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Examining the role of digital mediation in women's sexual identity: A constructivist grounded theory study

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Dedication

In loving memory of my parents Alex and Netta MacRae, who did not see the end of this journey with me but gave me everything to set me on my way.

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Publications and Conferences

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Abstract

This thesis outlines findings from a study exploring how women over 35 conceptualise their sexual identities in the digital age. As the literature lacked qualitative analysis of this aspect of adult women's lives the research was designed using principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). The study asked '*What role does the online world play in the way adult women construct their sexual identities?'.* Nineteen women (age range 38-73) were interviewed using a semi-structured approach about their sexual and online lives. Key elements of Constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014) were employed to interrogate the data in a constant comparison process of coding, categorising, memo production, theoretical sampling, core category construction and theory development. Three core categories were constructed from the data illustrating sexual identity was temporally developed as a concept through context and experience, that online life developed similarly refining over time and specific online behaviours were identified which supported sexual identity. The core categories within the findings were then contextualised within a Bourdieuian frame with reference to a model of habitus suggested by Decoteau (2016). The study offers insight into the nature of agentic sexual behaviour in women and the structural mechanisms within a patriarchal society which can, and do, serve to inhibit this agency. In this way the work of the study reveals both the social heteronormative elements which can inhibit or obstruct women's capacity to find their sexual identities, and also demonstrated, through a reflexive sexual habitus, the capacity for online means to contribute structurally against these negative forces; particularly for LGBT women and heterosexual women with specific issues to address. This specificity given to terminology used to describe sexual life in this work provides much needed clarity within the study of sexuality and will be of benefit to further research in the field.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Context of the study

My reasons for undertaking this study are simple, I had the sense that my education was not yet complete, and I had questions I wanted to answer which arose from both my own and my professional interests. The questions I wanted to ask were difficult however, as they were personal, intimate but nonetheless necessary to gain what I felt to be important insight into women's lives. My work focuses on women's perception of their sexual identities within an increasingly digitally connected world. I am driven to understand what underpins sexual identity and how women might use this knowledge to enhance their sexual wellbeing. I became aware in my previous career that much in sexual life can be left unquestioned and that women disproportionately suffer consequences as a result through lack of choice, communication, or action.

This study then is the culmination of personal, political and professional factors which came to a head in 2013 when I faced redundancy for the first time in my career. At the time I was coordinating a programme of work to address sexual health in the population of a large northern town and its surrounding districts. I had led the review of SRE across the secondary schools in the area and coordinated the re-writing the curriculum with a range of school nursing and youth work staff to be more forward looking and inclusive. In conjunction we developed systems which better communicated services to young people and adults. Working with the Tizzard Centre at the University of Kent I engaged staff to ensure the safety and wellbeing of sexually active learning-disabled adults. In collaboration with the probation service I also contributed to important work in safeguarding children by providing training in a tool we developed to assess and support children at risk of sexually harming others.

As can be seen the work had been diverse and challenging not least because engaging staff into issues of sexual health is particularly difficult. This difficulty was exemplified by the actions of the Leader of the local council in town where I worked insisting an email sent on my behalf to council staff regarding condom management training be withdrawn as unsuitable. This despite many council staff requiring this course to conduct their work. Unfortunately, this experience was not an anomaly within my career, it echoed the response of many towards my work in this and in the previous job roles I had held in drugs and alcohol services; denial, disgust, judgment, and disdain.

Given the difficulty many have with the subject of sexual health I had to build a suitable vocabulary from which to examine sexual life, which would allow others to see the role they

had in being part of the work alongside me. This started with expanding the ways in which people understood the term sexual health itself. The following WHO statement is classed a working definition, not an official position, but a guide to ongoing work in this area.

> 'Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled."
>
> World Health Organisation (2006; 5)

This statement was central to my overall approach to sexual health work. All too often I encountered staff who wanted to teach young people about the dangers of sex using the threat of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections to frighten them into abstaining altogether. The broader placement of sexual health within the context of both pleasure and healthy relationships informed the direction of the training I delivered to staff. Key then to my work was enabling professionals to develop their own unique vocabularies to their specific job roles to support communities to inform sexual health, not to stigmatise sexual behaviour. My role then was to address sexual health as a cross cutting theme encouraging others to gain the confidence to build my work into their remit. Ultimately it was not for me to be called in as the expert in sexual health but instead to build expertise into the local health, social care and educational workforce.

Teaching sexual health and developing this practical vocabulary meant quite some degree of reflexivity on my part not least because talking openly about sexual health particularly in the classroom context did not come easily to me at first. Facing questions from teenagers on matters of sex for the first time is certainly a baptism of fire into the school environment. However, I prepared by working with school nurses, youth workers and teachers who shared their experiences and helped me to practise the answers to the big questions before they were asked. This process was invaluable for relating to participants in training who felt similarly nervous about facing issues of sexual health their work. Reflecting on my own attitudes and considering how they informed my practice was crucial in this role and have continued to be within the examination of data in this study.

As a young woman I grew up in an environment that was not open about sexual matters. Our school lacked a formal system of sexuality education and credible sexual health information was hard to find in my small town. Living through the first generation of HIV in my late teens

and studying in Edinburgh, a city very much affected by the virus, meant safe sex practices were portrayed to myself and my peers as a matter of life or death. Later working with homeless people and in drug services I was only too aware of information around sexual health, and not much of it was cause for optimism. However, in response to this public health crisis I began to see great examples of harm reduction practice emerging and eventually I began work in specialist communications and training company contributing positively to this agenda myself. This work in conjunction with my own RCN Sexual Health training re-orientated my own focus in sexual health to supporting a positive model of sexual wellbeing and encouraging staff to do likewise. Specifically, to guide this work meant enabling staff to develop their practice by drawing on their sense of sexual identity in training, by getting participants to explore the place of sex within everyday life, as opposed to a problematic issue to be fixed. It was this experience which drew me to my study's later focus.

Latterly in my sexual health role challenges arose in relation to burgeoning online methods of communication and information. Students began to ask different questions in sex and relationships education, referencing sexual content they had seen online. Schools struggled to cope with phenomena such as sexting, particularly amongst younger high school pupils who failed to realise the risks they were incurring. Social media was a minefield for staff working with young people and policy seemed to lag behind the speed of change online. Traditional websites we had created were soon seen as static, almost archaic, places that did not offer the degree interaction young people were starting to expect online. I noticed in training a growing sense of unease about the internet and even experienced staff felt ill equipped to cope. We adapted our lesson planning to include online elements including frank discussion about pornography, risks in online gaming, and the legal aspects of sexting but just as we began to adapt to the digital my job came under threat due to austerity cuts. Services responded defunding all but essential services and much of mainstream youth service provision became targeted at hard reach young people and those at risk of exploitation.

I began to look into how the internet was being studied and realised that a great deal of energy was rightly being channelled at young people's experiences of the internet but at the same time I saw adults around me struggle with their online lives. I wondered if other adult women were considering how the online world affected them and their sexual lives. In training many women discussed how they felt under pressure in what appeared to be an increasingly sexualised culture. These thoughts formed the basis of my application to conduct this study. I realised that there was a way forward from the redundancy situation I faced, and that was by taking control of how it played out. In the autumn of 2013, I applied for voluntary redundancy and began my application to undertake this study.

My working life has been a succession of roles where I have had the privilege of people's confidence, in both supportive and educational contexts. I have used the privileged information that has been shared with me over time to shape the nature of this study. In this way I intended to draw on my experience and contribute to the academy by providing greater context to the interaction of the internet and the sexual life of women. I am truly grateful for the women who came forward to speak with me in this process for their frank and trusting input into the study. I hope my analysis of the data they shared shows the women the respect they very much deserve. The following section will outline the structure of thesis I have written from my work.

1.2 The Structure of the Thesis

The first section of the thesis, formed of the Background and Literature Review chapters, outlines the process of developing and refining the research question used in the study. The background to the research is outlined in Chapter 2 giving the historical context of both the study of sexuality and delineating the nature of the definition of sexual identity being used in the research. Given the nature of the research an overview of the field of digital sociology and its relevance to this work is also developed. Chapter 3 then documents the procedure of the literature review, highlights the main themes that were found, and gives an appraisal of the methodological range of the papers in the review. It concludes by revealing the nature of the research question arrived at through the review process.

Section two clarifies both the methodological principles underpinning the planning of the study the study and the method by which they were applied. Methodology is explored in chapter 4 by distinguishing qualitative from quantitative enquiry, mapping the epistemology and ontology of the social theory underpinning the main forms of qualitative research, and provides clear reasoning for the choice of constructivist grounded theory used in the study. Chapter 5 reveals the Methods undertaken to gather data and its subsequent analysis according to principles of Constructivist Grounded theory.

Finally, the last three chapters represent the findings of the research, the discussion of its place within the academy and conclusions that have been drawn from the data gathered in this PhD program. The findings explored in Chapter 6 reveal the three core categories arrived at from the data and their relationship. Chapter 7 then outlines the ways in which the data constructed in the study answers the research question. It also reveals the contributions the study makes to field by placing the data in a strong theoretical context which highlights and fills gaps in the literature around sexual identity and online life. The thesis concludes by exploring its contribution, limitations and addresses Charmaz (2014) tests of validity.

2 Background

2.1 Introduction

In a century there has been considerable change in relation to the study of sexuality, which has tracked cultural movements and considerable societal change. The poem below gives an indication of this sense of change and its place in British culture.

> Annus Mirabilis
>
> Sexual intercourse began
> In nineteen sixty-three
> (which was rather late for me) -
> Between the end of the "Chatterley" ban
> And the Beatles' first LP.
>
> Up to then there'd only been
> A sort of bargaining,
> A wrangle for the ring,
> A shame that started at sixteen
> And spread to everything.
>
> Then all at once the quarrel sank:
> Everyone felt the same,
> And every life became
> A brilliant breaking of the bank,
> A quite unlosable game.
>
> So life was never better than
> In nineteen sixty-three
> (Though just too late for me) -
> Between the end of the "Chatterley" ban
> And the Beatles' first LP.
>
> Philip Larkin (1974; 29)

In the poem Larkin reckons with momentous cultural shifts that separated sex from marriage, just as the contraceptive pill separated pregnancy from sex, in Britain in the sixties. This decade would see further significant change in 1967 with the passing of both the Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalised sex between men over 21, and the Abortion Act. This, progressive for its time, legislation took great strides towards a modern pragmatic state approach to the sexual lives of UK citizens (Stonewall, 2016). This change began the movement toward to the equalisation of the age of consent in 2001 and subsequently Marriage (Same Sex

Couples) 2013 (Stonewall, 2016). In both legislative and societal terms, the UK now is a considerably different place to that described as radical by Larkin.

This study concerns itself with another social cultural shift, that of the introduction of world wide web and the internet. Almost since it began, the internet has been known for two things; the proliferation of sexual content (Coopersmith, 1998), and the provision of novel communication mechanisms developed into various forms social media. Taking this into account the study aims to explore how the formation of an online life intersects with a women's conception and construction of sexual identity. In attending to this question is important to establish the nature of both elements being explored by defining sexual identity and online life.

2.2 Sexuality and Sexual Identity

Alongside the changing legislation, attitudes and patterns of behaviour within society of last fifty years, the intellectual understanding of the study of sexuality has also been subject to considerable change. Prior to the cultural upheaval attested to by Larkin in the poem at the start of the chapter the study of sex was mainly a scientific endeavour (Seidman, 2010). This approach of 'sexology' espoused the notion 'that humans are born with a sexual nature and that sexuality is part of the biological and genetic makeup of all individuals' (Seidman, 2010; 3). As such this concept centred sexual desire or drive as a 'need' within the human condition to the extent that it was central to the nature of humanity (Seidman, 2010; 4). More than this, sexology sought to promote the primacy of this sexual need as the 'driving force in human behaviour' (Seidman, 2010; 4).

The principles of sexology also reified the naturalness of heterosexual behaviour between men and women (Seidman, 2010). This biological and natural view of sexual behaviour both reflected and consolidated the prevailing socio-political power dynamics of their times, and despite its benign sounding reasoning Seidman (2010) revealed sexology had some very sinister underpinnings.

> 'Some sexologists saw their work as contributing to the creation of a healthy, fit population. Often this meant that sexology was aligned with a belief in a racial purity and improvement. There was a time when sexologists were aligned with a eugenic movement that discouraged active sexual behaviour by so-called inferior races and sexual intermingling of races'
>
> Seidman (2010; 5)

By way of example Marie Stopes pioneering work providing birth control to working class women from the 1920s onward is now rightly viewed through a critical lens given her markedly eugenic views. Much warranted scrutiny has fallen on the motivations for her work though some continue to argue the impact of her interventions outweigh its intent given the toll on women having multiple children at the time (Williams, 2011). The moral relativism of this position however must itself be subject to scrutiny given the re-emergence of scientific racism within the academy in many guises in recent times, as highlighted by the work of Angela Saini (2019).

In assessing the notable contributions of Kinsey and Masters and Johnson's to sexology Margaret Jackson (1987; 73) made the feminist argument as late as 1987 that Western cultures unquestioningly still accepted a scientific model of sexuality as 'common sense'.

> 'The model not only reflects and legitimates the male supremacist myth that the male sexual urge must be satisfied; it defines the very nature of 'sex' in male terms. Thus, although women are now regarded as sexual beings in their own right, female sexuality too has been shaped according to this androcentric model. In other words, male sexuality has been universalised and now serves as the model of human sexuality. Furthermore, by equating human sexual desire with a coital imperative i.e. a biological drive to copulate, 'sex' is ultimately reduced to a reproductive function, with the obvious implication that the only really 'natural' form of sexual relationship is heterosexual.'
>
> Jackson (1987; 73)

Whilst it may have been the case in popular discourse that this model remained dominant, the cultural changes that occurred through the sixties brought about a new generation of constructionist researchers who actively questioned the biological essentialist notion of sexuality and began to argue for sexual behaviour to be viewed in social and indeed historical terms (Jackson and Scott, 2011). That is to say, a new generation of researchers believed sexual behaviour was learned from the society in which we live (Weeks, 2010). The example here from Jackson brings together both sets of principles and could be said to make the constructionists point. Jackson contends the biological model has been learned within society by framing sexuality in male dominated heteronormative terms and as people have become accustomed to these sexology tenets, they are then reproduced by society rather than these behaviours arising innately from some natural order.

William Simon and John Gagnon were central to the development of the ideas of the social construction of sexuality. They argued strongly against the prevailing biological models underpinned by Freudian psychoanalytic principles of innate drives and family relationships influence on sexuality (Jackson and Scott, 2011). In rejecting the biological notion of the sexual for the social Simon and Gagnon developed an argument which espoused a '*positive conceptualisation of the social – as producing rather than negatively moulding or modifying inbuilt drives'* (Jackson & Scott 2011; 13). Jackson and Scott (2011; 13) also note that in taking this stance Simon and Gagnon (1974, in Jackson & Scott, 2011) not only predated Foucault's (1981, in Jackson & Scott, 2011) 'critique of the repressive hypothesis' but provided a strong social model for the 'construction of desire', 'the sexual self', the rejection of the heterosexual as the 'human' norm and importantly, from a feminist perspective, an independent female sexuality uncoupled from the 'repressed male sexuality 'could be formed.

Other sociologists of the time including Jeffrey Weeks (2010) rejected the notions of sexology in favour of a social model, yet he recognised the corporeal nature of physical sexual

behaviour. Weeks however maintained this behaviour came to be sexual through social discourse not nature.

> 'I prefer to see in biology a set of potentialities, which are transformed and given meaning only in social relationships. Human consciousness and human history are very complex phenomena.'
>
> Weeks (2010; 20)

Simon and Gagnon (1986) sought to remove the special status from the sexual and place it in a more prosaic frame within ordinary life, a counter intuitive position perhaps but one which underpinned their opposition to the Freudian framed sexology concept of the natural uncontrollable force of the sexual need (Jackson and Scott, 2011). In doing so Gagnon and Simon also fought against the unknowable sub-conscious elements which typified a psychoanalytic model of sexuality by contending that 'sexuality is constantly, reflexively modified throughout our lives' (Jackson and Scott, 2011; 14). This is important as the study is being undertaken from the perspective that to interpret and make sense of sexuality is the key to the formation of sexual identity. The study then takes the position that sexual identity is a woman's cumulative understanding and experience of her sexual life, her sexual self. If it were to be the case that sexuality, and thus sexual identity, develops and then is a fixed the study would have to conclude the internet has no role in the construction of sexual identity.

Within much of the literature however the conception of sexual identity appears to be synonymous with sexual orientation (Weeks, 1987). This position is not held within this study as it will use a model that assumes though sexual orientation can be seen as major part of the construction of sexual identity it should not be considered the sum total. A model of this nature is suggested by Epstein (1991; 827) which recognises sexual identity to be 'all the ways in which people operate in a socially-defined sexual sphere, see themselves as sexual beings and achieve a greater or lesser degree of consistency in their sexual relational experiences.' and this model supports the definition given above.

In more detail Epstein (1991; 828) puts forward three main elements as informing sexual identity 'sexual preference / orientation' what a person might look for in a partner from gender through to physical attributes, 'erotic role identity' what the person likes sexually, their preferred mode of sexual practice/s and 'the conscious identification of self with social sexual typologies' how a person may view themselves in relation to the sexual categories availed of them within their culture or indeed their rejection of such. In addition, Epstein (1991) argued gender figured within this identity, but like Gagnon and Simon (1986), with the proviso that

although gender and sexual identity interrelate in complex ways, they are distinct identities, nonetheless. It was not envisaged that the women interviewed would delineate their sexual identity in exact accordance with all these factors rather it was hoped they would explore what sexual identity meant in their own terms. Put simply for the purpose of this study sexual identity is how a woman reckons with the complexities of her unique sexual life and sexuality. It would be for each woman to highlight the elements which for her have the most significance and relevance. In investigating sexual identity through this frame of reference it is hoped that issues of choice and agency within sexual life may be revealed in better detail and understood in relation to their development over time.

Simon and Gagnon (1986) contended that sexual behaviour was learned by a social process of conferring sexual significance on acts that are not in themselves inherently sexual but become so through this association. These actions contribute to the formation of sexual scripts that the guide subsequent sexual behaviour. Again, these are not natural actions rather they socialised as sexual practices and become that which is related to the action of being sexual (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). The scripts that are built in this learning process can be analysed on three levels the intrapsychic, the intrapersonal and the cultural, describing the difference between 'the agentic individual, the interactional situation, and the surrounding sociological order' (Gagnon, 2004; 276, in Jackson & Scott, 2011; 15). How one becomes a sexual being then is contingent on both individual experience and cultural imperatives.

When considering then how sexuality and then subsequently sexual identity are constructed then a historical context is needed in terms of the learning experiences of the individual sexual agent but also in theoretical context in order to contextualise these experiences. Weeks (2002; 39) notes that 'the new sexual history has fundamentally transformed the way the way we interpret the sexual past and present. It is no longer possible to see as caught in the toils of nature, outside the bounds of history. It is a legitimate subject for historical investigation'. Indeed, the last twenty years in particular has seen a proliferation of research being produced in the history of sex. Many scholars in this area of study such as Dr Eleanor Janega (@goingmedieval) and Dr Kate Lister (@whoresofyore) contribute greatly to both public and academic discourse on the history of sex and have contributed much of this work through their use of digital practices like blogging and Twitter. In the following section the digital realm will be explored, as it pertains to this study in terms of online life.

2.3 Online Life

For the purpose of the study it is necessary to consider what might be the components and the implications of an online life. In the space of the last decade the mainstreaming of digital technologies and the ubiquity of online platforms such as Facebook and Amazon have radically transformed communication, work and consumer behaviour across the western world and beyond (Srnicek, 2017). Whilst it can be said the distinction between offline and online worlds are now difficult as one can be essentially be said to be constitutive of the other and vice versa (Valentine and Holloway, 2002; Herzig, 2016) for the women in this study their lives can be legitimately divided into pre and post internet. This study made no prior claim that the internet and other communication technologies would impact on sexual identity rather it aims to develop theory that may come to explain ways in which any relationship between the two phenomena can be understood.

It was not envisaged that the study would find that use of the internet and online life would be uniform across the sample by any means. How the women of the study engage with online world and create the habits of their online lives was speculated to likely be individual and contingent on skills, confidence and need. What was investigated was the relevant placing and importance of online activities within daily life and sexual behaviour. In addition, the study considered the wider telecommunication elements of mobile telephony in the form of text or picture messaging as part of online communication. This is particularly in light of the range messaging applications (apps) now used in conjunction, and in place of, text and picture messaging on mobile phones.

In defining their position on internet research in relation to digital sociology Orton-Johnson and Prior (2013; 1) noted the following.

> 'The very pervasiveness and normalisation of contemporary digital technologies means that few spheres of social enquiry are insulated from some form of digital manifestation. IR (internet research) is no longer the study of the exotic, esoteric or autonomous cyberspace and we felt dissatisfied and intrigued by the ambiguities and uncertainties faced by sociologists trying to think critically about new intersections, continuities and flows between the social and the digital.'

In this way it could be argued no twenty first century study of the sexual is complete without considering the possibilities of its nexus with the digital. Another reason for continuing the study of the sexual is to challenge prevailing views of what it means to be sexual given Weeks (2002) contention of the importance of the historical context of sexuality. This historical

contextualisation could be said to be welcome and necessary within the study of the internet given that some of the original conceptions of online interaction have been contested particularly around the notion of generational difference in digital skills by later researchers (Bennett, Maton and Kervin, 2008; Helsper and Eynon, 2010). In this way the study could offer clarification of the prevailing perception of the online skills of older adult women and contribute to a better understanding of the frame of their digital involvement.

