concerns about whether sexuality research conducted online is representative of the general population. In particular, chat users are a specific and distinct population from the general population. For example, social needs theory states that people going online for chat are those who are in need for socialisation that they could not find in the real space; whereas the social compensation theory argues that the motivation for online relationships is the search for social support (Mesch and Talmud, 2003). However, it would be a commonly shared view that not all people go on the chat. There are many people who goes occasionally on chat and they are neither socially isolated nor they are in need for social support. Therefore, it is a bit problematic to generalise the findings from the chat-based research. Thus, findings from this research should not be generalised to the whole population of Internet/chat users.

(c) **Conclusion**

To sum up, this research on the Mauritian chat users have found that sexuality dominates the Mauritian ICR. In fact, the three components of sexuality, that is sexual identity, sexual drives and sexual practices are all very much present on the Mauritian cyber-space through its ICR. The findings of this research have some important policy implications. Among those considered in this paper are: the urgency for a legal and regulatory framework for the protection of minors online; the importance of promoting ethical use of the Internet to the general public; the importance of promoting online sexuality education online; and finally the support for a periodic assessment and evaluation of the social, psychological, and economic impact of the internet on the Mauritian society and its people. Finally, it is important to consider the findings of this research with certain limitations in terms of its reliability and generalisability.

To conclude, the Internet will certainly change many facets of the society. In the future, the Internet will not only be an indispensable tool for the functioning of the society, but it will also suck in

many basic real social functions of the society into the virtual space. In a similar manner Cooper et al. (2000: 534) opine: “As technology continues to advance and ...the Net Generation enter the adult world they bring with them profoundly different ideas of, love, work, reward, responsibility, and morality. It is through the use of the digital media that the Net Generation will develop and superimpose its culture on the rest of the society”. The Internet will therefore assume a vital role in the socialisation of human beings in society. By doing so, the Internet will bring a new meaning, understanding, and image of the real social world. The Internet therefore will not only be a medium for learning and sharing new attitudes, perceptions, and behaviour; but it will also dictate how society should function. The virtual social space will thus lead the real social space. Hence, in investing massively towards an Internet-based society Mauritius should prepare itself by setting up new rules, regulations, policies, and conditions for a safe, secure, trustworthy, and non-threatening cyber-space. As mentioned earlier, Mauritius will only succeed with its new development strategies, if together with the preparation for the right conditions for the economic growth to take place, the planning to avoid, mitigate and deal with the negative outcomes and consequences for such valuable economic investment is carried out at the same time. Within this context, resolution of moral, ethical, legal, regulatory issues cannot lag behind (Cooper et al., 2000). It is therefore now or never.

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