It was of interest also, how the study woud contribute to research on the notion of gender and relationships online. Jamieson (2013; 28) cautions researchers from overemphasising the impact of the digital in the lives of women and suggests a 'refurbishment' of previously held notions of self rather than a radical change is required in relation to internet practices. Jamieson (2013) suggests analysing where the digital fits into existing family and intimate relations rather than looking for these to have been completely subsumed by online connection. As far as sex is concerned Jamieson (2013; 29) mused that cybersex often followed '*conventionally gendered scripts and in action experienced as play and fantasy rather than authentic personal and intimate relationships*.'. In this way some of the initial moral panic around sex and the internet could be said to be abating certainly within academia at least, the study sought to ascertain if women concurred with this argument.

As modern communication methods have given women new ways to explore who they are both socially and sexually the potential to connect with others and form relationships has grown exponentially (Jamieson, 2013). Chat rooms of the initial wave of internet communication have been replaced by evermore sophisticated forms of social media and applications which offer real-time connections and GPS link ups to a dizzying array of potential partners (Sumter, Vandebosch & Ligtenberg, 2016).

From this perspective then the study hopes to outline the nature of women's online lives in the context of their lives in general, and in connection with their sexual lives. Whilst there was no clear expectation of what would be found, the study sought to identify which elements may have effected change within the context of sexual identity and how significant this was for the women involved.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the empirical literature collected to inform the study. It will outline the specific approaches taken to literature in Grounded Theory studies, describe the methods used in this review, identify the papers, outline their methodology and go on to explore the four main themes that have arisen from the research papers;

- the sexual identities of women,
- women's relationships in the digital age,
- women's sexual behaviour online
- women's sexual scripts

Finally, the chapter will set out the questions arising from the review and from this arrive at the ongoing research question and objectives of the study.

3.2 The Literature Review in Grounded Theory

There is controversy within Grounded Theory Methodology about the place of the literature in the process (McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007; Charmaz 2014; Kennie & Fourie, 2015). Different iterations of Grounded theory vary in relation to the notion of researcher objectivity reflecting major paradigm differences in beliefs which guide decision making in research (McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007; Charmaz 2014; Kennie & Fourie, 2015). Conducting either qualitative or quantitative research demands that researchers make choices in accordance with their theoretical worldview (Sarantakos, 2014) and as such objectivity becomes a pivotal influence within literature decision making.

Grounded theory was initially espoused as an answer to the historically situated perception that qualitative methods lacked rigour (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, in later years Strauss and Glaser diverged in their opinions regarding literature in the Grounded theory process. Glaser (Glaser, 1992; 336 cited in McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007) suggested literature 'related to the field of study' must only be engaged with once the study had sufficiently progressed analytically where 'codes and categories had already begun to emerge'. This was in sharp contrast to Strauss (Glaser, 1992; 336 cited in McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007) who had previously proposed that engaging with the literature early provided a number of benefits including 'stimulating theoretical sensitivity' and providing direction for 'theoretical sampling'.

This study (as will be justified in Chapter 4) follows a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach after Charmaz (2014). A literature review was conducted before the data gathering process commenced in observance of protocols within the Faculty of Health Sciences. Charmaz (2014) like Strauss reiterates the need to engage with literature, she does however suggest not writing the review formally until after data collection. Given Faculty requirements this was not possible in this instance. However, Charmaz (2014) recognises the nature of doctoral study and concludes the following.

> 'Many research reports require a standard -rigid- format, the trick is to use it without letting it stifle your creativity or strangle your theory. The Literature review gives you an opportunity to set the stage for what *you* (her emphasis) do in subsequent sections or chapters'
>
> (Charmaz, 2014; 308)

In this way the review has guided the research process by acknowledging the literature and formulating the research question according to the matters arising from this search.

3.3 Method

3.3.1 Literature Search Strategy

The search strategy terms replicated the key focus areas of this study namely women, digital/online life and sexual identity. The search was conducted using a stepped approach to reduce likelihood of syntax error and therefore increase accuracy of results. The symbols '?' and '*' were used as truncations to allow for the range of terms in relation women and sexual identity widening the pool of results. In each database the same search terms were applied. In addition to the outlined search terms, limiters were used where available to restrict results to English, peer reviewed journals from 2008 onwards.

Table 3-1 Search Strategy

Search terms
1. wom?n
2. female*
3. S1 OR S2
4. sexual*
5. digital
6. online
7. S5 OR S6
8. S3 AND S4 AND S7

This review was undertaken using electronic academic databases to find empirical studies relating to women, sexual identity and digital life. The following table (Table 1) shows the databases used to conduct the search along with the numbers of papers found in each database.

Table 3-2 Search results

Databases searched	**Empirical papers found**
Academic Search Premier (A.S.P)	210
CINAHL Complete (CIN.C)	75
MEDLine	172
PsycINFO	131
I.B.S.S.	36
Scopus	254
Web of Science (W.O.S.)	254

The results from the search were stored within each database before being exported to Refworks for reference management and bibliographic use. From the initial 1132 empirical papers found 580 remained once duplicates were removed. At this point each paper was re-evaluated for relevance using the following criteria.

To be included in the review the papers were required to fulfil all the following

- Female sample or clearly disaggregated female data
- Relates to sexuality
- Relates to digital life

Papers which did not fulfil all of the above were excluded along with any which were found to be non-empirical. This left 86 papers which were then abstract screened leaving 52 papers for full text analysis.

3.3.2 Initial categorisation of the papers

As a precursor to the full review the abstracts the papers were read to get an idea of the themes that were covered by the selected papers. These themes provided an initial starting point for the analysis of the literature, in terms of a first overview of the empirical research. It appeared thematically the literature concerned itself with many negative aspects of online cultures in relation to sex and posited online sexual behaviour as problematic often. Much concern was given over to the threat to ongoing relationships posed by the internet. In this way on first reading the literature saw the arrival of the internet as a disruption to conventional relationship order. The loose initial themes identified were

- Sexual identity
- Women's digital identity
- Digital life
- Social media
- Compulsivity
- Fidelity and jealousy
- Online information and support
- Online dating
- Sexual behaviours online
- Pornography
- Objectification

3.3.3 Literature Analysis Matrix

After the abstract review the papers were read and interrogated using a matrix which systematically assessed the following key components.

- Author and date
- Design
- Aims
- Sample size and type
- Data collection
- Ethics
- Tests and analysis
- Summary of findings
- Discussion
- Themes

The matrix used in this review reflects processes used in other health frameworks such as Critical Appraisal Skill Programme (CASP) (2020) which are designed to ensure rigour in the review of evidence. Working with a matrix such as this ensures that each element of a study be assessed carefully both on its own merit and in conjunction with rest of the literature being analysed. After full text analysis using the matrix a further four studies were excluded due in a lack of data disaggregation, insufficient data and lack of sexuality focus leaving 48 papers comprising the literature review (papers from the review are highlighted in blue in the Reference List). The search is summarised in the PRISMA table (Appendix 1) and an example page from the matrix can be found in Appendix 2. After completing the matrix review the papers were found to relate four clear themed groupings which will be explored later in this chapter (3.4 Findings). These themes both reflected and condensed the initial abstract themes found on first inspection.

3.3.4 Methodological overview of the papers

Most of the papers found were quantitative in their design and largely survey based (see Table 3-3). Thirty-two of the forty-eight articles reviewed were entirely quantitative in their design. Of the remaining studies six were qualitative, five were conducted as mixed methods, two were content analyses, and one paper was conducted as critical analysis. Two further studies used one qualitative question in their otherwise quantitative designs.

Taken overall due to the small numbers of qualitative studies found there was a lack of women's lived experience documented in the research and the predominance of survey-based

design meant nuanced understanding of the topics reviewed was difficult to come by. From a qualitative perspective the mixed studies did not disaggregate their data well from their female participant's perspectives. Indeed, two studies were rejected from the analysis on this basis, the two that remained (Morgan, et al., 2010; Coon Sells, 2013) did give individual female responses within the text but did not collate these. Of the six qualitative studies only two (Chan, 2014; Walker, 2014) used samples not based on college aged women which arguably illustrates the lack of research undertaken into adult women's sexual lives.

Table 3-3 Methodological breakdown of the literature gathered

Method	Authors
Quantitative (32)	Albright, J.M., 2008; Byers, E.S. & Shaughnessy, K., 2014; Corley, M.D. & Hook, J.N, 2012; Daneback, K, et al., 2012; Daneback, K., Månsson, S. & Ross, M.W., 2012; Daneback, K., Månsson , S. & Ross, M., W., 2011; Daneback, K., Sevcikova, A., Månsson, S., & Ross, M.W., 2013; Delevi, R. & Weisskirch, R.S., 2013; Dijkstra, P., Barelds, D.P.H. & Groothof, H.A.K., 2013; Fox, J. & Warber, K.M., 2013; Glasser, C.L., Robnett, B. & Feliciano, C., 2009; Green, B.A., Carnes, S., Carnes, P.J. & Weinman, E.A., 2012; Laier, C., Pekal, J. & Brand, M., 2014; Lange, R., Houran, J. & Li, S., 2015; Manago, A., et al., 2015; Miller, M.J., Denes, A., Diaz, B. & Buck, R., 2014; Muscanell, N.L., Guadagno, R.E., Rice, L. & Murphy, S., 2013; O'Sullivan, L.F. & Ronis, S.T., 2013; Paul, B., 2009; Paul, B. & Shim, J.W., 2008; Robnett, B. & Feliciano, C., 2011; Ross, M., Månsson, S. & Daneback, K., 2012; Shaughnessy, K. & Byers, E.S., 2014; Shaughnessy, K. & Byers, E.S., 2013; Shaughnessy, K., Byers, E.S., Clowater, S.L. & Kalinowski, A., 2014; Strassberg, D.S., Rullo, J.E. & Mackaronis, J.E., 2014; Toma, C.L., Hancock, J.T. & Ellison, N.B., 2008; Wetterneck, C.T., Burgess, A.J., Short, M.B., Smith, A.H. & Cervantes, M.E., 2012; Whitty, M.T. & Quigley, L., 2008; Wright, P.J., 2013; Wysocki, D.K. & Childers, C.D., 2011; Zheng, L. & Zheng, Y., 2014;
Qualitative (6)	Bosch, T., 2011; Chan, A.H., 2013; Coon Sells, T.G., 2013; Morgan, E.M., Richards, T.C. & Vanness, E.M., 2010; Rubin, D. & McClelland, S.I., 2015; Seal, D.W., Benotsch, E.G., Green, M., Snipes, D.J., Bull, S.S., Cejka, A., Lance, S.P. & Nettles, C.D., 2015; Walker, A., 2014;
Mixed Methods (5)	Lever, J., Grov, C., Royce, T. & Gillespie, B.J., 2008; Dehaan, S., Kuiper, L.E., Magee, J.C., Bigelow, L. & Mustanski, B.S., 2013; Dir, A.L., Coskunpinar, A., Steiner, J.L. & Cyders, M.A., 2013; Farr, D., 2011; Fox, J., Bailenson, J.N. & Tricase, L., 2013
Mixed Methods (with one qualitative question) (2)	Grov, C., Gillespie, B.J., Royce, T. & Lever, J., 2011; Muise, A., Christofides, E. & Desmarais, S., 2009;
Content Analysis (2)	Hall, P.C., West, J.H. & McIntyre, E.,2012; Vannier, S.A., Currie, A.B. & O'Sullivan, L.F., 2014;
Critical Analysis (1)	Lupton, D., 2015

The authors in many of the quantitative papers questioned their own generalisability (Byers, E.S. & Shaughnessy, K., 2014; Daneback, K, et al., 2012; Daneback, K., Månsson, S. & Ross, M.W., 2012; Daneback, K., Månsson , S. & Ross, M., W., 2011; Daneback, K., Sevcikova, A., Månsson, S., & Ross, M.W., 2013; Delevi, R. & Weisskirch, R.S., 2013; Green, B.A., Carnes, S., Carnes, P.J. & Weinman, E.A., 2012; Laier, C., Pekal, J. & Brand, M., 2014; Manago, A., et al., 2015; O'Sullivan, L.F. & Ronis, S.T., 2013; Paul, B., 2009; Paul, B. & Shim, J.W., 2008; Ross, M., Månsson, S. & Daneback, K., 2012; Shaughnessy, K. & Byers, E.S., 2014; Shaughnessy, K. & Byers, E.S., 2013; Shaughnessy, K., Byers, E.S., Clowater, S.L. & Kalinowski, A., 2014; Strassberg, D.S., Rullo, J.E. & Mackaronis, J.E., 2014; Toma, C.L., Hancock, J.T. & Ellison, N.B., 2008; Wetterneck, C.T., Burgess, A.J., Short, M.B., Smith, A.H. & Cervantes, M.E., 2012; Zheng, L. & Zheng, Y., 2014;), despite having large sample sizes, which would seem to undermine the very purpose of using quantitative methods. Whilst survey-based design affords consistency with which to track various phenomena it lacks the flexibility to address individual's expression of their sexuality. One of the final papers in the review (Shaughnessy & Byers, 2013) assessed the usefulness of single item variable questions in sexuality research. They concluded by cautioning against this methodology for a number of reasons including language and issues of understanding, including a lack of consistency in the terminology of sexual activity. Yet a number of the studies (Daneback et al.,2012; Daneback et al.,2013) were founded on such single item design.

Several of the studies analysed objects of the digital world including mining data from existing public message systems (Coon Sells, 2013), representations of self (Hall et al. 2012; Manago et al. 2014) and online dating profile content (Farr, 2011; Glasser et al; Morgan et al; Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). This existence of this digital communication systems data within research indicates the ongoing need to make sense of the interaction between social and the digital worlds. However, the preponderance of quantitative methodology, particularly the use of self-administered online questionnaires, found in the review would suggest the surfeit of data arising out the online milieu has the potential to skew social research toward more positivist approaches. Challenging these approaches is worth considering in the planning of internet research. It is unlikely that a nuanced understanding of social pressures, structure or process can be accurately drawn from surveying or after the fact data mining. However thematic and narrative analyses of data were found which did offer more qualitive depth (Chan, 2013; Coon Sells, 2013) within the methodological evaluation of the studies found.

3.4 Findings – Results and Thematic Breakdown

The papers found in this review covered a broad range of categories, but four main themes arose out of the studies reviewed; women's sexual identities, relationships, sexual behaviour online and sexual scripts.

3.4.1 Women's Sexual Identities

Within the review papers sexual identity was seen as almost synonymous with sexual orientation (Albright, 2008; Farr, 2011; Coon Sells, 2013; Daneback et al. 2013, DeHaan et al., 2013; Dir et el., 2013; Walker, 2014; Rubin & McLelland, 2015;), although the concepts of the performance of sexual identity (Bosch, 2011; Hall et al., 2012; Chan, 2013;) and the subversion of sexual identities (Chan, 2013; Walker, 2014) were also explored.

3.4.1.1 Sexual orientation

Of the studies relating sexual identity to orientation two groups of studies emerged; firstly comparative studies investigating the role of sexual identity (orientation) in various online sexual/ relational activities(Lever et al. 2008; Albright ,2013; Daneback et al., 2013; Dir et al., 2013;) and secondly studies relating to the formation, meaning, and acceptance of LGBT sexual identities(Coon Sells, 2013). It should be noted these studies are not the only papers within the review to utilise sexual orientation as a category within their methodology but the papers here were specific to refer sexual orientation as sexual identity within their titles and, or, abstracts. Results vary in these papers in terms of the significance of sexual identity and can be seen to be somewhat contradictory. Gender differences are generally more widely explored within the papers.

Albright (2013) found some variation in the use of the internet for sex seeking purposes by sexual orientation. Those reporting compulsive levels of sex seeking at more than 11 hours a week (2% of both women and men in the sample), were reported as more likely to be single and gay/lesbian or bisexual than heterosexual. Gay and lesbian participants followed by participants identifying as bisexual were more likely than single people to be looking for a serious relationship online. In terms of offline behaviour, gay and lesbian participants were twice as likely to have reported meeting fifty people or more from online activity, and three times as likely to have met more than one hundred offline. It was postulated that this reporting related to casual sexual encounters.

In the same paper Albright (2013) raises significant differences for women in terms of sex seeking activity irrespective of orientation, including greater likelihood of discussing sex online, which was attributed to the 'relational' (their emphasis) nature of such activities, in other words women like to engage with people about sex not just engage in sex. Women were also

found to be more likely to use their online experiences to influence interactions with their partners. As such women tended to see their online sexual activity as an adjunct to their offline lives. In addition, many women reported pressure to perform acts seen online and being subject to increased bodily scrutiny from their partner's online activity. This was also linked to reduction in actual sexual activity within some relationships.

In a paper on the role of expectancies in sexting behaviours (Dir et al., 2013) some small differences relating to sex and sexual identity were touched upon, sexting being the sending and receiving of sexual text or image message usually by mobile phone. Positive and negative sexting expectancies were found for all participants, but these expectancies and sexting behaviour were said to vary significantly in terms of gender, race, sexual identity and relationship status. It was stated that participants that identified as homosexual or bisexual received explicit images on their phones more often than those who identified as other. From an expectancy point of view the results lacked sufficient power to be significant due to the relatively low numbers (3.9% homosexual, 3.6% bisexual, 1.1% other - no disaggregation of sex of these figures was given). Women were stated to report stronger negative expectancies in relation to receiving sexts. It was postulated that variation in sexting activity could be related to different expectations of the outcomes of such sexting activity and that as such these differing expectations are responsible for any differences across all demographic groups not the characteristics of the groups themselves.

In contrast Daneback et al. (2013) found far more concordance across their sample when looking whether or not individuals felt the internet had fulfilled their sexual desires. Most women in their study reported they had fulfilled their sexual desires online 22% to a great extent and 59% to a small extent, with 18% not experiencing fulfilment. In this paper both sex and sexual identity had no bearing on the fulfilment of sexual desires online or the lack thereof. The paper concluded that these findings represented the fact that to a 'large population' the internet had become a space where they could fulfil their sexual desires regardless of sex and sexual identity (orientation).

Despite showing some variation in the way different demographic groups use online dating Lever et al. (2008) support the idea of the internet being of value to all. They contend the internet's capacity to allow people to screen for desired characteristics specific to individuals' tastes, and its potential for discretion, enables both LGBT and heterosexual users to explore and develop their sexual identities whilst building valuable social connections.

In the papers relating to formation and meaning of sexual identity Coon Sells (2013) follows up the notion of the benefit of social relationships developed online. The paper uses the concept of identity negotiation theory (Creswell, 2007 in Coon Sells, 2013), to explore use of online social spaces to as a means for LGBT people to define their sexual identity. It delineated the ways in which users of social platforms perceive their own identities and display them in the presence of others attempting to do the same visually and textually thus contributing to both their own and the overall sexual identity/ies of the platform's community. In this way a social media platform acts as a cultural entity, a community online where people express themselves, are perceived by others, perceive others around themselves and thus are part of an interactive process of formation of self and community.

This paper Coon Sells (2013) also outlines a process of sexual identity formation which recognises universal issues of managing emerging sexual feelings, behaviours, investigating relational intimacy and leading to an indication of sexual orientation. For LGBT young people this will mean contextualising same sex attractions and what this means for them within their own communities. A key theme arising from this work was the impression young people had of how others within offline communities viewed them, often negatively, which was a key driver for attempting to find safe online space to explore their sexual orientation.

3.4.1.2 Performance of sexual identity

External expectations of women's sexual identity as a theme arose within a number of papers (Chan, 2012; Hall et al, 2012; Bosch, 2013; DeHaan et al., 2013; Walker, 2014; Rubin & McClelland,2015). The principle of LGBT people finding safety online was reiterated in Dehaan et al. (2013) where this sense of safety was extended into the realm of sexual health in that the paper postulated that young people supplement the lack of quality sexual health information in their offline lives with more online sources, in addition to online social support.

By way of contrast however the internet itself is not always free of the expectations that exist offline as Rubin & McClelland (2015) demonstrate. In this work young people express their concerns about wider social platforms, such as Facebook, online communities where they have to manage their identity very carefully for fear of exposure. In effect the participants were seen to be confining themselves to a 'virtual closet' to reduce the likelihood of social exclusion relating to their orientation. This fear is echoed by participants in the work of Bosch 'Young women and 'technologies of self': Social Networking and sexualities (2011).

The internet being at once emancipatory and restrictive in this context is well illustrated by Walker (2014). Walker examined the experiences of women who sought sex with women online who did not relate to any lesbian or bisexual categorization. In doing so the participants

in Walker's (2014) study separated out their sex with women as an extension of their sexual needs, not their identity. Indeed, the methodology of the study (Walker, 2014) had to change to online data collection methods in order to maintain the strict anonymity these women sought, many of whom were in long term established heterosexual relationships. These sexual needs were largely attributed to abundant sex drives rather than a need to relate to women per se (Walker, 2014). This study turned on its head the notion or sexual script that women need relationships in order to enjoy their sexual lives. The women of this study described using the internet to find women to have sex with, rather than identify with, in as discreet a way as possible to maintain their outward heterosexual identities.

Clearly LGBT identity is not confined to one fixed mode of being rather a complex system exists within which women will negotiate their own distinct place as outlined in by Coon Sells, (2013) and DeHaan, (2013). Whilst from the outside stereotypes of these identities can be crudely drawn, the work of Farr (2011) explores the fluidity and complexity of the 'tomboy' identity. In the paper Farr unpicks the multiple meanings associated with the tomboy and its use within women seeking women personal ads. Farr (2011) highlights the breadth of identities within this term and argues the importance of its role in breaking down conventions of the butch/femme dichotomy within lesbian discourse, whilst still offering up resistance to societies rigid scripts of femininity. In other words, in investigating the breadth of representations within a niche aspect of lesbian identity Farr (2011) holds up a mirror to the often narrow expectations of what it is to be feminine in western society; heterosexual, sexually non-threatening, typically feminine and importantly not in any way masculine.

3.4.1.3 Subversion of sexual identities

This rebellion against expectations of feminine identity and sexual identity can also be seen in the work of Chan (2013) and Bosch (2011). In common with Bosch's paper on young South African women (2011), Chan (2013) explores narratives that govern married women's (si-nai) behaviour in terms of society's and family's expectations. Chan (2013) describes a very modest, essentially non-sexual, existence in which married women put their husband and children needs ahead of their own. This identity appears to translate to the online world in an outwardly conservative parenting forum. Bosch (2011) describes the self-editing that young women do in order to maintain standards expected of them by their families. Both groups of women find ways to subvert these expectations by creating subgroups with rebellious sexual banter (Chan, 2013) or utilizing mobile social networks less scrutinized by their families (Bosch, 2011).

In conclusion the papers reviewed have shown how internet can be seen as a platform to both mold individual's sexual identities but can also serve as a means to control individual's expression by replicating offline sociocultural restrictions. How women manage the freedoms and restrictions the digital world affords them is a key focus of this study.

3.4.2 Relationships in the digital age

The papers found in the review relating to the theme of relationships in the digital age can be broadly categorised as follows; the seeking of relationships online (Lever et al., 2008; Toma et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2010; Farr, 2011; Robnett and Feliciano, 2011; Wysocki and Childers, 2011; Lange et al., 2014; Walker, 2014), the ways in which online activity can maintain relationships (Delevi and Weisskirch, 2013; Shaughnessy and Byers, 2013) , online threats to relationships (Whitty and Quigley, 2008; Wysocki and Childers, 2011, Dijstra et al., 2013; O' Sullivan and Ronis, 2013;) and the mechanisms for approval of relationships online (DeHaan, 2012; Fox and Warber, 2013)

3.4.2.1 Relationship seeking online

In seeking relationships online women are seen to be exercising a great degree of control over what they want from relationships. The capacity to measure individual's preferences the internet now affords researchers is huge and mainly takes the form of public dating site profiles. Many studies in the review (Lever et al., 2008; Toma et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2010; Farr, 2011; Robnett and Feliciano, 2011; Lange et al., 2014; Walker, 2014) use data derived from the profiles of online daters to highlight the decision making processes and preferences women exhibit in seeking partners. The results are at times contradictory and most employ quantitative design which does not allow for analysis of the motivations those women uploading or responding to profiles.

What women want from relationships is as varied as women themselves as reflected in Morgan et al (2010) demonstrating differences in women's preferences over time in that older women were seen to place more emphasis on preferred personality factors than younger women. Those women that mentioned these factors in their preferences were also more likely to be seeking more committed relationships (Morgan et. al., 2010). It is suggested that significant differences exist in relationship preferences between younger and older women daters and found this was reflected in their profile but do not give any particular analysis of why this should be the case (Morgan et. al., 2010).

Whilst Albright (2008) also found women were more likely to be looking for serious relationships online, other studies subverted this notion including Walker (2013) who

highlighted women seeking women seeking women for specifically non-committal, often extra-marital, sex.

Much of the research grouped women together as a single variable in their analysis and gave little disaggregation except when describing their cohort (Morgan, et al., 2010; Coon Sells, 2013). However, some papers did more to explore differences between their female participants. Lever et al. (2008) noted that heterosexual women over 40 were significantly successful at forming serious relationships from internet personal ads. This success however was not described in terms of women's agency or talent for taking on new means of communication, rather it was described as function of 'overrepresentation' of a group otherwise 'disadvantaged in the offline (i.e. real world) courting market'. They go on to describe ageism starting to appear in men's profiles in relation to older women and lament this but at no point give any credence to women actually being successful in their offline relationships in their own right. They appear to suggest women have migrated online en masse and triumphed in spite of the adversity of their age.

In contrast with this disadvantaged, or indeed desperate, view of older women Lever et al. (2008) go on to outline the specific ways women use the online space to discriminate for they want from a relationship, which serves to promotes a more positive view of women being in control of their social and sexual lives. Seal et al. (2015) develop the idea of the women being more discerning online by outlining ways in which some women take an essentially a harm reduction approach to their use of sex seeking chat rooms online. Women in this study saw chat rooms as a means of conducting something of a 'background check' on prospective partners before meeting them offline. They also highlighted the confidence online spaces gave them in expressing what they wanted and rejecting people they did not want to connect with further (Seal et al., 2015). The women also outlined using online means to meet people purely for sex which runs counter to expectations of women wanting serious relationships at this age (Seal et al., 2015). This again serves to illustrate women subverting the narrow sexual scripts that abound relating to women's sexual appetites, or supposed lack thereof, and points to women exerting more control in their to relationships, short or long. Wysocki and Childers (2011) also noted the role of the internet in allowing women to go through a process 'weeding out' in appropriate dates and get to know more credible matches.

However, within Seal et al. (2015), study other women countered that no such digital safety exists, and that deception is widespread in online relationship seeking. 32% (not disaggregated) of respondents overall in the study reported negative experiences from meeting people they had first engaged with online, often because their date had

misrepresented themselves or their relationship status. Thus, the convenience of online interaction is tempered with concerns about safety, and integrity.

The potential for dishonesty in online interaction was explored by Toma et al. (2008). By examining self-presentation in dating profiles, the authors found that altering the facts about oneself online was endemic within the profiles of both men and women. As participants ratings of the accuracy of their profiles correlated closely to the measured accuracy of the profiles it was argued these inaccuracies, though small in scale and usually subtle, were deliberate falsifications. The effect of these small changes can be likened to the online version of putting your best foot forward in digital dating arena. In this way it could be said that this deception is akin to the self-editing people do at the beginning of offline relationships and is in effect an extension of offline relationship strategies. In other words, the women were employing similar behaviour online as they might do in other relationship forming settings.

In this way it is possible to recognise the humanity of interactions in the digital world. Despite the obvious potential for difficulty, there is still potential online to satisfy social and sexual relational needs. Morgan et al. (2010) argued the differences in the way dating profiles were written as women age could prove to be useful in understanding the dating identity differences between generations. Women as they age were seen to be more likely to refer to their achievements and personality and to seek these out in prospective partners than younger people (Morgan, et al., 2010). One explanation that can be offered for this difference is that women could be said to be rejecting restrictive and superficial beauty norms they were expected to live up to as younger women. Perhaps this emphasis on the hidden self shows women becoming more comfortable in their own skin and being more ready to portray themselves in their own terms and values.

Seal et al. (2015) recognise the importance of the online space to women to broaden the 'pool' of people they can interact with when seeking a new relationship. This is particularly valuable to women who are geographically or socially isolated. LGBT women benefit from this aspect also in being able to step outside of the social structures of their area and find friends and partners that prove difficult to meet in more heteronormative environments.

The world of choice offered to women can be seen to have a downside in that discernment can tip over into discrimination. Men were seen to be 3.5 times more likely to have a particular body type preference (Glasser et al. 2009) when entering online dating, but Glasser asserts women could potentially have such preferences but be less likely to feel able to express them openly due to prevailing sexual scripts and expectations. However, that does not mean that

body preference does not figure in women's dating choices. At the time of the review no research has emerged from the review relating to newer dating applications such as Tinder which are predicated on decisions based on physical appearance in the first instance. Women across all demographic groups have joined up to this process suggesting women are just as happy as men to rate their prospective partners physically.

Of greater concern was the data relating to race and dating outlined in Robnett and Feliciano (2011) study which explored heterosexual dating profiles for racial-ethnic exclusion. Robnett and Feliciano (2011) found evidence that gender was a key determinant to openness to interracial dating and that women were in their study were more likely to state a racial preference for their dates. In addition both white and black women were more likely than their male counterparts to prefer date only within their race, and white women and men were least likely to wish to interracially date, with 65% of white women preferring to date only white men (Robnett and Feliciano, 2011). White women were also the least likely to express a desire to date solely outside their racial group at 4% (Robnett and Feliciano, 2011). That women were prepared to voice these choices but not body preference is very concerning. Within this study black women and Asian men were found to be more highly excluded than black men and Asian women in online dating, Robnett and Feliciano (2011) argue these results illustrate the gendered nature of racial acceptance and as such need to incorporated into existing theories of race relations. It should be recognised that this particular study is based on an American sample which may not be directly replicable in the UK or Europe, but clearly race has a real impact on women's dating choices and experiences online. This study amply illustrates the crossover into the online space of external problematic socio-cultural influences.

This sobering aspect of online interaction is contrasted with the positive experiences that women can get from online interaction. Whilst as discussed here social media does have disadvantages in terms of balancing freedom of communication, connectedness, privacy and expectation but undoubtedly the success of online communication lies in its capacity to create communities online. In this way women can be seen to be active participants in the creation of digital culture, as opposed to being merely passive consumers. These communities often provide women with powerful back up to fend off the external societal expectations of them as Chan (2013) attested to.

3.4.2.2 Online approval of relationships

Another aspect of the cultural support online is the approval women can receive for their relationships from their specific online communities. DeHaan (2012) outlined the gaps that LGBT young people felt in their communities and the safer social networks they explored

online. This activity fostered friendship and romantic relationships which were positively accepted by their online communities which could be then taken offline increasing their real-world quality of life (DeHaan, 2012). Forming these relationships without the anonymity and distance of the online space was far more difficult offline and sometimes dangerous.

An important element in the acknowledgement of relationships online is the status they are given in social media. Fox and Warber (2013) found that the young women in their study placed more significance on their relationships being 'Facebook official' than young men and believed this indicated the relationship to be serious and exclusive. Becoming 'Facebook official' relates to the changing of a Facebook profile to indicate the person is in now in a relationship. The external approval this provides these young women, both offline and on could be said to illustrate a need for recognition of social success, or conversely a need to avoid social stigma or judgement. It is worth noting that along with relationship status being front and centre in a Facebook profile newly opened Facebook says rather baldly 'you have 0 friends', this creates in a concrete way the need to change this status and successfully delineate just how many friends a profile holder has and that they have a relationship to report on, as opposed to having worth in themselves. As differences have been shown in the way women present themselves in dating profiles it would make intuitive sense that women would present differently on social media, but no such research has come up in this review to map use across generations.

The reportage generated in social media platforms have evolved over time in that visual applications such as Instagram and Snapchat have begun to threaten the dominance of Facebook in social media. Uploading photos to Facebook has always been central to its appeal but both Instagram and Snapchat use the photograph as communication in and of itself further adding to the performance expected in the online space. This only adds to pressure to perform online to those who are invested in their digital lives.

3.4.2.3 Maintenance of relationships online

Recognising that pressures exist to attain relationships does not negate the potential for digital life to maintain relationships as well as approve or create them. Both Shaughnessy and Byers (2013) and Delevi and Weisskirch (2013) highlight ways in which online behaviour contributes to the maintenance of relationships. Sexual activity online between partners, known or unknown, sometimes referred to cybersex has become the focus of much research on digital behaviour. Investigating cybersex experiences, Shaughnessy and Byers (2013) found that significantly more women reported cybersex with an established partner than with anonymous contacts and also reported that this would be their preferred choice of cybersex in future. This

reflects women's use of new technology to enhance the sexual repertoire of their relationships.

Delevi (2013) explored the phenomena of sexting, the use of mobile devices to send and receive sexually suggestive text messages or photographs. Sexting has been explored in research closely due to the potential for social harm to come to participants, very often women, when digital images move out of their control. Far from being the ill-judged activity it is often portrayed as, Delevi (2013) found sexting was something that many women did but not frequently. Women were seen to exercise careful judgement in their participation in sexting behaviour and needed to feel comfortable within a committed relationship to engage in this activity at all (Delevi, 2013). In this way women were seen to use sexting to maintain valued relationships, as opposed to instigating new ones.

Unfortunately, just as women gain some control over a new element of their sexual expression a worrying new sexual script has evolved around sexting. After the loss of control of the sexual images women are often blamed for creating them when they are subverted by their intended participants (Jackson, 2016). In parallel with myths associated with other sexual offences, principally rape, it is women's actions that are often more open to scrutiny when things go wrong in these scenarios. In other words, women are criticised for creating sexual images rather than those who subvert their trust, in a mirror image of the discourse around women and the 'prevention' of rape.

3.4.2.4 Online threats to relationships

Wysocki and Childers (2011) explored the relationship between cybersex, sexting and infidelity and found women to be more likely to engage in sexting and just as likely as the men surveyed to be unfaithful both offline and on. These results, whilst potentially on the surface, not palatable could be said to attest to women's successful adaptation to the new ways of relating online. Behaviour of the nature reported here favours a view of women's acting out their self-determined priorities and needs rather than following a script written for them by society.

Exploring the nature this online infidelity in comparison to offline behaviour was a feature of a number of studies in the review that examined online threats to offline relationships (Whitty and Quigley, 2008; Dijstra et al., 2013; O' Sullivan and Ronis, 2013). In a study looking into young people's online sexual activities in relation to their cheating behaviours O'Sulivan and Ronis found that young women who engaged in online sex chat very much increased their odds of reporting cheating or poaching behaviours. That is to say the girls surveyed were far more likely to kiss someone other than their partner or engage in kissing with someone they knew to have a partner if they had reported participating in online sexual chat. O' Sullivan and

Ronis (2013) suggest that online sexual chat could serve as an indicator of sexual adventurousness in young women, further research is required to determine the significance of these results for work around sexual identity development, links to sexual problems and the potential prevention of harm.

It has been suggested that online infidelity may be perceived differently in comparison to real life behaviour. Whitty and Quigley (2008) tested this notion to establish if any sex differences exist in this process in line with previous studies of emotional versus sexual infidelity (Shackelford and Buss, 1996 in Whitty and Quigley, 2008). None of the participants in the study viewed online infidelities ahead of offline concerns and were unlikely to relate online activities to love. Some support was given to previous research in relation to sex differences in jealousy in that when asked to make the choice women rated emotional infidelity as more upsetting than sexual infidelity where men felt the opposite (Whitty and Quigley, 2008).

Dijkstra et al. (2013) further explored the nature of jealousy in response to infidelity both offline and on. Using two measures of jealousy, one based on betrayal and anger, the other on threat. It was found that betrayal/anger related jealousy was reported primarily in relation to sexual transgression in both online and offline scenarios (Dijkstra et al., 2013). Threat related jealousy occurred mainly Dijkstra et al. (2013) noted in relation to two online scenarios relating to emotional connection with another person via text messaging or developing a strong bond with someone through communicating online. Women were seen to have stronger feelings of jealousy, in comparison to men, in relation to a number of the online scenarios given in comparison to some of the offline examples (Dijkstra et al., 2013). This was suggested to be potentially related to women's lack of computer skills and which would lead to feelings of being out of control of their partner's behaviour online or frustration at their lack of ability to track their partner's behaviour online (Dijkstra et al., 2013). This attribution was backed by references to one Central Bureau of Statistics (2006, in Dijkstra et al., 2013) study of Dutch men and women which suggested 62% women compared to 48% men had little or no computer skills. Given that previous research has offered a range of complex theories as to why differing jealousy patterns exist in men and women relating to infidelity from evolutionary reproductive imperatives though to socio-cognitive models based on differing perceptions of love this computer skills-based explanation seems somewhat thin in comparison.

Miller et al. (2014) put forward another alternative view of the drivers of jealousy in relation to online activity. Using photographs of various forms of physical touch between two opposite sex models Miller et al. (2014) sought to establish if participants attachment style had any bearing on their reactions to scenarios they were shown. Women were shown to have strong

reactions to jealousy invoking material presented, along with fearful males and anxiously attached individuals which would suggest that differing patterns in jealousy may also be attributable to wider psychological differences between people based on their views of the quality of their relationship and their security within it.

Miller et al. (2014) picked up on the wealth of evidence left online by social media interaction, often visible in nature such as photographs, which can serve to drive jealousy in ways not experienced by previous generations. The authors cited the work of Muise et al. (2009) as an exploration of this threat to relationship satisfaction. Muise et al. (2009) found a significant relationship between amount of time spent on Facebook and levels of jealousy related feelings and jealousy induced Facebook behaviours. It was suggested that evidence found on Facebook could drive participants to spend more time online which could result in more time to find, examine and deliberate over the evidence found (Muise et al., 2009). The visible nature of Facebook was described as a mechanism to further enhance the distress jealousy caused to individuals based on the feeling of losing face if/when others witnessed the evidence uncovered (Muise et al., 2009). This has the effect of creating a loop which can be very difficult to remove oneself from. As the young women in the study spent considerably more time on Facebook their potential to develop jealousy issues from their use could reasonably be expected to be greater (Muise et al., 2009). The rationale behind this model of difference in jealousy appears stronger than women lacking in computer skill as mentioned previously. In effect it could be said that too much information is provided to these women which in real life would not have been afforded to them and as a result proprietorial behaviour emerges disproportionate to often entirely innocent but visible interchanges. The authors suggest that research need to be done to examine the effect this element of information mining would have on older adults (Muise et al., 2009). With age comes a longer list of past partners and potentially greater risk of actual infidelity as well as jealous interpretation of social reconnections made online.

Continuing the theme of too much information Muscanell et al. (2013) supported the idea that differences in jealousy may be driven by the information displayed online but develop this notion by suggesting the way it is presented also has a bearing on how viewers respond. The openness of Facebook profiles is set by individual's privacy settings. By giving participants a range of scenarios based of differing profile privacy settings and the inclusion or not of couple's photographs, Muscanell et al. (2013) sought to explore the effects this would engender. Again, women's reactions tended to be stronger in response to the scenarios and showed that even quite ambiguous information could be used to develop strong negative emotions in viewers of Facebook profiles (Muscanell et al., 2013). It would appear the women

in this study sought a great deal of reassurance from profiles that they may others wise have lacked. Facebook profiles and other forms of social media offer so much information to read between lines of that they can overwhelm as well as inform their participants.

The wealth of research found concerning relationships in the digital age marks the huge significance the change of communication technology has brought into women's lives and illustrates the complexity this change has wrought. Women, to all intents and purposes, cannot opt out of the digital life as more and more aspects of our daily lives migrate online and so have to manage the impact on their relationships as described here whether they chose to or not. Women are continuing to develop ways to meet these challenges and opportunities as their digital involvement grows within their specific online communities.

3.4.3 Sexual behaviour online

Much of the research in this section outlines the diversity of sexual behaviours that women take part in online and the attitudes that are evolving to this behaviour (Grov et al., 2011; Daneback et al. 2011, 2012, 2013; Shaughnessy & Byers, 2013, 2014; Byers & Shaughnessy, 2014; Lupton, 2014; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). Within the subject of sexual behaviour online there is also a focus on sexting as a distinct activity in a number of the papers (Wysocki and Childers, 2011, Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Dir et al., 2013; Strassberg et al., 2013, 2014;). The use of pornography is widely established as the most common sexual behaviour online and is explored in section also (Albright, 2008; Paul & Shim, 2008; Paul, 2009; Wright 2013). Finally this section explores research that has highlighted some of the problematic issues that can arise from sexual behaviour online (Whitty and Quigley, 2008; Ross et al., 2011; Corley and Hook, 2012; Green et al., 2012; Wetterneck et al., 2012; Dijkstra et al., 2013; O'Sullivan & Ronis, 2013; Laier et al., 2014).

3.4.3.1 Diversity of sexual behaviour online

As with any other aspect of sexuality, sexual behaviour online is a diverse group of activities reflecting the range of sexual needs of those online. It is worthy to note that not all sexual activity online is arousal oriented, that is to say not all activity with a sexual purpose online is directly related to a sexual act. Many women use the internet for information that will guide their offline sexual behaviour or inform decisions regarding sexual health. Sexual information seeking of this nature was explored by Daneback et al. (2012) who noted that three specific reasons to seek out sexuality information online; to achieve knowledge of their bodies, find information relating to how to have sex, and to explore their 'curiosity about sex'. Women aged 35-49 and 50-65 were most likely to seek information about sexuality online due to curiosity first, sex knowledge second and body information third (Daneback et al., 2012). This

contrasted with younger women whose most searched for information was about their body (Daneback et al., 2012). Overall more young women looked for all three of the forms of information than older women (Daneback et al., 2012). From this a generational difference can be seen in that it appears that women know more of their bodies as they age but perhaps feel out of touch with prevailing sexual mores in comparison to younger women.

The online environment also affords women the opportunity to find materials or products that will enhance their offline sexual lives. In recent time sexual products such as vibrators and other sex enhancing products have become much more acceptable to purchase to the extent that specialist high street chains have developed, and supermarkets now stock extended ranges of products often alongside their condom range. Not all women feel comfortable purchasing in these environments however and so prefer to view such products in more private circumstances. Daneback et al. (2011) found that those purchasing sexual products online tended to be older adults in relationships, who reported relatively high levels of sexual activity. Women and men differed little in their reasons for purchasing products online both citing convenience as the main reason they bought their products online (Daneback et al., 2011). Where men and women differed was in the products they bought, women favouring sex toys such as vibrators where men bought more pornographic visual material (Daneback et al., 2011). Daneback et al. (2011) proposed that investment in these products indicated increasing levels of normality associated with this merchandise and a desire to exercise a greater level of control over their purchase than in a traditional retail environment. It could be argued also from this evidence that older women can be seen to be exercising greater agency in their sexual lives as they age built upon their understanding of what they want from sex and what they can do to optimise their sexual experiences.

The ubiquity in the use of digital devices to run day to day communications and coordinate our lives has been enabled in no small part to the use of apps, software applications which offer discreet additional downloadable functions to phones and tablet computers. News, weather, shopping and other mundane needs often are monitored or conducted through these apps and the field of health is a growing area of app consumption.

Where once women used diaries to note the timings of their menstrual cycles apps now can do this and in addition offer fertility advice in the process. Whilst the proliferation of what appears to be helpful tech of this nature is often adopted with little thought some researchers are concerned about the level of intimacy women are giving away often unknowingly to the programmers of these apps. Lupton (2014) analysed apps to track not only menstrual cycle and fertility but also sexual behaviour and partner tracking. Lupton (2014) does recognise the

benefits of these apps to their users but highlights concerns over the amount of the data they create and its value, and potential traceability, to private healthcare businesses and insurance providers. It is also argued that these apps serve to promote a narrow heteronormative reproductive view of sexual behaviour (Lupton, 2014).

The actual diversity in sexual behaviour online however is represented by much of the research in this section. Daneback et al. (2013) asked a fundamental question in their research, do people fulfil their sexual desires online? From a sample of 1614 adults (62% women, 38% men, aged 18 to 65) the answer was yes from 80% of participants (21% to a great extent and 59% to a small extent). No sex or sexual identity differences were found in the study as regards sexual fulfilment meaning women were just as likely as men to be fulfilled by their sexual explorations online (Daneback et al., 2013). The range of activities the sample engaged in to gain this fulfilment illustrates the diverse ways in which women find sexual satisfaction online and includes; reading erotic stories, watching pornography, talking about sex, sexual information seeking, buying sexual merchandise, seeking romantic and sexual partners, and having cybersex(Daneback et al., 2013). The range of these behaviours serves to draw attention to the fact that most people could find something that was interest to them as a sexual being online, arousal oriented or not.

Grov et al., (2009), in one of the early studies in the sample, explored the impact of online sexual activities (OSA) on real life relationships and found positive benefits for women involved in this behaviour including more and better quality sex with their partners, and from this increased levels of intimacy. Being involved in OSA with partners was also said to promote better sexual communication between partners (Grov et al., 2009).

One way of measuring how embedded these behaviours have become in the sexual lives of women is to ascertain the attitudes women hold towards sexual behaviour online. Shaughnessy et al. (2013) examined the self- appraisals of two types of arousal related behaviour (solo and partnered) in both student and community samples, put simply they asked women how they felt about the sexual behaviour they undertook alone or with partners online. Overall women viewed their participation in such activities as positive and commonplace (Shaughnessy et al., 2013). No gender or sexual orientation differences were found in the study relating to online sexual behaviour of either type, solo or partnered. This led Shaughnessy et al. (2013) to conclude that this behaviour had ‘little impact’ on those that participated in it and served mainly as an occasional sexual outlet to participants. That is to say the sexual behaviours the women in this study participated in did not result in negative consequences and were an infrequent element of a normal sexual repertoire for them.

Shaughnessy and Byers (2013) went on to examine partner choice in relation to cybersex, that is to say partnered sexual activity online. The study measured the frequency of cybersex with partners not known, partners known to each other but not in a relationship and primary partners (Shaughnessy et al., 2013). They found that cybersex with a primary partner was most common, most frequent and also the most desired type of cybersex for women (Shaughnessy et al., 2013). In a later study Byers & Shaughnessy (2014) found attitudes to three kinds of sexual activity online (non-arousal, solo-arousal and partnered arousal) to be neutral to slightly positive on average in the women of their study. A small group of women in their sample however were positive towards non-arousal and partnered arousal but negative towards solo-arousal activity (Byers & Shaughnessy, 2014). Byers & Shaughnessy (2014) suggest this anomaly may be due in part to traditional views of women's sexual behaviour that frame female masturbation as shameful or taboo. These two studies taken together highlight the potential impact of sexual scripts on women's view of themselves and their sexual behaviour. Shaughnessy and Byers (2013) showed that women were far more likely to want to and to experience cybersex with established partners which could be said to support traditional relational scripts. Byers & Shaughnessy (2014) then illustrate some women's discomfort with self-pleasure as part of cybersex as this behaviour does not conform to the script of sex within the confines an established relationship. These studies could show that far from being transgressive activities for some women online sexual activity can be an extension of widely held notions of women's sexual roles.

Within the research relating to sexual behaviour online sexting as a distinct activity was the focus of a number of studies. As said previously sexting is the sending and receiving of sexual text or photograph via mobile devices. Delevi and Weisskirch (2013) noted that many women have participated in sexting but mostly infrequently and mainly for the purpose maintaining valued relationships. Dir et al., (2013) explored variations in sexting behaviour from the perspective of what outcome people expected from it and argued that these expectations drove differences between people's approaches. Again they found that although sexting widespread it happened relatively infrequently for most of their participants, in other words most people had sent or received sexts but this did not happen often for most people (Dir et al., 2013). Women had more negative expectancies regarding receiving sext messages and single women were more cautious regarding sexting than those in a relationship (Dir et al., 2013). This could be said to support the findings that women in committed relationships are more likely to sext as a means of maintaining their relationship rather than attempting to find one. This finding seemed to be supported by the work of Strassberg et al., (2014) with younger

women reflecting on their high school sexting behaviours, the vast majority of this activity happening between girls and their boyfriends at the time.

Women can be seen to be using their real-world expectations of sexual behaviour and what they want from their established relationships to guide their online behaviours. Online behaviours have their place but do not tend to lead women's sexual relationships rather they are more likely to be chosen carefully to enhance existing partnerships. Women tend, from the evidence gathered here, to exercise caution online but do recognise the benefits they can achieve online in terms of enhanced sexual communication and better-quality sexual experience for their relationships. It would appear that for women sexual behaviour online is more likely to be occurring for specific purposes rather than as a means to an end.

3.4.3.2 Pornography

Albright (2008) outlined the ways in which women saw pornography as means of improving their sex lives by instigating arousal and enhancing sexual communication. These benefits however were in contrast to negative outcomes that women could experience in relation to their partners use of pornography including their partners reduced satisfaction in their appearance and pressure to perform acts routinely depicted online (Albright, 2008).

Grov et al., (2011) reiterated women's concerns about partner's online sexual behaviour in addition to the finding that women were less likely overall to participate in online sexual behaviour than men. Women in this this study were not uniformly against their partners use of online pornography but were less likely to view it favourably than men (Grov et al., 2011). It was also found that women in this study also reported more negative consequences in relation to their partner's use of pornography (Grov et al., 2011). Despite this it should be said that Grov et al., (2011) found the majority of women, 67% in this study, associated no negative consequences to their partner's behaviour. The authors also outlined the positive benefits many of the women identified using pornography with their partners (Grov et al., 2011). This provides further evidence of the notion that women conduct online sexual activity as an adjunct to their offline lives, as opposed to being a sexual means to an end.

The differences between men and women's use pornography are explored by Paul and Shim (2008). The results of this study indicated that although men and women had the same motivations for using pornography, namely, to maintain relationships, mood management, habitual use and fantasy, that men experienced these motivations with more intensity than women (Paul & Shim, 2008). In this way, the authors argue, women are less motivated to seek out pornographic material online and as a result do so less than men (Paul & Shim, 2008).

Women's use of pornography was seen to be driven by other personality factors than just their sexual interests. Paul (2009) found that mainstream pornography viewing could be positively correlated to dispositional sexual affect. Dispositional sexual affect can be said to be the continuum illustrating the extent to which a person responds positively, erotophilia, or negatively, erotophobia, to sexual stimuli. In other words, dispositional sexual affect reflects how sexually interested or motivated a person happens to be (Paul, 2009). It makes intuitive sense to find that those women with higher levels of erotophila, a stronger sexual affect, are more likely to use pornography, but this correlation did not extend to more specialist forms of pornography. Instead this type of behaviour was found to be more closely related to levels of psychopathy in women's personality profiles (Paul, 2009).

Paul (2009) contended that those women with stronger senses of sexual affect found a better psychological fit with more mainstream material and that watching more extreme forms of sexual behaviour was not necessarily sexually stimulating rather it stimulated their need for 'antisocial or sensation seeking' material. The idea of psychological fit Paul (2009) refers to derives from Mosher's sexual involvement theory (Mosher, 1980 in Paul, 2009) which proposes that individuals will be more stimulated by material which reflects their individual sexual scripts, attitudes and experience. This study (Paul, 2009) is of interest on a number of levels in that it proposes a model for the mechanisms driving women's pornography use and also highlights the concept of pornography gratifying non-sexual needs. In doing so this research underlines the concept that pornography should not be approached as one entity, but rather it requires careful categorisation (Paul, 2009). The potential for the more extreme pornography that can be found online to provide anti-social stimulation has implications for how women and /or their partners use pornography and its subsequent impact on their relationships.

Wright's study (2013) investigated the effect pornography may have on women by exploring the relationship between women's pornography viewing habits and their views on extramarital sex. A positive association was found and was attributed to higher levels of confidence in media, lower levels of religious affiliation and lower levels of education (Wright, 2013). Whilst this study focuses on one narrow indicator of the impact of pornography the study does mention the dearth of studies in this topic pertaining to women and so merits attention.

The role of pornography in women's lives has been shown to be complex although like other aspects of online sexuality women pick and choose when to use pornography and often in relation to enhancing their relationships, as opposed to being a singular activity. There is certainly a lack of qualitative research indicating any sense of meaning or impact in relation to

women's use of pornography. The research found in this section, other than that of Wright (2014), is not particularly recent and so does not coincide well with the uptake of smartphone technology for example which have had a huge impact on the way women interact with others and engage with the internet, and potentially therefore pornography.

3.4.3.3 Problems arising from sexual behaviour online

Much of the research found in this search focussed on the problems that arise from sexual behaviour online. Within this research jealousy and infidelity have been widely covered as issues and discussed earlier in this review (Whitty and Quigley, 2008, Dijkstra et al., 2013; O'Sullivan & Ronis, 2013;). In addition to this a number of papers focus on issues of compulsive behaviour in relation to sex and the internet (Ross et al., 2011; Corley and Hook, 2012; Green et al., 2012; Wetterneck et al., 2012; Laier et al., 2014).

In line with other research around pornography (Paul and Shim, 2008) Ross et al. (2012) found lower levels of problematic sexual internet use in women than in men but still found significant levels within their sample to merit concern. 5% of women polled considered themselves to have 'some problem' whilst 2% exhibited serious problems across five modalities measured (Ross et al., 2012). Viewing pornography was noted to be a significant factor in the sexual problems stated by participants in the study, as well as the sourcing of some extreme elements of content within pornography (Ross et al., 2012). In this way Ross et al. (2012) suggest, though not conclusively, that sexual internet problems were a form of internet addiction as opposed to a subset of sexual addictions.

This position is challenged by a number of other studies (Green et al., 2012; Wetterneck et al., 2012; Laier et al., 2014) which highlight the impulsive and compulsive nature of sexual internet problems deriving from the strongly reinforcing nature of sexual stimulus in these behaviours. In other words, the more a person experiencing difficulty with pornography views the more they want to see. This coupled with the easy availability of sexual content online and ever-increasing internet access could suggest a model of the potential for women to experience addictive behaviours with regard to pornography. In addition social and background factors were highlighted which would appear to put some women at increased risk of developing of sexual problems online including experience of childhood sex abuse, exposure to pornography as a child, previous sexual addiction problems and experience of mental ill health (Corley & Hook, 2012).

This research then seems to suggest that whilst women experience less problems online than men, probably due to their differing levels sexual behaviour online, significant issues still arise for some women particularly where they have specific vulnerabilities to other sexual problems.

As women's lives become more and more immersed in the digital world which hosts such high levels of sexual content, the research collated here appear to suggest the potential for the difficultie described here are likely to remain.

3.4.4 Sexual Scripts

Sexual scripts have theoretically underpinned much of the research reviewed here (Bosch, 2011; Daneback et al., 2011; Wysocki & Childers, 2011; Chan, 2012; Wright, 2013; Shaughnessy & Byers, 2014; Walker, 2014; Manago et al., 2015; Rubin & McClelland, 2015) covering a range of topics that can be grouped broadly into three themes the role of sexual scripts in social media, the visualisation of sexual scripts and role of sexual scripts for adult women.

3.4.4.1 Sexual scripts in social media

The young women in Rubin and McClelland, (2015; 521) described what they to be the 'virtual closet' in their experience of Facebook. The participants revealed how they felt under significant pressure to conform to heteronormative standards and worried about being exposed or inadvertently exposing themselves online (Rubin & McClelland, 2015). The process of 'emotional labour' by which they managed their identities was clearly of great personal strain to the young women involved (Rubin & McClelland, 2015; 521). It could be said in this setting (Facebook) heteronormativity exists as a prevailing sexual script which is felt most keenly by women who do not relate to this identity. In other words, the mainstream nature Facebook as a platform encourages a culture of heterosexual performance and approval which serves to exclude those outside the script.

The difficulties of managing non-heterosexual identities on public forums echoed Bosch's (2011) study that recognised this issue for LGBT young women but also identified key concepts in young women's identity development which were performed online. This study noted the role Facebook and other platforms played in creating a 'cult of femininity' which both highlighted young women's place in their culture but also helped them to live up to these archetypal roles (Bosch, 2011; 75). In other words, social media showed them what it was to be a girl and allowed them in turn to show the world the girls they had become. It could be said then that social media becomes part of the fabric of society in a real sense in that it becomes part of the process by which it (society) monitors, evaluates and alters itself over time. This process is made concrete in changing of status online. As noted previously Fox and Marber, (2013) outlined the value placed on being 'Facebook official' which could be said to allow young women to illustrate their success in conforming to traditional sexual scripts.

Despite the undoubted effects of sexual scripts online there are a large number of papers which have been explored already within this review, primarily in the sections relating to

identity and relationships, which attest to the means by which digital life can and does enable women to explore their identities in positive way and in so doing find information, support, friendship and lasting relationships (Lever et al., 2008; Farr, 2011; Daneback et al., 2012; Coon Sells, 2013; Daneback et al., 2013; DeHaan, 2013; Seal et al., 2015).

3.4.4.2 Visualising sexual scripts

Manago et al., (2015) related the use of photographs online to self-objectification and argued that by participating in social media in this way young women and men were increasingly becoming to view their sense of worth as function of their physical appearance, and as a result become more and more inured to being seen as a sexual object online. Put simply the more that young women uploaded images of themselves the more they came to rely on being liked online, particularly sexually, to feel successful (Manago et al., 2015). This process was seen to be concerning not just in itself but because of the relationship between this sense of 'objectified body consciousness' contributing to an increased potential for 'body shame' and consequentially lower levels of 'sexual assertiveness'. (Manago et al., 2015; 1). The authors describe how the posting of photographs allows for the viewing of oneself from an outsider's point of view which could be achieved through a number of different media platforms leading to a 'disembodied experience of the self' (Manago et al., 2015; 3). This may have wider implications in terms of the judgement of risk in real life terms or have the potential to have a negative impact on mental wellbeing.

The power that the approval of social media can offer would appear to merit the risk in incurring a negative judgement on the part of the young women involved in visual displays online. Recently YouTube videos have appeared from teenage girls asking for their attractiveness to be rated with depressingly predictable results. That young women see themselves through the lens of public opinion is deeply worrying for their future sense of self and consequently their chances of developing agency which could be positively applied to their sexual lives.

3.4.4.3 Sexual scripts and adult women

Two papers previously referred to in the section on sexual identity to shed some light on nature of adult women's specific online interactions (Chan, 2012; Walker, 2014). The si-nai (married mothers) of Chan's (2012) study appear on the surface to subscribe to the cultural and largely asexual scripts set for them within their culture. The website they converse on is after all a forum for mothers, and much of the discussion initiated revolves around their children and the performance of being a good si-nai dedicated to family first and foremost (Chan, 2012). Chan (2012) suggests this performance erodes after time and the establishment

of sexual in-jokes, often aping flirting and making sexual comment about other online friends, begins. This process becomes bound in trust and functions as something of a safety valve for these women to let out their true sexual nature (Chan, 2012). In this way the participants could be said to be using scripts to meet other women like themselves and free each other from the restrictive nature of their societies and family's expectations of them.

Walker (2014) illustrates women taking further steps from the scripts ascribed to them, whilst holding on to them themselves. The participants in this study were adult women who sought out other women for sex (Walker, 2014). Common to all the participants was the sense that they were not looking for relationships rather they sought sex with women to fulfil specific sexual needs that were otherwise not met in their lives and that they all had a heterosexual partner (Walker, 2014). These women hid their sexual behaviour with women from their partner and other friends and family as they did not classify their behaviour as cheating but realised their significant other might (Walker, 2014). Most of the women 26 out of 34 still identified themselves as heterosexual the remainder as bisexual (Walker, 2014). These women completely understand what is expected of them and the consequences that would arise from their behaviour but are not willing to conform to what they see as unreasonable scripts. Their same sex attraction undermines the traditional sexual script but just as significantly so does their separation of sexual action from the confines of a relationship. In this way these women assert their sexual needs in their own terms and perform the sexual script in a manner that suits them in the rest of their lives.

The two examples here give strong evidence of women's awareness of, and preparedness to transgress, these scripts within limits set by themselves, and as such are illustrative of adult women's agency in their sexual lives.

3.5 Conclusion – Overview of the evidence

With the immersion in the digital world women have encountered a new frontier in their sexual lives with the potential to exert great influence on their sexual identity. The evidence gathered here shows numerous ways in which women are sexual online with and without intention. The performance and presentation of women's lives, their relationships and sexuality have become open to society in an unprecedented fashion in a matter of a decade. What this means for these women will be the subject of this ongoing research proposal.

The evidence gathered from this review can summarised as follows Dijkstra

- Sexual identity was widely applied in the literature as a term for sexual orientation when exploring LGBT experience (Albright, 2008; Farr, 2011; Coon Sells, 2013; Daneback et al. 2013, DeHaan et al., 2013; Dir et al., 2013; Walker, 2014; Rubin & McLelland, 2015;). Alongside this research notions of performance of (Bosch, 2011; Hall et al., 2012; Chan, 2013;) and subversion of (Chan, 2013; Walker, 2014) sexual identity online were also observed. As such sexual identity was mostly defined within an LGBT framing in the main or explored in terms of performativity or transgression. In this way LGBT women's experience could be seen as an exemplar in the literature (Coon Sells, 2013) to open up the possibility that the internet could offer the means to support, facilitate or indeed create sexual identity.
- The internet was found to be the resource many women used to be both seek (Lever et al., 2008; Toma et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2010; Farr, 2011; Robnett and Feliciano, 2011; Wysocki and Childers, 2011; Lange et al., 2014; Walker, 2014) and also to maintain their relationships (Delevi and Weisskirch, 2013; Shaughnessy and Byers, 2013). Older women were better represented in terms of data in these studies, but some of the analysis of this data leant on stereotypical notions of older womanhood (Lever et al, 2008). Evidence also suggested that the internet had deleterious effects on relationships (Whitty and Quigley, 2008; Wysocki and Childers, 2011; Dijkstra et al., 2013; O' Sullivan and Ronis, 2013;) as a consequence of infidelity (Whitty and Quigley, 2008; Dijkstra et al., 2013; O' Sullivan and Ronis, 2013;) or jealousy (Muise et al., 2009; Muscanell et al., 2013; Miller et. Al. 2014). Socially the internet had also brought about novel means for the approval, and presentation, of relationships which added a layer of management to social life in the digital age (Fox and Warber, 2013).
- Evidence suggested that women do use the internet for a diverse range of sexual purposes (Daneback et al. 2011, 2012, 2013; Grov et al., 2011; Shaughnessy & Byers, 2013, 2014; Byers & Shaughnessy, 2014; Lupton, 2014; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). As time goes on these behaviours are becoming increasingly common and normalised. The use of pornography was described as a common feature of sexual behaviour online (Albright, 2008; Paul & Shim, 2008; Paul, 2009; Wright 2013). Sexting though covered widely in the literature (Wysocki and Childers, 2011; Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Dir et al., 2013; Strassberg et al., 2013, 2014;) was recognised as irregular activity which tended to be carefully judged behaviour contingent on relationship factors. In the

main women often appear to use the internet as an adjunct to their offline sexual lives and mainly choose the activities they part with careful consideration of their context.

- Some evidence was found to suggest that the initial optimism engendered by the free spirit of the early internet was being eroded as cultural and sexual scripts were beginning to exert an influence online particularly in large scale social media sites such as Facebook (Bosch, 2011). This however was countered by the illustration of elements of transgression and subversion of sexual scripts (Chan, 2012; Walker, 2014).

The following gaps were apparent in the evidence

- Investigations specific to adult women's online sexual lives were lacking, particularly in the qualitative sense. A number of studies specifically mention this lack or research, including Wright (2014) who recognised the surfeit of evidence based on college age women's experience.
- Issues related to privacy, presentation and performance, key areas of social media experience, tend to focus on young women's experiences and may not directly relate to older women's lives.
- Research into sexual behaviour online often focussed on the potential for problems in the use of internet for sexual purposes or measuring sexual behaviour online rather than evaluating the experiences of women online and offline in the digital age.
- Consequently, the context of sexual behaviour online was not very clear. The way in which women manage their sexual lives online and how they view themselves as sexual beings in the digital age were lacking in the literature.

3.6 Foreshadowed Questions

The evidence gathered in the review prompted a number of questions.

First, what sense do women have of their sexual identity? Secondly have they actively considered it over time?

The evidence within the data gathered within this review suggested that sexual identity is still seen as synonymous with sexual orientation within academia (Lever et al. 2008; Albright ,2013; Daneback et al., 2013; Dir et al., 2013;). Coon Sells (2013) however outlined sexual orientation as a component part of sexual identity and Walker (2014) proposed that for many women current categories of sexual orientation did not fit their idea of themselves. In considering sexual identity women could consider what their sexual lives actually mean for them. This process of meaning making could serve to underpin a woman's level of agency and efficacy in relation to her sexual behaviour. Therefore, to actively engage with one's sexual identity runs counter to narrow passive sexual scripts which abound in culture. Arguably, the digital world provides both a mirror and sounding board to allow women to engage in this process of identity construction knowingly or not.

With this in mind, how do women manage the freedoms and restrictions of an online life with regard to their sexual lives?

With the onset of the digital age, and the increased level of connectedness this brought, the relationship between public and private life have altered radically (Van Djick, 2013). Many benefits have arisen from this, but the costs can be extreme. Shame and public humiliation are real life risks in online communication (Ronson, 2015). Where a mistake in conversation can be corrected, a comment in text can be difficult to erase and even innocuous comments can be easier to misconstrue without verbal cues. Therefore, adult women of this generation are having to develop a new range of social, relational and sexual skills without previous precedent.

As a consequence, what do women feel in control of their in online lives?

As digital participants this is a question everyone must ask themselves. From passwords, to profile updates, photo sharing and more intimate behaviours online the data trail the average person leaves behind is considerable (Van Djick, 2013). Much in the online sphere can appear to be beyond the individual's control, this coupled with the rate of cultural change bought about by this new technology, may mean concepts of privacy could alter as a result (Preston, 2014). New scripts are already emerging in relation to revenge porn for example, with women

being blamed for the creation of intimate images in relationships as opposed to those who subvert these images (Jackson, 2016).

With the potential risks what benefits do women gain for themselves and their relationships from their digital involvement?

The research in this review suggests for the majority of women digital life is non-problematic and actually has the potential to be of some benefit in a sexual sense (Chan, 2013; Walker, 2014). How women articulate and contextualise these experiences could provide a better understanding of the positive aspects of online sexuality. There is a wealth of literature available relating to sexual problems that needs to be countered with the more straightforward positive experiences of women. Based on this principal it is important to ask whether women are consciously aware of any impacts of their digital lives on their sexual identity, for better or worse.

It is interesting to consider the extent to which a woman has considered her digital life in a broader sense, in a similar way to sexual identity. In other words, do women ever step back and consider what they get from their online lives, what they like to do and do not like to do, and where they fit within their digital communities. Assessing both sexual identity and digital life concurrently could provide women an opportunity to evaluate daily aspects of their lives they might not have otherwise considered.

3.7 The Research Programme

3.7.1 Aim

The study aimed to fill the qualitative gap in research around adult women's sexual lives in the digital age and in so doing illustrate the ways in which adult women construct their sexual identity in this new era of communication.

3.7.2 The Research Question

Considering the foreshadowed questions and the data derived from the review the following the PhD study question was the following.

What role does the online world play in the way adult women construct their sexual identities?

The main objectives of the study were

- To establish what, if any, relationship exists between sexual identity and digital life.
- To explore the role of sexual agency and sexual self-efficacy in the management of sexual identity in the digital age
- To endeavour to establish theoretical models of the relationship between digital involvement and sexual identity which will go on to inform work at an educational, therapeutic or personal level regarding sexual wellbeing.

This study, aims to contribute to body of knowledge around sexual identity and its place within the sexual lives of adult women, providing the basis for ongoing work in this area.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline and explain the methodological decisions taken within this qualitative study. It will begin by examining the distinct nature of qualitative research and the philosophy which underpins it. It will then go on to describe the nature of Grounded Theory methods and the decision making which led to the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory within this study.

4.2 The Nature and Purpose of Qualitative Research

In conducting social research insight is sought in the quest to understand people and their interactions in the social world. The answers to questions of social research can be found using measurements, numerical representations and statistics, or in a more narrative form using language and explanation or a combination of both (Sarantakos, 2013). Where measurable results are required quantitative methods will be employed, and where specific explanations and meanings are sought qualitative methods are used (Flick, 2014). Mixing these methods can accomplish research which answers multiple questions in stages and each of these questions will be addressed using suitable methodology accordingly (Sarantakos, 2013).

Any single topic then can be explored using any of these methods, but the question asked within each approach will differ by examining different aspects of the area of interest. Taking voting behaviour as an example, it (voting) can be assessed quantitatively in order to map how often people vote in local compared to general elections by comparing election statistics. Whereas research to ascertain the reasons why people do or do not vote would be answered by qualitative means by asking a sample of voters what drove their decision-making processes. A specific issue such as the results of a referendum can be assessed by both means to assess voter turn-out compared to other forms of voting behaviour alongside voting decision data to give mixed method context to a one-off event. From this one topic the adaptability and scope of social research methodology can be seen to be organised into distinct methodological approaches.

Defining qualitative research is not an easy task as this term encompasses a vast array of approaches from many different disciplines (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; 2). However, these methods are often critiqued as not being generalisable or too interpretative, though Sarantakos (2013) makes the point that most of the features singled out for criticism are seen by qualitative researchers as their strengths. Morse (2012; 11-13) documents her personal struggle with 'sceptical and scornful' opposition to her qualitative work within medical science for example which serves to illustrate the scrutiny some qualitative researchers come under due to their choice of methods. The academic benefit of the rigour within qualitative methodology has contributed to its both refinement and breadth of application over time. This development in conjunction with theoretical and philosophical shifts within social and medical science means that qualitative methodology now occupies a place of greater esteem within the academy, to which Morse (2012) does attest.

> ‘Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.’
>
> Denzin and Lincoln (2005; 3)

This definition highlights the true nature of qualitative study, to search for meanings and understanding. It also notably recognises that qualitative research can change the world it encounters. This is a powerful idea with great significance for those who use these methods, particularly in terms of ethical responsibility and a commitment to social justice.

By recognising their place within their enquiry knowingly, qualitative researchers then reflect actively on their part within it rather than eliminate their influence as quantitative researcher would strive to do (Charmaz, 2014). Consequently, qualitative research can truly encapsulate the context of the phenomena studied within the world in which it is situated. Sarantakos (2013) refines this notion by stating that the purpose of qualitative research is to understand what drives social action, the meanings attached to it, and how this in turn enables people to create their individual lives and collective worlds. As such Sarantakos (2013) suggests that social action is less relevant than what that action means subjectively.

Research methodology is clearly more complex than picking from a menu of options however the fact remains that a researcher’s methodological decisions are essentially driven by the questions they ask (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; 13). Most questions can only be answered by one type of approach; a quantitative study cannot provide reasons for why people have voted the way they have any more than a qualitative study can measure the changes in voter turn-out over time. In this way, it can be seen that both methods are valid but occupy different places within academic practice.

Corbin and Strauss (2008; 13) question why researchers ask the questions they do and suggest that this reflects a personal predisposition to particular methods of research. As qualitative researchers Corbin and Strauss (2008) go on to explore not the definition of qualitative research rather what qualities define those who gravitate to this method. They portray a curious adaptable researcher with ‘humanistic’ leanings, who appreciates the flexibility and diversity within qualitative research, someone keen to respond to the challenges of working in the field (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; 13). They describe a researcher capable of managing the

'ambiguity' of the world and responding in a 'creative' manner to the planning and execution of their work (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; 13). They suggest how one 'frames' a research question belies one's underlying inclination towards modes of methodology (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; 13). In exploring this phenomena Corbin and Strauss (2008) illustrate the philosophical processes underpinning social research.

From this it becomes clear the nature of the researcher themselves is of importance within methodology; who they are will dictate their interests, and therefore their own focus on the social world. The researcher's experience, and how they in turn think, will determine the types questions they ask, and in turn these questions dictate the main methodology they will utilise. In other words, how the researcher views the world dictates the way in which they both instigate and conduct their research. Put another way the researcher's philosophy fundamentally underpins their research and the following section will explore this concept in more detail.

4.3 The Philosophy of Qualitative Research

Understanding that philosophy underpins research gives greater detail to the real distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. As eluded to by Corbin and Strauss (2008) in the previous section a relationship exists between the questioner/researcher, the question and the methodology. Methodology is arrived at, or rather should be, after a process has taken place which asks a number of questions of the researcher. According to Sarantakos (2013) the following questions are apt

1. What is the researcher's view of reality?
2. How does the researcher then view what constitutes knowledge of the world?
3. How might the research be conducted to support these assumptions?

These questions in sequence establish the researcher's ontological, epistemological and methodological positions which both enable and structure their studies. Taken together these assumptions about the nature of reality, ontology, the theory of knowledge and knowing, epistemology, and the construction of research, methodology, are grouped together as research paradigms (Sarantakos, 2013).

This echoes the work of Guba and Lincoln (1994;107) who noted that in general terms 'A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with the ultimates or first principles'. They go on referring to research as follows

> '*Inquiry* (their emphasis) paradigms define for the inquirers what it is they are about, and what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate inquiry. The basic beliefs that define inquiry can be summarized by the response to three fundamental questions, which are interconnected in such a way that the answer given to any one question, taken in any order, constrains how the others are answered.'
>
> Guba and Lincoln (1994;108)

The three questions Guba and Lincoln (1994; 108) outline are

1. The ontological question
2. The epistemological question
3. The methodological question

Although Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest in their definition above that these questions may be asked in any order because the outcome of any effects the answer to the others, many methodology texts present a linear approach to these questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Mason, 2014; Sarantakos, 2014) which recognises the benefit of the logical progression, Guba and Lincoln (1994) applied to their order. Guba and Lincoln (1994) use the three questions to explore the nature of what they considered to be the four 'Alternative Inquiry Paradigms'. The

next section will consider the three concepts Guba and Lincoln (1994) based their questions on in turn.

4.3.1 Ontology

For the purposes of this study the following definition will be adopted,

> 'An ontology is a philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality – what can be known and how. The conscious and unconscious questions, assumptions and beliefs that the researcher brings to the research endeavour serve as the initial basis for the ontological position.'
>
> (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; 13)

Four distinct ontological categories are described by Guba and Lincoln (1994; 109) in relation to their four 'Alternative Inquiry Paradigms'

Table 4-1 Ontological Categories

Positivism	**Post-positivism**	**Critical Theory et al.**	**Constructivism**
Naïve Realism; "real" reality but apprehendable	**Critical realism**; "real" reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehendable	**Historical realism;** Virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallised over time	**Relativism;** Local and specific constructed realities

In essence, the categories described here depict a continuum between a single objective reality completely external to human experience which nonetheless is observable and measurable, through to the model of multiple realities created by human experience. The arguments regarding the nature of reality are central to discipline of philosophy and are themselves subject to the social processes of their time (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), and as such no one interpretation of these principles provides a definitive single answer. However, it is essential that the researcher can illustrate the basis from which ontological assumptions derive.

The complexity of philosophical approaches to qualitative research cannot be understated but some attempts have been made to provide a simpler overview to allow the novice researcher to begin the process of examining how they wish to proceed in social research. Sarantakos (2013; 28) puts forward the ontological choice between a 'realist' or 'constructionist' view of reality. These diametrically opposed choices could be said to represent a continuum, coalescing of the four categories put forward by Guba and Lincoln (1994). Sarantakos (2013) suggests the researcher either perceives the world from a realist stance with an objective external reality, akin to those within the natural sciences, or from a constructionist subjective standpoint that recognises the existence of multiple realities constructed by individuals and societies. This choice, Sarantakos (2013) states, between realist and constructionist ontologies, dictates the epistemology one will then use which will be discussed in the next following section.

This particular study assumes a constructionist ontology and rejects the notion of a fixed external reality captured by the distanced objective researcher. Rather it recognises as Charmaz (2014; 13) suggests the fluid nature of 'multiple', 'constructed' realities which in turn defines a constructive reflexive approach the researcher will bring to bear on their work.

4.3.2 Epistemology

For the purposes of this study the following definition will be adopted,

> 'An epistemology is a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower. An epistemology includes how the relationships between the researcher and research participant(s) is understood.'
>
> (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; 13)

Four distinct epistemological categories are described by Guba and Lincoln (1994; 109) in relation to their four 'Alternative Inquiry Paradigms'

Table 4-2 Epistemological Categories

Positivism	**Post-positivism**	**Critical Theory et al.**	**Constructivism**
Dualist/ objectivist; Findings true	**Modified dualist/ objectivist;** Critical tradition/ community; findings probably true	**Transactional/ subjectivist;** Value- mediated findings	**Transactional/ subjectivist;** Created findings

Here again Guba and Lincoln (1994) present what could be considered a continuum of epistemological thought from a belief in a purely observed scientific objective truth though to a subjective understanding of the of human/individual creation of knowledge.

Sarantakos (2013) once more relates the epistemological choices a researcher makes as between the two ends of this spectrum; realists employing an empiricist epistemology and constructionists using an interpretivist epistemology. In other words, a realist researcher believes true empirical evidence can be found to support the reality of the objective world whereas constructionists interpret the subjective data they gather to attempt to give meanings to the worlds they create. This study follows a constructionist ontology, and therefore will assume an interpretivist epistemology.

4.3.3 Methodology

For the purposes of this study the following definition will be adopted,

> 'Methodology is a theory of how knowledge building should ensue. Methodology is the bridge that brings our philosophical framework together with our methods practice.'
>
> (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; 13)

Four distinct methodological categories are described by Guba and Lincoln (1994; 109) in relation to their four 'Alternative Inquiry Paradigms'

Table 4-3 Methodological Categories

Positivism	**Post-positivism**	**Critical Theory et al.**	**Constructivism**
Experimental / manipulative; Verification of the hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods	**Modified experimental/ manipulative;** critical multiplism; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods	**Dialogic/ dialectical**	**Hermeneutical/ dialectical**

Within Guba and Lincoln's (1994) category of methodology a continuum is less able to be established. Instead each paradigm exhibits quite distinct methodology. Positivists, Guba and Lincoln (1994) assert, will use scientific methods to test the truths of the social world, whereas post-positivists will adapt scientific method to disprove existing hypotheses. Within critical theory exists a dialogue between the researcher and participants which recognises disparity in knowledge (and power) within it with the aim of challenging preconceived knowledge of the social world held by both, thereby advancing new constructions of the world. Whilst constructivists work with their participants to hone and refine their constructions of their worlds.

Sarantakos (2013) relates the epistemological choices directly to the two main modes of research realists employing an empiricist epistemology leading to a quantitative methodology, constructionists using an interpretivist epistemology leading to a qualitative methodology. Once the commitment is made to either quantitative or qualitative methodology, a number of methodological approaches guide the researcher in the execution of their study. In general, quantitative methodology exists within a positivist paradigm which holds to a scientific notion of the neutral observer documenting the facts of the real world, using 'fixed design and quantitative methods' (Sarantakos, 2013; 29).

However, given the constructivist ontology, denoting multiple constructed realities, and an interpretivist epistemology it is not surprising that no single dominant paradigm exists within qualitative methodology. Denzin and Lincoln (2005; 22) suggest four main interpretive paradigms guide qualitative research; 'positivist and post-positivist, constructivist-interpretive, critical (Marxist, emancipatory) and feminist-post-structural'. Within these paradigm subdivisions exist and compete, and these 'tensions' within qualitative enquiry have been explored extensively (Gage, 1989; Guba and Lincoln, 1994;) The explorations of these tensions has proven useful for prospective researchers as a means of diligently exploring their ontological and epistemological positions within their work, an exercise Guba and Lincoln (1994) stress is vital to the research process.

To conclude, in the process of research design the researcher's question will dictate whether the study utilises either quantitative or qualitative methodology. Methodology can be described as

> 'a research strategy that translates ontological and epistemological principles into guidelines that show how research is to be conducted'
>
> Sarantakos (2013; 29)

In academic terms, ontology, how the researcher sees the world, will dictate the ways in which they conceive knowledge of this constructed, their epistemology. These two concepts in turn can only be serviced by certain methodological practices which have been borne out of this philosophical process (Sarantakos, 2013; 29). All researchers must then examine how they view the world as a conscious process within their methodological decision making, it would be incredibly difficult if not impossible, to conduct research which is framed in a world view the researcher did not hold. This understanding that the researcher's world view informs the research methodological process is the first step in recognising the role of the researcher as the instrument of the study.

The research question will not only explore an area of interest but will illustrate the ontological and epistemological assumptions the researcher holds. In other words, the questions asked delineate the researcher's view of their worlds and how they will construct knowledge of them.

This study, as it follows a constructionist ontology, assumed an interpretivist epistemology and therefore was conducted using qualitative methodology namely a Constructivist approach to Grounded Theory espoused by Charmaz (2014). The rest of this chapter will explore and development of grounded theory and provide justification for it's use in this particular study.

4.4 Grounded Theory in focus

4.4.1 Challenging Positivism

Grounded theory methodology is widely adopted within social research and has over time developed into many forms (Birks and Mills, 2011; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2014; Payne and Payne, 2004; Sarantakos, 2013;). The development of Grounded Theory methodology challenged positivist approaches to social science which were pre-eminent in the middle of the twentieth century (Charmaz, 2014). At this time social sciences overwhelmingly held to belief systems which lauded the objectivity of the scientific method which resulted in empirical quantitative methodology being used almost exclusively (Charmaz, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013). The validity of qualitative study was challenged for its reliance on interpretive explanations of participant's descriptions of their own lived experiences and as such its place within research was often seen as a 'preliminary exercise for refining quantitative instruments' (Charmaz, 2014; 7).

However, despite the dominance of positivism and quantitative methodology other perspectives were beginning to emerge at this time which sought to examine the social world from an alternative epistemology. Notable early twentieth century thinkers John Dewy and George Mead espoused a Pragmatist philosophy, which challenged the objective epistemological assumptions within positivism (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Pragmatists such as Dewey (1929 cited in Corbin and Strauss,2008) claimed that ongoing knowledge of the world is inseparable from and influenced by prior experience of that world. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In making this claim Dewey(1929 cited in Corbin and Strauss,2008) did not seek however to undermine scientific effort or natural laws formulated to understand the world, rather, as Corbin and Strauss (2008; 4) contend he placed emphasis on their being 'part of accumulated belief' gathered from experiences of the world over time which can be said to be true 'for the time being' until such times as they are proven otherwise.

This pragmatist philosophy was subsequently developed by Mead (1938, in Corbin and Strauss, 2008) whilst at the University of Chicago, into the principles of symbolic interactionism which has continued to be one of the main paradigms that underpin qualitative research to the present day (Sarantakos, 2013). Published by Blumer (1969, in Charmaz, 2014) after his death, Meads work on symbolic interactionism held that actions in the social world were not automatic responses to stimuli rather they were complex processes borne out human thought and experience.

Within the competing perspectives of social research came attendant methodology to support these schools of thought; in quantitative terms objective empirical standardised designs and

the qualitative, subjective, more flexible and reflexive processes to tease out meaning and significance. By the middle of twentieth century positivist quantitative and interpretive qualitative research became more defined as institutions and fields of study began to diverge along these lines. In the United States the University of Chicago and Columbia University would prove to be instrumental in development of a generation of researchers who would develop new pathways within research methodology (Charmaz, 2014). The positivism of Columbia produced highly skilled quantitative researchers in line with the pervasive philosophy of the time, whilst Chicago's pragmatist tradition took a more interpretive approach based on the principles of symbolic interactionism that put emphasis on the interplay between 'society, reality and self' reliant on 'language and communication' (Charmaz, 2014; 9).

4.4.2 Glaser and Strauss: The Discovery of Grounded Theory

Within medicine quantitative methodology dominated research practice at this time. By the 1960s some researchers began to reason for qualitative approaches to medical research particularly with regard to the study of patient care and within nursing studies (Morse, 2012). In 1967 sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss produced their ground-breaking work 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research' which set out to provide clear standardised design for the analysis of qualitative data. This arose from their collaboration in researching medical staff's approaches to death and dying with their patients (Morse, 2012).

In the process of undertaking this work Glaser and Strauss systemised their approach to the qualitative data they were collecting by coding it and comparing analytical notes from their field work together (Charmaz, 2014). As a result, Glaser and Strauss developed strategies which could be utilised for a wide range of social research (Charmaz, 2014). Their work provided a system designed to create new theory that was 'grounded in qualitative data rather deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories.' (Charmaz, 2014; 6). Glaser and Strauss produced 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory' (1967) within the 'golden age of rigorous qualitative analysis' after the second world war until the end of the 1960s (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005;17). The prevalent ontology of this time was characterized by the post-positivist belief in 'an assumed reality worth discovering as a detached objective observer' (Birks and Mills, 2011; 6) which is reflected strongly within the book in its commitment to research being undertaken from neutral point of view on the part of the researcher.

Charmaz (2014) notes that Grounded Theory amounted to a marriage of two disparate schools of thought brought to the methodology by Glaser a former student of the positivist Columbia university and the pragmatist Strauss who studied at the University of Chicago. What resulted

from Glaser and Strauss's collaboration was the framework for an empirical methodological approach to interpretive qualitative practice in social research.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) sought to expose the weakness in the social science of their day which they saw as driven by the verification of existing theory which left little room for the formulation of new theoretical positions. They suggested this position was arrived at as few social scientists felt there was much to add to theories of the giants of early 20th century thought, such as Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Marx and Mead (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967; 11)) wanted to free students from the continual verification of their predecessor's work and offer them the structural means to formulate new theory which provided a better fit to their space in time.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) attribute three defined goals to the 'Discovery of Grounded Theory'. Firstly, the book sought to firmly place the generation of theory in the context of interaction with observed data (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). In doing so researchers could move beyond the predominant theories of their time which Denzin and Lincoln (1998; 162) characterised as 'inordinately speculative and deductive nature'. The second goal was to prescribe the methodological means to achieve grounded theories (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Finally, the elevation of the 'status' of 'careful qualitative research' was the third goal which the book hoped to achieve (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; 162).

By focusing on generation of theory within their method Glaser and Strauss (1967) turned their backs on the deductive logic of the time, of retesting extant theory, to formulate processes designed to inductively derive theory from data.

Charmaz (2014; 7) defined the following key components of grounded theory practice

- Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis
- Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from pre-conceived logically deduced hypotheses
- Using the constant comparison method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis
- Advancing theory development during each stage of the data collection and analysis
- Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps
- Sampling aimed toward theory construction (theoretical sampling) not for population representativeness
- Conducting the literature review after developing an independent analysis.

The theory produced in this way - from specific data - is said to be substantive (Flick, 2014). That is to say, it pertains to a specific issue or area of interest to the researcher and as such

only relate to this issue/area or that which is closely related to it (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; 246). In this way the specificity of the theory produced is potentially transferable to other similar topics but not generalizable more widely (Birks and Mills, 2011). However, Glaser and Strauss (1967 in Charmaz, 2014) indicated that groups of substantive theories could be grouped together potentially to produce more a formal generalisable theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Beyond its position in relation to the production of theory, Grounded Theory methodology is distinguishable by a number of its methods. Constant comparison methods are central to grounded theory, during which the analysis of the data gathered is conducted from the beginning, and therefore informs the ongoing process of the study (Sarantakos, 2013). The theoretical approach taken to sampling in grounded theory is driven by the conditions found in the study, not fixed in advance, therefore researcher will seek out participants or data to test their assumptions as theory begins to emerge (Sarantakos, 2013). In essence, what fundamentally sets Grounded Theory apart is its dedication to serving the data, to truly *ground* the findings from what has been discovered in the study process (Sarantakos, 2013).

According to Charmaz (2014; 8) a successful application of grounded theory met the following criteria

- A close fit with the data
- Usefulness
- Conceptual density
- Durability over time
- Modifiability
- Explanatory power

(Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967, in Charmaz, 2014).

In providing specific guidance to inform systemised analysis of qualitative data, Glaser and Strauss (1967) legitimised qualitative methodology whilst moving it forward and in the words of Charmaz (2014; 8) 'built on earlier qualitative researchers' implicit analytic processes and research strategies and made them explicit'. Qualitative methods have developed both within and away from grounded theory in the subsequent decades but it is unlikely the pace of change or diversity in qualitative processes would have advanced in the way that they have without the work of Glaser and Strauss at this time.

4.4.3 Divergence and Critique of Grounded Theory

'The Discovery of Grounded Theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was in effect a starting point from which Glaser and Strauss went on to refine their methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, 1968, 1971, in Charmaz 2014). Over time Glaser and Strauss published numerous separate expositions of their theory which represented more closely their original philosophical starting points (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1978, in Charmaz 2014)

Despite the divergence between its two initiating proponents the transformative nature of their original Grounded theory text remains, however this must now be seen in the light of 50 years of critical appraisal of the methodology. To choose between Glaser or Strauss's approach to Grounded Theory is to ignore the wide ranging interpretations which have moved the methodology forward from its inception, much of this driven their former students Kathy Charmaz (2006), Adele Clarke (2005), Juliet Corbin (2008), Carolyn Weiner (2000) (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007).

With the widespread adoption of Grounded Theory came increased scrutiny of the efficacy of its methodology. Criticism of the first generation of grounded theory focused on clarity of its methods, its philosophical underpinning and therefore credibility of its outcomes. Despite Glaser and Strauss' (1967) claims to offer students a new way of conducting research Birks and Mills (2011; 5) contend that Glaser and Strauss (1967) did not give a detailed enough description of how to put together the 'strategies' and 'techniques' of grounded theory in to a workable 'methodological /methods package'. However, Birks and Mills (2011) do go on to say this was addressed by a later edition of work by Corbin and Strauss (2008) which outlines a symbolic interactionist underpinning to their exposition of the method.

Others echoed the concern that the initial iteration of Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) had not been sufficiently methodologically specific, which in turn led to an eventual dilution of its application and indeed to the common mislabelling of some studies which had little in the way of connection with it (Bryant and Charmaz, 2011).

Although there was a lack of explicit explanation of the philosophical underpinning to the vast majority of the Grounded Theory work of both Glaser and Strauss, their later methods became increasingly focused on techniques which were thought to demonstrate a positivistic ontological stance (Charmaz, 2005 cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Charmaz, 2014). These included Glaser's (1978) six Cs: 'Causes, Context, Contingencies, Consequences, Co-variances and Conditions' and Corbin's (1990, 1998) 'conditional matrix' which could be said to have been rejected when the group of scholars working on Bryant and Charmaz's (2005) key Sage text made no use of them in the 'Handbook of Grounded Theory'. In response to these

concerns regarding the positivist leanings of Grounded Theory new iterations began to emerge which would challenge the objective nature of the first generation of Grounded Theory practice and seek to bring the methodology in line with contemporary social theory.

4.4.4 The Constructivist Response

In an attempt to address the positivist nature of the methodology Charmaz a one-time student of Glaser and Strauss went on to develop an approach to the methodology which is now widely adopted (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) proposed constructivist grounded theory should eschew the objectivist notion of a detached observer within research in favour of a model which embraces the position of the researcher within a study. Researchers adopting this methodology would then be said to be co-constructing their findings in conjunction with the participants or data sources (Charmaz, 2014). This approach mirrors a constructivist ontology which contends that 'the world is not objective and discovered but socially constructed' (Sarantakos, 2013; 468).

As previously discussed in this chapter this research study follows a constructionist ontology, will assume an interpretivist epistemology and will therefore be conducted using qualitative methodology. This section of the chapter has already outlined the appropriateness of Grounded Theory to address the practical nature of the research question. In order for the study to be conducted in accordance with philosophical principles espoused earlier in the chapter it will therefore take a constructivist approach to the methodology of Grounded Theory in line with the principles laid out by (Charmaz, 2014).

The following section will explicate further the distinct qualities of a constructivist approach to grounded theory method.

4.5 Constructivist Grounded Theory

Kenny and Fourie (2015) in contrasting the work of Glaser, Strauss and Charmaz outlined a range of principles three specific modes of grounded theory, Classic, Straussian and Constructivism, had in common. In their paper Kenny and Fourie (2015) did not however refer to Charmaz most recent edition of Constructing Grounded Theory (2014) but nonetheless offer a reasonable starting point to define key characteristics which remain central to all three expositions of the method. These are as follows;

- Memo writing
- Constant Comparison
- Theoretical Sampling
- Substantive vs Formal Theory

Kenny and Fourie, (2015; 1286).

Beyond the clear philosophical differences between the three Kenny and Fourie (2015; 1286) noted constructivist grounded theory was distinguishable from the others as it used an 'open-ended coding framework designed to construct' a grounded theory which this chapter will explore in more detail later (4.7.2 Data analysis). In addition, Kenny and Fourie (2015) highlighted that constructivist grounded theory also differed by advocating the use of a literature review chapter in addition to referring to the literature throughout the study process. This study followed the constructivist methods developed by Charmaz (2014) in conducting a literature review (Chapter 2).

Charmaz (2014; 14) noted herself that the various methods of grounded theory have, in fact, much in common and amounted to a 'constellation of methods, rather than an array of different methods'. Matters of philosophy may separate grounded theory exponents but they share many of their methods (Charmaz, 2014). In referring to the 'craft' of grounded theory Charmaz (2014; 18) also relates the individual sharing the same model of grounded theory may indeed place differing 'emphasis' on different aspects of the process. It can be seen then grounded theory offers a flexible methodological framework which can be adapted to not only suit a wide range of qualitative designs but also may be approached from differing ontological perspectives.

4.5.1 Choosing Constructivist Grounded theory methods

When deciding to use qualitative methods the researcher is recognising a need to explore and interpret an aspect of the social world using the words, or other creations, of the people inhabiting that world and their own, the researchers, unique perspectives. The breadth and

variety of qualitative methods offer researchers a range of approaches to answer the particular requirements unique to their questions.

4.5.1.1 Requirments of the research question

As stated in the literature review chapter this study aimed to fill the qualitative gap in research around adult women's sexual lives in the digital age and in so doing illustrate the ways in which adult women construct their sexual identity in this new era. The specific research question was as follows:

WHAT ROLE DOES THE ONLINE WORLD PLAY IN THE WAY ADULT WOMEN CONSTRUCT THEIR SEXUAL IDENTITIES?

In asking this question it was hoped to establish what, if any, relationship exists between sexual identity and digital life. In exploring these concepts, the research also considered the roles of sexual agency and self-efficacy in the management of sexual identity in the digital age. By attending to these themes and concepts the objective of the study was to establish theoretical models of the relationship between digital involvement and sexual identity in women who have experienced adolescence offline but that now inhabit an increasingly online world.

As already discussed in this chapter the study was qualitative in its nature as the question being asked clearly requires exploration and explanation rather than quantifying by measurement. The question was refined to its current form in response to a review of the literature which found that most of the research relating to women, sexuality and the internet related to what women did, not *why* they did it and as such lacked context in terms of women's wider identity and experiences.

In terms of methodology from an early stage Grounded Theory was identified as a good fit for this research question. This decision was based on the fact the research question pertained to a situation not widely researched which therefore would benefit from a study which could produce theory which could go on to be further explored within the field (Birks and Mills, 2011 (p16); Flick, 2014 (p399); Sarantakos, 2013 (p.371)). This section will go on to further define and explicate this decision whilst giving more detail about the nature and historic development of grounded theory methodology.

4.5.1.2 The utility of Grounded Theory in this study

The suitability of Grounded Theory in this study was reviewed using a decision-making framework created by Starks and Trinidad (2007) which compared the methodological merits of three widely used methods within healthcare research; Phenomenology, Discourse Analysis,

and Grounded Theory. Within their paper Starks and Trinidad (2007; 1373) provide a table which concisely lays out the history, philosophy, goals, methodology and other key variables a researcher would consider in the process of methodological decision-making.

The purpose of Grounded Theory methodology, according to Flick (2014; 40), is to generate theory '*developed from empirical material and its analysis'*. The use of grounded theory is suggested by Starks and Trinidad (2007; 1373) to be most suitable in relation to questions that explore '*how does the basic social process of [X] happen in the context of [Y environment].*' This maps well to research question

'WHAT ROLE DOES THE ONLINE WORLD PLAY IN THE WAY ADULT WOMEN CONSTRUCT THEIR SEXUAL IDENTITIES?'

which could be rephrased as

'How does the process of sexual identity construction happen in context of the online world?'.

Stark and Trinidad (2007; 1373) also put forward that the 'goal' grounded theory was to '*Develop an explanatory theory of basic social processes'*. These two elements would appear to support the decision to use grounded theory as this methodology puts forward answers to previously unknown elements of social processes in the form of theory 'grounded' in data found in investigation of the research question.

4.5.2 Data collection

In collecting data grounded theorists can use any of the methods outlined earlier in this chapter (4.4.1) but Charmaz (2014; 18) provides closer inspection of the potential of 'documentary and ethnographic approaches' alongside 'intensive interviews'. Charmaz (2014) is careful to point out the data gathering must be examined for its context as much as for its content. It is recognized that the 'world-views' of 'local' and 'larger' cultural influences will come to bear on participants, or indeed provide the basis from which these participants may create their own new expressions of their cultures (Charmaz, 2014; 54). This study will conduct interviews to explore the research question. Charmaz (2014) devotes two chapters to this important element open to grounded theorists. The consideration Charmaz (2014) gives this topic underlines its importance within the methods used in grounded theory practice.

In exploring intensive interviewing Charmaz (2014) begins by describing the range of processes involved in this method of data collection

- Selection of research participants who have first-hand knowledge that fits the research topic
- In depth exploration of participants' experience and situations
- Reliance on open-ended question
- Objective of obtaining detailed responses
- Emphasis on understanding the research participant's perspective, meanings and experience
- Practice of following up on anticipated areas of inquiry, hints, and implicit views and accounts of actions.

Charmaz (2014; 56)

Much like grounded theory itself , a list of characteristics cannot convey the skills required to achieve such an interview. In addition to the practical concerns of an interview guide a number of softer issues must be attended to (Charmaz, 2014). These can include how best to communicate any specific terminology within the topic, managing sensitivity in a topic, practice interviews to check for flow and due consideration of interviewer's overall demeanour and indeed appearance when meeting participants (Charmaz, 2014).

Conducting the interview requires a great deal of skill from the interviewer to encourage 'theoretical usefulness' from the data (Charmaz, 2014; 19). Researchers must balance the data they are presented with the ongoing requirement of the process of theoretical sampling and as such each interview is conducted in an 'active' responsive manner (Charmaz 2014; 85). In conducting a responsive engaged interview of this nature, the researcher should be mindful, and also annotate, the interplay between themselves and the participant as an additional source of contextual data regarding the construction of the theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Charmaz (2014; 108) notes 'several advantages' in using intensive interviews. The fluid nature of intensive interviews provides the opportunity to both explore new elements as they arise during interviews whilst still attending to 'key theoretical concerns' (Charmaz, 2014; 108). The 'iterative' nature of the process of grounded theory allows the researcher to test and retest their thoughts regarding the data (Charmaz, 2014; 108). The option to return to re-interview participants offers a chance to test out 'theoretical ideas' with participants who are already cognisant with the study who can provide valuable feedback due to their previous participation (Charmaz, 2014; 108). The rich data these interviews provide enhances data analysis from the beginning and provides more scope for a good theoretical outcome from the study.

4.5.3 Data analysis

Within grounded theory constant comparison analysis is used to analyse the data coming into the study from the very beginning (Charmaz, 2014). Kenny and Fourie, (2015) identified that approaches to the coding framework constituted a key difference between the three modes of grounded theory practice they compared. As previously stated, Kenny and Fourie, (2015; 1286) indicated that constructivist grounded theorists would adopt an 'open-ended' coded framework 'designed to construct' a grounded theory. This constructivist approach differed from previous iterations of grounded theory as it 'resisted a concrete, rule-bound, prescriptive approach to coding, arguing that this stifles and suppresses the researcher's creativity' (Kenny and Fourie, 2015; 1278). The framework presented illustrates a process of 'Initial or Open Coding', followed by 'Refocused Coding' which leads to the means to 'Construct a Grounded Theory' (Kenny and Fourie, 2015; 1278). This framework enhanced by 'memo writing, constant comparisons, theoretical sampling and saturation' constituted the data analysis of constructivist grounded theory (Kenny and Fourie, 2015; 1278). This abridged version of constructivist approaches to data analysis does reflect Charmaz's 2014 iteration despite referencing the previous 2008 edition.

Charmaz (2014; 137) emphasises the need for creativity and 'play' within the initial coding phase to 'discover subtle meanings and have new insights'. During coding the data is labelled with codes which begin to unpick the concepts embedded within it (Charmaz, 2014). 'Ideas' need to be tested within a 'flexible' system in order to get the most out of the presenting data (Charmaz, 2014, 137). From this point once 'initial codes take analytic form' the development of focused codes will evolve and begin gather momentum (Charmaz, 2014; 160).

Focused codes - as with any other aspect of constant comparison method – can then be checked 'against large batches of data' to ensure 'the analytic process' is 'effective and efficient' (Charmaz, 2014; 160). This process of data analysis should help the researcher develop their 'theoretical sensitivity' which in turn should 'influence' their 'coding' (Charmaz, 2014; 161). In developing 'theoretical sensitivity' the researcher refines their capacity to 'understand and define phenomena in abstract terms and demonstrate relationships studied phenomena' (Charmaz, 2014; 161). In so doing a researcher equips themselves to be able to go to produce both substantive and formal theory from their work.

4.5.4 Theoretical Sampling

The codes developed in the analysis of data constitute the building blocks, or first step which will go on to be developed into grounded theory of the study. The second step is use of theoretical sampling to test the data arising, to seek fresh perspectives, give depth or otherwise support the category as of merit for consideration (Charmaz, 2014).

> Theoretical sampling is strategic, specific and systematic. Because you use it to elaborate and refine your theoretical categories, conducting theoretical sampling depends on having already identified a category. This pivotal grounded theory strategy helps you to delineate and develop the properties of your category and it's range and variation.
>
> Charmaz (2014; 199)

As the codes from the data coalesce into categories this presents the opportunity to develop the focus of subsequent interviews, or alternate data gathering methods to, by gathering 'more data on the category and its properties' (Charmaz, 2014; 192). This in effect means that the research moves itself forward building on the evidence already provided to give more insight and focus to the data gathering as it moves on, all the while providing additional context for the data that has been noted earlier (Charmaz, 2014). This interplay should not be confused with other aspects of sampling used in other methods. Theoretical sampling is not any of the following according to Charmaz (2014; 197).

- Sampling to address initial research question
- Sampling to reflect population distributions
- Sampling to find negative cases
- Sampling until no new data emerges

Charmaz (2014) attributes many of these erroneous approaches to theoretical sampling to notions of quantitative thinking that can creep into analysis, particularly in terms of trying to establish generalisability where none is required in qualitative work. Rather a qualitative researcher is more concerned with specific and deep understanding of a narrower groups experience (Charmaz, 2014).

4.5.5 Rigour in Constructivist Grounded Theory

Within the context of Charmaz's (2014) model of a constructivist grounded theory the concept of rigour is not just a function of the methodology. Rigour is also a quality of the researcher, the means by which they enact their integrity in applying the principles they espouse within their practice.

> ‘I chose the term ‘constructivist, to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher’s involvement in the construction and interpretation of the data and to signal the differences between my approach and conventional social constructionism of the late 1980s and early 1990s. My position aligns well with the social constructivists whose influences include Lev Vygotsky (1962) and Yvonne Lincoln (2013), who thus stress social contexts, interactions, sharing viewpoints, and interpretive understandings. These constructivists view knowing and learning as embedded in social life. Other constructivists sometimes assume a more individualistic stance and a radical subjectivism to which I do not subscribe. For me, subjectivity is inseparable from social existence. ‘
>
> Charmaz (2014; 14)

In this way it is incumbent on practitioners of this method to be transparent in the handling of their data and to explicitly recognise the reflexive nature of their place within their studies. This does not however preclude the possibility of robustly evaluating how these theories are formed, recognising the researchers place within study is only one of many steps in the process of examining the fitness of the theory developed from these studies.

In order to account for the processes undertaken within a Constructivist Grounded Theory study Charmaz (2014; 337/8) does offer a set of modalities through which to evaluate them;

- Credibility
- Originality
- Resonance
- Usefulness

The inter-relation of these factors evinces the rigour of the study, in that ‘a strong combination of originality and credibility increases the resonance, usefulness, and the subsequent value of its contribution’ Charmaz (2014; 338). These factors can contribute to studies which are academically revealing and may be relatable to a wider populace where the writing is of sufficient creative quality (Charmaz, 2014).

4.5.6 Reflexivity in Constructivist Grounded Theory

From an ontological standpoint constructive grounded theory differs from other iterations of the methodology in its specific rejection of objective positivist principles and practice in favour of a subjective view of reality which can accommodate multiple realities and perspectives (Charmaz, 2014). In order to achieve this the researcher must then recognise the importance of their reflexive practice in the course of their study as fundamental to enacting this ontological point of view. It is not good enough for the researcher to recognize they influence

the construction of theory produced in their study they must actively attend to and act upon this input in a transparent manner throughout the study process.

Memo writing is key to annotating this process throughout the data gathering and analysis stages (Charmaz, 2014). Thoughts and reflections on the coding process reactions to interviews, and flashes of serendipitous inspiration should be included within the memo journaling to allow the researcher to gauge adequately their place in the study in order to record this later within their methods and findings chapters (Charmaz, 2014). To hold a constructivist ontology means to be a reflexive researcher, not to attend to this element would fundamentally undermine the integrity of the methodology explored in this section.

4.6 Conclusion and summary

In delineating the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods this chapter has explored the diversity of approaches that can be taken in the exploration of phenomena within the social world. In recognising this variety, the chapter illustrated the importance of having both quantitative and qualitative means of examining the social world within the methodological framework, as neither approach is suitable for providing the answers to every question.

The chapter has also demonstrated the fact qualitative methods have been subject to greater scrutiny as their non-positivist ontological positioning has met with resistance from more positivist fields such as medicine. This continued scrutiny has meant the development of methodologies that have been transparent and capable of demonstrating their worth to social science such as those espoused by Charmaz (2014).

In this way the chapter has defined and justified a constructivist grounded theory based on the work of Charmaz (2014) to the qualitative research question posed. The methods employed within study to enact this methodology will be outlined in Chapter 5.

5 Method

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the design and illustrate the methods used to complete the study. To do this the chapter outlines the process of the practical preparation of the study's procedural elements, the ethical preparations undertaken, and the sampling process that recruited participants to the study. It then describes the subsequent Grounded Theory analysis process used to understand and organise the data in order to develop and construct the Grounded Theory which will be explored further in the next chapter.

5.2 Procedural considerations

Having established constructivist grounded theory as the methodology to address the research question the practical work of the study began. Decisions on key aspects of data collection and access were needed to inform the methods framework prior to submission to the departmental ethics committee. The literature review had established that qualitative study in the area of the research question was lacking and as such decisions needed to be made about the best possible methods to gather data which could inform a grounded theory study.

5.2.1 Data collection method

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to be the method of data collection. As discussed in section 4.5.2 there are several ways in which this form of interviewing supports grounded theory enquiry. Interviews planned in a semi-structured style offer flexibility and a degree of consistency as opposed to standardised schema used in quantitative studies (Sarantakos, 2015; 270). Mason (2014; 62) contested the notion that semi-structured interviews are 'unstructured' arguing in fact they are carefully prepared and undertaken, and therefore offer a valid and valuable approach to complex data gathering. In conducting semi-structured interviews, the initial planning of a guiding schema allows the researcher to focus on specific topics but provides sufficient flexibility to follow new avenues brought up by participants as the study progresses. The process of the development of the schema for the study will be discussed in section 5.6.1.

In addition to its flexibility the format of the semi-structured interview was chosen to enable constant comparative analysis from the start of the process. Constant comparative methods are central to grounded theory methodology accompanying the data collection and analysis process from the beginning of a study (Glaser& Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014). The means by which comparison can be achieved between semi-structured interviews is by the formulation a guiding schema. The use of a guiding schema or interview schedule provides an underlying structure to compare data between interviews, and in so doing gives the interviewer time to think and adapt to their interview (Charmaz, 2014). Being a guide rather than a defined requirement during interviews, a schema allows room for change to facilitate theoretical sampling later in the study process, or indeed at any point where a new line of enquiry opens up in the data collection. In this way the use of semi-structured interviews enables both constant comparison but offers the flexibility needed for theoretical sampling later in the study, two important elements of grounded theory methodology as described in section 4.5.

5.2.2 Participant Access and Interview Setting

The women being recruited to the study were not classed as vulnerable, nor were they being sought through contact with a specific service or setting. The women were being asked to come forward of their own volition and therefore no issues of access to settings or permissions were required, beyond individual consent procedures which were approved as part of the ethics submission process and can be found in Appendix 4

The interviews took place on campus in rooms at the University Brynmor Jones Library. It was hoped that meeting face to face with participants would enable the researcher to use their interview experience to develop rapport with the participants and thus enable them to feel more at ease and ready to talk. Being a woman researcher in this context was also crucial to development of trust in this study of such an intimate area of life. The work of Finch (1984) and Oakley (2016) found that women in research were often keen to participate where they were able to talk to another woman. In addition, it was envisaged that a face to face approach would provide additional situational data to the analysis of the interviews by providing non-verbal context to the interview data in line with Charmaz (2014).

Access for participants was another important consideration. From a mobility perspective and given that interviews would take place in daytime hours, the use of online communication to conduct interviews was considered to be an acceptable alternative where participants were unable to attend an interview in person. Safety also informed the decision to undertake the interviews on campus. When interviewing participants, they would be signed in and therefore staff would be aware of their presence allowing both researcher and participant to be reassured that other staff were nearby should any difficulties arise. This also was important for building security and fire regulations on campus. Confidentiality for the participants would be ensured as interviews would be booked as meetings and as such, staff would not be aware of the reason for their attendance. Where needed phone or Skype contact would have been arranged however all participants opted to attend interviews in person.

5.3 Ethical Considerations

5.3.1 Addressing Key Ethical Principles

The study received ethics approval in May 2016 following submission of the following documents to the departmental ethics committee.

- Departmental Ethics Form
- Interview schedule (Appendix 2)
- Consent form (appendix 4)
- Study information Sheet (appendix 5)
- Referral sheet (appendix 6)
- Publicity materials - poster and leaflets
- Content from WordPress website
- Departmental Review Form

The committee required a number of clarifications and alterations to materials produced which were dealt with accordingly and put to re-submission. The committee were particularly keen to address issues relating to the potential disclosures of criminal offences within the interviews. Though this had been considered it was made more explicitly clear in subsequent re-submissions. A total of three submissions to the committee were completed before the study was given ethical approval to proceed. This agreement was subject to the Chairs viewing of the publicity materials and website content which were also subsequently approved (see Appendix 7 and 8).

Given the intimate nature of the discussions it was anticipated that there was a strong possibility that participants may disclose issues of abuse or sexual violence. With this in mind a reference sheet was produced of appropriate local agencies to supply to any women who required ongoing support outwith the interview setting. These services included a range of local mental health provision and services specifically related to domestic violence and sexual assault.

It is imperative that academic research is carried out with due reference to principles of ethical practice. This study's ethics submission was completed with reference to four key principles put forward by Beauchamp and Childress (1985) that should be addressed within research design prior to entering the field. These are non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy, justice and they were allowed for in following ways

5.3.1.1 Non-maleficence

First do no harm. A study must not be designed in such a way as to risk harm to participants (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007). Whilst no physical harm would be at all likely in an interview context, the content of the study has the potential to bring out issues of sexual nature which could lead to the disclosure of traumatic events. With this in mind, clear support and procedures were outlined in the ethics submission namely protocols for stopping interviews and a ready supply of information regarding support services. In addition, the provision of sample questions in the information sheet attached to the study gave the women a very clear view of what to expect of the line of questioning within the interviews.

5.3.1.2 Beneficence

A study should in its outcomes aim to make a novel contribution to the academy, but it should also aim to offer a degree of benefit to its participants (Murphy & Dingwall 2007). This study aimed to provide women with the opportunity to review an aspect of their lives in a concrete manner that they may have not considered prior to the interview. As such it was hoped the study could provide the women with food for thought to enable them to bring fresh perspective to this aspect of their lives and relationships. By participating it was hoped that the women could perhaps identify challenges in their sexual experiences or indeed better appreciate the role of their sexual identity within their lives in general. The following statement was included in the study information sheet

> *'Hopefully taking part in this research can be seen as an opportunity for you to assess your own sexual identity and from this point it might enable you to gain confidence in your sexual self or perhaps highlight issues you never thought of specifically before. Think of the interview as a way to air your views in way that you do not have to edit yourself. The more honest you are about feelings and experiences relating to the topics of online life and sexual identity the better for the research. Having taught sex and relationship education in schools and teaching adults around sexuality there are not many topics in relation to sexuality and relationships that the researcher has not worked with so please be as open as you can.*
>
> *The main thing the study aims to do is develop theory which could be subsequently used in a therapeutic context with other women and as such it is hoped that you as a participant could see this as a secondary benefit to taking part by contributing to other women's lives in a positive manner. It is hoped*

this study will engage with women who will come to see themselves as the pioneers of the digital world that they are. '

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As outlined above the hope was that the research could enable a better understanding of sexual identity within life and relationships to the women's individual benefit but in addition provide them with a sense of having contributed to supporting other women over time.

5.3.1.3 Autonomy

The values and decisions of participants must be respected in the study process including the right for the participants to withdraw, or not participate once they understand what is required, from the research (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007). The main mechanism by which this was achieved was gaining informed consent from the participants prior to taking part in the study using the consent form approved by the Ethics Committee in May 2016. A copy of the form can be found in appendix 4. The form highlighted the extent and limitations of confidentiality within the study, and outlined the timescales related to withdrawing from the study. Using constant comparative methods, it is important that participants understand that withdrawing from a study which begins analysis from the start limits the timescales that enable a researcher to remove data from the process.

5.3.1.4 Justice

Finally, all participants must be assured that they will be treated fairly and equally as all other participants (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007). The Ethical procedures process whole ensured that key protocols around consent, safety, and confidentially were agreed and subsequently acted upon. Further details on how procedures were enacted to protect the rights of the participants are described in section 5.6 Data Collection

5.4 Recruitment

5.4.1 Summary of process of recruitment

The nature of the sample was dictated by the research question, and given its qualitative nature, meant that a large representative group of participants was not required in this case. No fixed number of participants was sought within the study as Grounded Theory methodology data gathering is contingent on data saturation being reached and this cannot be allowed for in advance (Charmaz, 2014). In comparison to quantitative methods only a relatively modest number of participants can provide the depth of data and specificity required for good qualitative study (Sarantakos, 2005). In this case 19 participants were recruited and interviewed.

The study originally aimed to contact participants via the social network Twitter. This approach was chosen to try gain interest from women who were already online and versed in social media. Tweets would highlight the study and provide a link to a WordPress site which contained details including.

- Welcome page introducing the study
- The study information sheet
- Researcher introduction
- Contact page

The WordPress site was designed to hold enough information to be usable without being off putting, following the advice of Joseph et al. (2016) who urged researchers to provide clear materials to attract participants into research. Informed by the work of Finch (1984) and Oakley (2016) who emphasised that women would likely engage well with other women the language of the introduction to the researcher section was specifically written to be conversational in an attempt to begin to build rapport given the intimate nature of the study.

Hosted by the University the Word Press site, all content was approved by the Ethic Committee chair prior to launch. The subsequent recruitment tweets which were sent all had strong meme-like visuals in an attempt to be arresting in the timelines of potential participants. Memes are widely circulated online and are a regular feature of social network communication.

> *'Among internet insiders, "meme" is a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language "move," or some other unit of cultural "stuff."*
>
> *Knobel and Lankshear (2007; 202)*

Therefore, by using meme type imagery it was hoped the tweets would use humour as the means to both engage and reassure participants to follow the links to the study, as well as improving their chances of being forwarded on through other users networks of followers.

Whilst the social media elements of the study were being rolled out, a number of contacts became interested in the study through word of mouth from student colleagues and from the presentation of a poster at a post graduate research event. Three women were interviewed after one heard about the study through another student and contacted two of her friends. Separately another woman enquired about participating at the departmental poster event leading to a further two women getting in contact after hearing of her experience.

Despite several tweets going out and being re-tweeted no-one came forward through this method over a period of three months. At this point a member of staff from the graduate school after hearing of the difficulties in recruiting to the study offered to send an email to the mailing list of lifelong learners in the University. From this email 25 women came forward, of which 14 women were subsequently interviewed.

All of the women contacted the researcher either directly in the case of the first six participants, through the WordPress site, or via email. Everyone who put themselves forward for the study was emailed and asked for a phone number in order to confirm their wish to proceed. The participants were spoken to on the phone and provisional arrangements made for interview times at their convenience. Once arranged the researcher contacted each participant via email with the time for interview and a specific place to meet on campus, as well as a description of what the researcher would be wearing.

In addition to the meeting details, the consent form and study information sheet were attached to the contact email. On the day of interview the researcher met each participant signed them into the library and made sure they had a drink. Participants were given paper copies of the study information and consent form to sign before the interview began ensuring informed consent.

5.5 The sample

5.5.1 Sampling

As this study follows constructivist grounded theory methodology (as outlined in section 4.5) it did not seek to find a representative sample instead the study would sample theoretical ideas arising from the analysis by adjusting the framing of the questions in the ongoing interviews.

> *'Theoretical sampling means seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging theory. The main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting your theory. You conduct theoretical sampling by sampling to develop the properties of your categories until no new properties emerge.'*
>
> *Charmaz (2014:193)*

In order to progress to a point where the process of theoretical sampling is possible a study sample is required which will serve the requirements of the research question (Flick, 2014). Using purposive sampling, rather than being a random sample, a group of women were sought who would fulfil the following criteria arising from the research question

The participants must

- Be women
- Be aged over 35
- Be online regularly (at least three times a week) and have an email address
- Be willing to discuss their sexual identity with the researcher.

The participants would be excluded where

- They are not regularly online
- They have no email address
- They do not return contact with researcher within times specified
- They do not attend interviews as arranged

The sample age of over 35 has been established for two reasons. Firstly the literature review found women over college age were not well represented within the published research and as such would be the focus of this study. Second this starting point of 35 in the age range was to establish that all those interviewed would have gone through their adolescence offline. By doing so it would be expected that the women would have experienced some sense of sexual

development and as such would have begun to realise their sexual identities before beginning their online lives.

Whilst representation is not the goal of Grounded Theory sampling (Sarantakos, 2005) as discussed in 4.5.4, the profile of group is still of interest particularly in terms of those women who did not come forward for the study. Although ranging in age, relationship status and sexual orientation the women who put themselves forward for the study were not ethnically diverse. All the women interviewed categorised themselves as some variant of white with one woman describing herself as Mediterranean. For the purpose of the study the term woman was taken to mean a person who identified and lived as a woman. Transgendered women were welcome to join the study however no women specifically identified being transgender within the group.

The absence of black and minority ethnic (BAME) or transgender women resulted in specific tweets being used to encourage both groups of women to engage in the study. Unfortunately, like this approach in general, this was not successful. Accordingly, the study data must be seen in the context of being derived from a white and apparently cis-gendered perspective. It bears repeating however that qualitative enquiry does not require a sample to be representative rather that it be defined and clearly described when the data is presented (Sarantakos, 2005). However, the absence of the voices noted should not be accepted per se, thus the specific targeting mentioned here, and the resulting lack of success in enabling both BAME and transgender input to the study was very disappointing from an intersectional perspective.

5.5.2 Summary of research participants

Table 5-1 Research Participants

Name	Age	Relationship status	Sexual orientation	Employment status	Self-classified ethnicity	Self-classified sexual orientation
Carole	40	Married	Heterosexual	Employed health professional	White British	Heterosexual
Selina	49	Relationship	Heterosexual – with same sex experience	Self-employed property developer	Caucasian	Normal, straight, normal
Lynne	44	Single	Heterosexual	Self-employed owner of escort agency	White British	Straight
Chris	55	Single	Heterosexual	Employed in higher education	White British	Heterosexual em, celibate
Heather	49	Married	Lesbian	Employed health professional	White British	I'm a lesbian woman
Katie	38	Married	Lesbian	Employed civil servant	White British	Gay
Yvette	54	Married	Lesbian	Student health professional	Mediterranean	Gay
Margot	64	Married	Heterosexual	Semi-retired self-employed teacher	White	Man/woman?
Evelyn	65	Married	Heterosexual	Retired social services provider	White, well white British	Heterosexual straight
Deidre	73	Married	Heterosexual	Retired	White English	I'm normal
Helen	61	Married	Heterosexual	Semi-retired writer	White British	My sexuality and sexual side of me is totally with my husband
Louise	51	Single	Heterosexual	Employed NHS administration	White British	Well the opposite sex
Lesley	39	Relationship	Heterosexual	Employed office administrator	White British I guess	Heterosexual
Joanne	40	Single	Heterosexual – with same sex experience	Full-time student	White British	I'm straight
Tara	42	Single	Not specified - with same sex experience	Self-employed counsellor	White British	Other I don't want to put myself in a box
Linda	51	Single	Heterosexual	Employed housing officer	White British	Heterosexual
Rhiannon	53	Single	Heterosexual	Unemployed art teacher	British	Straight
Gina	63	Married	Heterosexual	Retired school librarian	Human being	Straight I suppose straight yeah
Monica	58	Relationship	Heterosexual	Employed in civilian police role	White Caucasian I guess	I'm heterosexual

5.6 Data collection

5.6.1 The Interview Schedule

The interview schedule was designed to move through the main themes of study namely online life, establishing sexual identity and the interrelation between the two. The questions in schedule were indicative of the content of the proposed interviews acknowledging the fact that theoretical sampling would be employed over the course of the interviews to test ideas arising from the data analysis.

The schedule was not designed to be followed verbatim but rather to provide a framework or prompts for the researcher, particularly in the initial interviews. Having the schedule spine for the interviews enabled focus to be kept on both rapport building with participants and on active listening which would enable sensitivity to the data from the outset. The full interview schedule can be found in appendix 2. As discussed in section 5.2.1 the use of semi structured interviews was supportive of constructivist grounded theory by enabling constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Mason, 2014, Sarantakos, 2015)from the outset whilst being flexible enough to allow for digressions into new areas of interest enabling the process of theoretical sampling as time went on.

5.6.2 Preparing for the interviews

The interviews were conducted at the Brynmor Jones Library and the Calder Building on campus at the University of Hull. Using campus meeting rooms allowed women from all over the Hull and surrounding area to attend what was a fairly well-known site, with good transport links for their interviews. Situating the interviews on campus would also lend academic credence to the work being undertaken and the procedures which were created around the study. Given that the women would be discussing sensitive topics it was important the interviews took place in a formal setting within a known academic institution, to offer reassurance to participants. All of the interviews were recorded straight into Sonocent software which would allow for creation of transcription notes in the same programme. Participants were met at pre-arranged places, and escorted to the booked rooms once signed in. In the room they were welcomed, given a drink if they wished and the consent form was discussed as well as the procedure for the interview including the recording process. Paper copies of the consent form and study information sheet were supplied by the researcher. Additional support paperwork was present to be given to any woman who became in any way distressed or made a disclosure which was distressing in nature.

The consent form outlined the duty of confidentiality to the participants and that their data would be anonymised, but also outlined the limits of this confidentiality should they disclose

anything criminal in nature to the researcher. The women were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study up to seven days after the interview. In addition, the form checked the women had had the purpose of the study explained as well as its context within a doctoral programme, including the possible publishing of papers from the study at a later date. When the participant was ready, and the paperwork was signed the interview began with a short recording check before proceeding to the main interview. See appendix 5 and 4 for the information sheet and consent form.

No-one withdrew their consent after the interviews took place and no-one was referred on to the police or social services. The additional support paperwork was given out to three participants in the study, twice in relation to disclosures made within the interviews themselves and once where a participant spoke of an issue in her life after her interview.

5.6.3 Conducting the Interviews

In the main the flow of the interviews went well however external factors did have a bearing on some. On two occasions rooms were very noisy and had to be changed due to building work in the library and on one occasion the interview was interrupted by a student who had booked the room subsequent to the booking made by the researcher. Whilst these were not helpful to the process fortunately, they had very little impact on the interviews themselves. The schedule proved to be a very useful aide at the beginning of the interviews, providing consistency and structure to the discussions. In time the schema was less necessary as theoretical sampling principles meant that following the data that was beginning to emerge became more salient to the process (Charmaz, 2014).

Most of the women took a little time getting used to the subject matter of the interviews and some found that they needed key concepts reiterating in the course of the interview. However, as rapport developed most of the participants spoke frankly about their lives much to the benefit of the study. The following sections will outline the data revealed to the researcher by the participants and how the ongoing analysis of this developed the categories which would go on to underpin the theory arising from the study.

5.7 The process of data analysis

5.7.1 Overview of the Analysis

This section will illustrate the methods of constructing grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) by explicating the analysis of the data collected in the study. It will

- illustrate the initial coding of the interviews (5.7.2),
- explain the design of the organisational mechanisms which enabled constant comparison of data from the beginning of the analysis (5.7.2),
- explore and illustrate the focus coding procedure which drove the categorisation process within the study (5.7.3),
- draw attention to axial elements which became apparent in the analysis (5.7.4)
- highlight the use of memos and theoretical sampling (5.7.5; 5.7.6)
- and finally present the core categories, the culmination of the analysis (5.7.7; 5.7.8).

Unlike previous iterations of grounded theory method, as laid out in section 4.6, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) is less rigid in how its principles methods are applied. This does not mean that the work of the analysis is any less rigorous rather a constructivist approach is set of guiding principles for analysis rather a rigid design, (Charmaz, 2014). This section will demonstrate that the theory constructed in this study and delineated in the following chapter has been grounded in the data collected.

5.7.2 Initial / Open coding

As with the other iterations of GT method (outlined in section 4.4-4.5) constructivist grounded theory is developed from analysis begun concurrently with data collection. The data analysis begins with initial or open coding.

> *'Ground theory coding is the process of defining what data are about. Coding means categorising segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarises and accounts for each piece of data. Your codes show how you select, separate and sort data and begin an analytic account of them'*
>
> *Charmaz (2014:111)*

By coding the researcher takes the first step in the process of making sense of what might be going on in their study by documenting their initial analytic responses to their data. Codes take apart the data line by line to explore the making of it, with a view to paving the way to developing the theoretical implications of what has been found later in the study. Coding allows the researcher to begin to interpret the data which in turn influences future data collection and so enables the process of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014). In the

following section a precis will be given of the process of analysing and comparing the data arising from the first interviews.

In this study the interviews were transcribed from the recording into proforma with room for coding to one side. Coding was done directly after transcribing and contemporaneous notes were made about the interviews allowing for a comparative analysis from the start. The next section outlines the progression of the first four interviews, the coding developed from them and the initial indications of the thematic elements arising from the data.

5.7.2.1 Interview 1 Carole initial coding

In the following excerpt from the first interview Carole outlines her feelings about social media and its impact on her emotional wellbeing. In expressing her distress Carole offers an insight into the ways in which she has positioned herself in relation to the presentations of others in the digital world. The coding serves to draw out processes happening around a concept, in this case social media, which is shown to be subject to emotional responses including mistrust, depression and envy. The result of these emotions means social media is something Carole has begun to avoid.

Table 5-2 Interview 1 Excerpt 1

Carole	Open codes
'Yeah, course. Em' (pauses) 'tsk well I suppose with me its very sort of personal reasons. I used to get a bit fed up with Facebook anyway cos I just felt like, you know, nobody shows their true reality of their lives it's just what they want you to see, in the end. I used to go on and be a bit depressed, seeing everyone's lives and thinking oh they look a bit more exciting than mine and they've got more friends than me er' (exhales) and eh you know I don't think that's particularly good for you to compare yourself negatively against other people but for me personally its only because I've struggled with infertility and it's always baby pictures up, so I've taken myself off just to have a bit of a break from that aspect.'	Personal impact of social media Distrust in the perfection of presentation Depressing nature of seeing others' lives 'compare yourself negatively' Ubiquity of baby pictures problematic when facing fertility issues. Removing oneself to avoid social media triggers vis a vis fertility

Despite finding pictures of other people's children distressing, Carole still returned occasionally to Facebook through a fear of missing out or being 'nosey'. In this way social media became a necessary evil something Carole was drawn to for connection but excluded from participating due to her fertility difficulties.

Carole went on to describe the changing role of sex across her life course; describing sex as a means to an end in her early life but later as a means of connection with her husband. In doing so Carole showed change in her sexual identity over time particularly in terms of an increase in sexual agency with age. However, in contrast Carole also expressed a feeling that she lacked sexual identity and sex was something belonging to the young. In this interview then a number of potential themes could be seen of particular interest were aspects of sexual identity and life course changes which seemed interesting, as well as agency and age in sexual behaviour and the idea of relationships as security.

Table 5-3 Interview 1 Excerpt 2

Carole	Open coding
'yeah it's not my main focus' (briefly pauses) 'much these days, well at all really. these days. *No but I think a lot to do with that is being a bit older, perhaps? I think when I was younger basically or when I was single I was more caught up in' (clears throat) 'you know' (pauses) 'obviously you know being the right weight or looking a certain way and in fact now though that I'm a bit, a bit more of a stable point in my life and I'm secure in my relationship and yeah I'm that bit older and not so bothered about how I appear to other people, yeah as long as I'm happy in myself I don't really, like I say my sexual side of myself that's reserved for my husband and that's it really.'*	Not finding sex a primary motivator Further clarifying to not finding sex a motivator at all at this time. Relating age to lack of sexual identity Being single brings pressure on appearance and finding partners. Stabilising influence of relationships. Security provided by relationship. No longer concerned what others think as a result of this conferred security. 'sexual side of myself that's reserved for my husband and that's it really'

5.7.2.2 Interview 2 Selina initial coding and comparison

Interview 2 with Selina provided further exploration of the idea of necessary evil but applied this more widely to communication technology as a whole. Selina spoke about her increasing use of technology and a sense of being permanently available. Within the discussion the value of the internet was scrutinised, and Selina expressed distaste for what she saw as the waste of social media on the 'banal'. Selina felt the potential power of social media was often squandered on trivial processes of communication like gossip or trolling. This both mirrored and extended the Carole's comments in terms of the effect of 'noseying' on mood to the more active issue of the deliberate targeting of vulnerable people or people's vulnerabilities.

Table 5-4 Interview 2 Excerpt 1

Selina	Open codes
' yeah, the phones with me all the time. My mother calls it my umbilical cord, and she gets sick to death of it. because unfortunately your now on the end of, people need you twenty-four seven, or you feel compelled to respond to some things. Although it's been great, it also been you know, it's been weird because it's been so expanding hasn't it on so many levels but I think it's been absolutely horribly restricting as well.'	Ubiquity smart-phones. Resentment from family due smart-phone' ubiquity Constantly reachable/online Compelling pressure to respond immediately to contacts. Freedom versus restriction. Tensions created by technology.

With regard to sexual identity Selina described a 'hedonistic' relationship in her thirties which changed her view of sex and subsequently her sexual identity. This supported the idea of changing nature of sexual identity previously found in coding of Carole's interview.

Table 5-5 Interview 2 Excerpt 2

Selina	Open coding
'I probably don't think about it a lot. It's more the person I'm with that I start to feel, start to think about sex. I'm not like I mean I've had some girlfriends that have a libido like, is like an oversexed eighteen-year-old boy. They're 'ooh yeah' you know like it just like beyond me so. Its more to do with when	Participant identifies that having a partner drives her libido. Does not identify with friends whose libido's are independent of having partners - categorises this as over-sexed.

I'm in a relationship then I feel sexual. So, they're my focus.' *'yup, yeah when I haven't been in a relationship well I I just don't sort of think about it. And if I do then it might be porn or it might be, buts its very rare. Its more I'm motivated sexually when I'm in a relationship by that person, you know cuddles and thinking about them, and experiencing stuff with them.'*	Strongly ties libido to desire for her partner. Sexual feelings outside of relationship context classed as rare.

Selina spoke about sex very positively and had a keen understanding of her own wants, desires and preference in pornography. In contrast in this second excerpt Selina echoes Carole's sense of the importance of relationships, but also specifies her (Selina) lack of any sense of libido when not in a relationship. This example of libido foreshadowed many of the women's description of sexual identity being contingent on relationships, rather than a phenomenon recognised by the women independently. It was also notable that Selina specifically described herself as heterosexual in orientation, despite having had sexual contact with women in her past relationships and enjoying pornography featuring women. However, the fact that Selina also made specific mention of the distinction between her sexual identity and wider identity may explain this distinction. Selina specifically stipulated that despite her assertiveness in life she preferred a submissive role within her sexual life.

In addition to the relationship focus of sexual identity linking with Carole's previous interview both the women spoke of their disappointment with their experiences of online dating. Both Carole and Selina had found that this way of meeting prospective partners lacked the chemistry of meeting men in real life. It was notable that Selina's tone of voice and demeanour markedly changed when discussing this element of online life. It was interesting to discover how the other women had faired dating online.

Whilst Selina's interview extended some of the ideas arising from Carole's interview it also raised the issue of Intrusion of communication technology as well as raising thoughts around orientation as sexual identity. Considering the two interviews together the themes of agency, performance and boundary setting appeared to be interesting avenues for further exploration.

5.7.2.3 Interview 3 Lynne initial coding and comparison

The third interview was particularly difficult as the participant, Lynne, disclosed she was raped as a teenager. In accordance with the submitted ethical processes, which planned for disclosure of a sensitive nature, the interview was stopped. However, having been given the option to finish the interview and time to compose herself Lynne was adamant she wished to continue. I felt that the most appropriate response to this was to continue as this gave Lynne control over the situation. The rest of interview went well, and Lynne said she would make use of the supporting organisations material given to seek some support for issues she described.

The coding of Lynne's data introduced themes of domestic and sexual violence into the analysis as well as concomitant issues of self-esteem and body image. However, Lynne shared a number of key issues with the previous interviews including the linking of sexual identity to relationships and also her view that online dating could not replicate the spark of people meeting in real life. Lynne also expanded upon codes begun in the previous interview relating to pornography. Both Selina and Lynne were enthusiastic about their use of online pornography, however Lynne gave a different perspective delineating pornography to a foreplay role within her casual relationship. This relationship was also of interest as it was completely mediated by online communication, a fact which Lynne disclosed to her own amusement.

5.7.2.4 Interview 4 Chris initial coding and comparison.

In this fourth interviewed Chris picked up and developed upon a range of topics previously identified. Of particular interest were Chris's experiences of online dating. Like the others Chris had been underwhelmed by the connection she had with the men she had met from online dating. However, this process had led to something of a positive assessment for Chris. In meeting unsuitable people Chris had realised she was not prepared to settle for any relationship for the sake of it. Chris came to the realisation that being single and self-determining was something to be valued and that a relationship would have to offer something special for her to contemplate giving up her freedom.

In terms of online life Chris shared that her mood played a part in how she interacted online. Echoing the sense of pressure felt by Carole, Chris said that small slights online could have significant impact for offline wellbeing. Using the example of comparing others' family photographs at Christmas Chris revealed ways in which she could feel vulnerable by seeing into others' lives. Chris was able to give this context and recognised that everyone performs or curates their life online nonetheless in vulnerable moments this could prove emotionally onerous. Chris also highlighted the complexities of managing relationship breakdown on social

media and the impact of divorce on women finding relationships whilst caring for children. Chris also mentioned concern for friends who risked meeting people too soon after connecting online. From the perspective sexual identity Chris also like the other women interviewed revealed changes in sexual identity over time distancing herself from her attitude to casual relationships as young woman.

5.7.3 Focussing the coding and categorisation procedures

The diagram below outlines the set of categories that were assigned to the data after the first four interviews were reviewed. The work undertaken to re-assess the initial subcategories and categories of codes from the interviews is the secondary step of constructivist grounded theory referred to by Charmaz (2014) as focused coding.

> *'Focused coding means using the most significant and or frequent earlier codes to sift through and analyse large amounts of data. It requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorise your data incisively and completely. It also can involve coding your initial codes'*
>
> *Charmaz (2014:138)*

The previous sections have outline the process of initial coding that took place from the first four interviews by illustrating the procedures of the interviews and the formulation of the initial tentative categories to understand the codes which in Charmaz (2104) iteration of grounded theory method are known as focused codes. The focussed codes attached to the data were subsequently used to assess and refine the codes in the ongoing interviews from this point.

Within the design of the study it was decided to continue this focussed coding cycle on a four-interview basis comparing each interview to the rest then stopping to re-assesses and focus code after every fourth interview. This process created phases in the analysis which offered the researcher a pause to reflect on the progress and provided an indication of potential theoretical significant elements as they arose. This represents what might be considered the 'work' and 'structure' of the analysis but over time other key elements were occurring to reach the point where theory could be produced from this process.

Table 5-6 First Coding Categories

Sub category	Category
Remembering life before the internet	Remembering life before the internet
Daily habits	Components of online life
Popular places online	
Internet embeddedness	
Intrusion	
Concern for young	
Work	
Connections	
Platforms	Social media
Uses	
Seeing into others' lives	
Comparing oneself to others	
Curated lives	Performative nature of life online
Images online	
Spoiling identities	
Opting out	
Pressure from social media	Establishing boundaries in online life
Responding to pressure / boundary setting	
Compelling nature of online spaces	
Data concerns	Privacy in the online world
Privacy setting	
Privacy turning points / deal breakers	
Image	Self-image and esteem
The impact of aging on self-perception of attractiveness	

Esteem	
Maintenance	Relationships
Finding	
Need	
Security	
Relationship breakdown	Problematic relationships
Divorce	
Domestic violence	
Experience/ effects of abusive relationship	
Sexual violence	
Orientation as sexual identity	Recognising sexual identity
Preference as identity	
Recognising sexual identity	
Lack of sexual identity	
Body image in sexual identity	
Age and identity	
Performance	
Relationship and Identity	
Love and sex	
Agency	
Experiencing sexual development	Examining the role of sex across the life course
Initial relationships	
Sex belonging to the young	
Ongoing importance of sex	
Sex in relationships over time	
	Agency in sexual behaviour
Performance	Getting sex right

Sourcing Information about sex	
Discussing sex with peers	
Preferences in sexual behaviour	
Gendered beliefs about sex	
Orgasm	
Beliefs	
Orientation specific information	
	Sexual taboos - what we don't talk about
Participation / experience	Dating in the online world
Relationships facilitated / conducted online	
Risk	
Disingenuous actions	
Problems of presentation	
Using internet for sexual purposes	Online sexual behaviour
Information seeking	
Choice in sexual imagery	
Fantasy/ fandom	
Curiosity	
Watching material atypical to orientation or behaviour	
Beliefs about sexual content online– context	
Role of online sexual behaviour	
Frequency of online sexual behaviour	
Purchasing sexual products	
Moral	Not using internet for sexual purposes
Established	Linkage between online life and sexual identity?
Not established	
Not sure	

5.7.4 Axial developments in the coding categories

The following table reflects a change in the ongoing analysis in the second phase cycle of interviews in that across the four interviews only one new category was suggested whilst numerous subcategories arose from the data. In Constructing Grounded Theory (2014) Charmaz describes the process of Axial Coding espoused by Strauss and Corbin in their iteration of the method as follows

> *'..to relate categories to subcategories. Axial coding specifies the properties and dimensions of a category thus its proponents see it as a way of making coding – and the resulting analysis – more systematic'*
>
> *Charmaz (2014:147)*

Like Charmaz (2014:148) here elements of axial coding have entered into the analysis although not as a specific deliberate attempt to impose order on the categories rather they have 'emerged' as the interviews progressed. This process can be shown by the various additions accrued and subsequently illustrated in the table below. It would be unfeasible for categories not to have dimensions or subcategories after all, but in this analysis as this table attests the relationship between categories and subcategories emerged from the individual's codes rather than from a formal process applied to the data as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1987).

From the table below it can be seen that one interview can very much broaden a sense of a category and provide greater depth to its understanding. Heather provided a greater understanding of the processes of developing a sexual identity both offline and in the digital context.

At this stage noted above after reviewing the categories after eight interviews it was apparent that online life was both a help and hinderance to the women interviewed. Social media, more often than not Facebook, enabled connections but opened a view into others lives which was not always helpful. A number of the women felt pressure from social media in terms of matching up to other's performances online and one woman struggled with not being in control of imagery appearing in online contexts.

Table 5-7 Axial Development within the Coding

Interview	Category +	Subcategory +
5. Heather	Other media Identity	Alternative to internet Connecting to likeminded Not connecting Television Books Magazines Films Awareness Changes Supporting identity Internet providing privacy Experiencing otherness Concealing identity Fear Finding identity / orientation Confusion Longing to fulfil true identity Identification with others Attempting to fit in Worth in identity Orientation specific information Lacking realism Not relatable Not emotionally engaging Not interested in hardcore content
6. Katie		Being visible online Identification with others/belonging Hope for young
7. Yvette		Trust Attitude to posting

		Quantified lives Reinforcing self Protecting self Beauty ideals Confidence Friendships Heteronormativity - not knowing the existence of another option
8. Margot		Family connection

Sexual identity was not widely understood by the women but could be explored talking about relationships and the role of sex over time. Pornography divided the women in that some took a dispassionate functional view of pornography as an adjunct to their sexual lives whilst other were specifically opposed to it on moral grounds. Some of women did not look at pornography as they were concerned what this would mean for their professional reputation. Of those that did use pornography the women spoke of looking at material did not reflect their own sexual lives or orientation.

Online sexual behaviour comprised of a wide range of actions from sourcing information, accessing sexual imagery and the use of online dating platforms was accepted if not always successful. The lesbian women interviewed however had had more positive experiences in general as it contributed to a wider process of finding likeminded people online.

5.7.5 Using memos to progress the analysis

At this point of the analysis there was a need to move towards a more theoretical frame for what was happening. Two cycles of comparative coding had occurred, and a range of categories were coalescing in the data. Writing memos is a central tenet of grounded theory practice as it allows the researcher to reflect on the coding choices they are making and in doing so creates greater clarity around the patterns and meanings that can be ascribed to them (Saldana, 2013: 41). The following memo reflecting on details from Yvette's interview provides a good example of this process.

This denotes a key development for theory in the study, curation online could fulfil an active role in protecting oneself from both external expectations and online pressures. It also suggests that visibility online has to be negotiated carefully given the narrow visual culture which has developed in social media. The following memo diagram was produced around this time.

Table 5-8 Memo Yvette Interview

03.05.2017

Presentation of self/ Protections of self - dimensions of curation online

Yvette's interview proved to be very interesting. She was a warm and friendly character who met your eye and was keen to talk. What stood out from the discussion was Yvette's description of purposefully adopting a persona online. Previous interviews have covered the passive aspects of feeling pressure online and the active aspects of maintain boundaries or removing oneself from the fray of Facebook but Yvette describes something else.

Yvette describes a deliberate approach to her online life; she adopts a persona comprising humour and self-deprecation. Not only that she also describes the cultures this persona is made in relation to namely that of the perfectly made selfie photograph and the chic nature of French style expectation. She spoke of being realistic about her looks and about being fine about this yet…

> *'I suppose, I don't feel terribly confident as a sexual being as well. I don't know. It's to do with my appearance or what I make of the way I look, I suppose, which, you know, I've never been, I don't know, somebody to steal hearts. …./*
>
> *'It's always a pretend person, in a way, when you use a social website, but not to the point of, I don't know…/*
>
> *'French people make the trends. That's why I'm the odd one out. Style and all this, yes. It does make me feel a bit at odds because of my body image and, obviously, the reason why I portray myself as I do, perhaps, online, which is the, you know, friendly funny … it's because there's no way I can compete in that area of being, you know, the typical, sexually attractive person. So I'm not going into that field, because I know I can't win in that field'.*

In order to engage online Yvette has protected self (new subcategory) within the online world including its expectations driven by both online cultures and offline cultural expectations curating an online life. Not only that Yvette is aware of what she is doing and from this is able to be critical of others online lives - in particular she questions both the reality of the number of friends people (quantified lives) have on social media and the vacuous notion of competition this engenders.

Therefore, it could said that women can consciously develop, by curation, a particular sense of themselves online which performs a purpose according to their needs and beliefs about themselves. This interview confirms a reactive quality to online live and displays the subtleties of cultural or societal effects on the way women view themselves and then subsequently present themselves.

Memos do not always exist in written form like the one above. Over the course of the research a number of diagrams were produced to which explored the relations of concepts arising from the data. By doing so the concepts both appear stronger but also find additional meaning in relation to other areas of the data. This process was particularly useful for forming higher categories and beginning to look for theoretical sense in the data.

The diagram below relates a number of continuums of emotional responses to online life from closed very specific use of the online world to enthusiastic unguarded uptake of all things available online. It attempts to find salient dimensions in online life that the women navigate. Clearly curating an online life could be driven by cultural forces both online and off, but it was not clear if this was experienced in a consistent way.

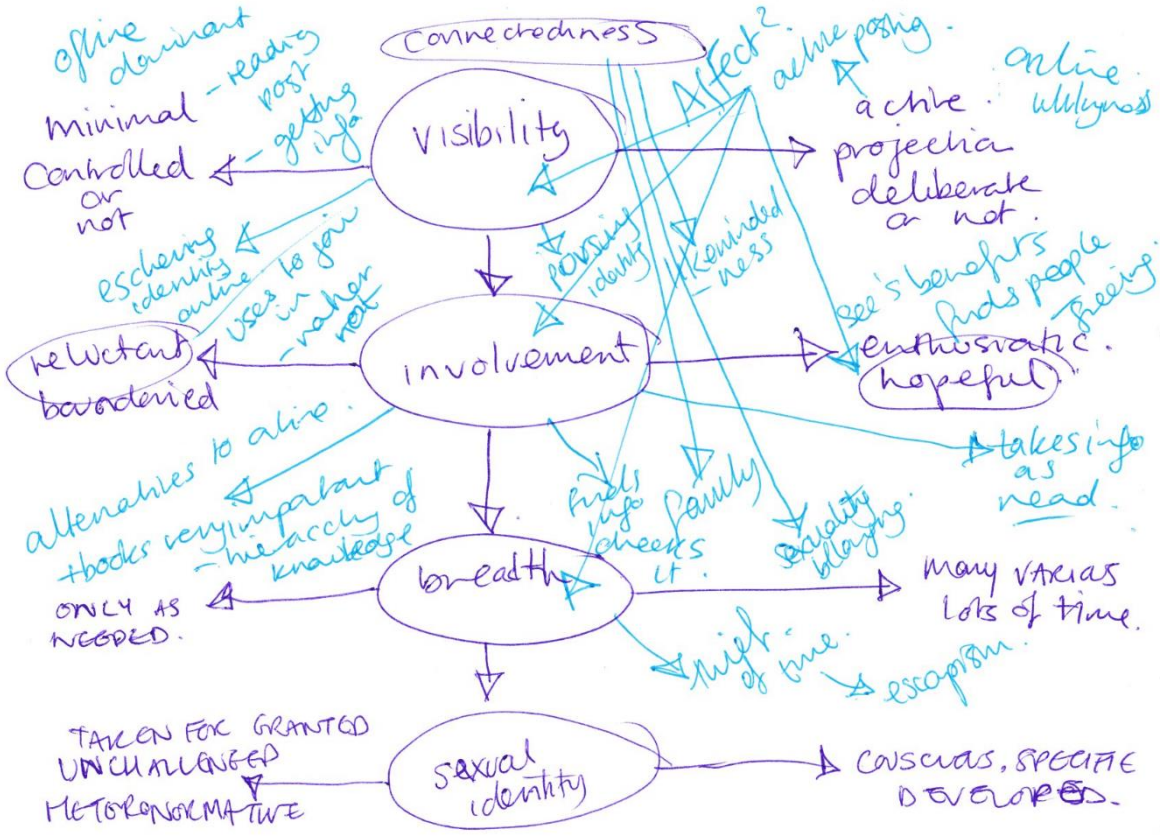

Figure 1 Visual Memo Example Mid Analysis

5.7.6 Theoretical coding and sampling

The analysis progressed through another cycle of four interviews resulting in the following alterations to categories.

Table 5-9 Category and Subcategory Development

Interview	Category+	Subcategory+
9. Evelyn	Generational difference	Previous generations Women today
10. Deidre		
11. Helen	Opinion on internet Interest in the research	Phones Opinion on SM
12. Louise		Relationship Status Mothering

From a category point of view much less progressed in these interviews and at a later point these categories were not continued. The subcategory differences did bring together some interesting coding however most of which remained in the final analysis. However not creating new categories did not mean that these interviews did not contribute to the analysis, these interviews consolidated the previous codes and gave them more depth. This process captures the initial elements which can then be pursued theoretically in later interviews.

As noted previously in section 5.6.3 the emphasis of the interviews did alter over time to reflect the data coming from them. This is key to the process of theoretical sampling In constructivist ground theory methodology attending to theoretical ideas by questioning them either in the data or in the field in order to further the analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Sometimes this occurs in the ordering and re-ordering of categories as more information brings fresh perspectives as the figures (new category figures) highlight but importantly theoretical development will begin to influence how a researcher approaches their interviews. In the following excerpt (Table 5-10) the use of Facebook is explored in terms of privacy, after several participants had recounted specific turning points that marked a change in practice related to the control of information. The use of Facebook by participants was almost universal and the interchange below was purposefully trying to develop the theoretical elements of control and privacy on this platform.

Table 5-10 Theoretical Coding Evelyn Interview

I:	**I'd just like to talk a little bit about Facebook and Twitter, but I'll start with Facebook. What's your experience of Facebook been? How long have you been on it, say for example?**	Early adopter on Facebook Facebook is 'quite helpful for what it was set up to do'
R:	Quite a long time. I can't think how long now, but a long time, yes. Probably from not long after it started. Like most people I find it quite helpful for what it was set up to do, like, you know, actually not helpful in that people seem to have put their whole life on Facebook. I'm not interested in what they've had for dinner, or whether their boyfriend is (inaudible 00.02.46). I've always worked in childcare, is my occupation and I worked for a charity, which was teenage pregnancy, so I was the crèche manager. So a lot of the young women that we were involved with then are actually still friends on Facebook. You know, you just think, "Oh, just don't do that." So I'm always private messaging them saying, "Maybe you shouldn't perhaps have put this on Facebook," you know, so. So yes, I think in some respects it's a really good thing, and in some respects it's a really bad thing, because once you've posted something that's out there for always. It's not like, I think some people use it almost as if you're talking to a friend, but actually, the whole world is seeing this, and it's not something that you can actually take back afterwards, so.	Dislikes 'that people seem to have put their whole life on Facebook. I'm not interested in what they've had for dinner' Childcare/ Teenage Pregnancy background Has Facebook connections with previous clients Has concerns about appropriateness of some YW posts Suggests changes to posts to YW Facebook good/ bad thing Concerns about posts being 'out there for always' not talking to friends talking to the world.
I:	**Do you think there was a point in time before you became conscious of that on Facebook, or do you think you've always approached Facebook with that level of privacy, or did something spur you to be private on there, and see it as you're not talking to friends?**	Always been mindful of Facebook privacy Private person
R:	I think I've always done that. Because I think I am quite a private person, not in my friends, but I think that's my age and how I was brought up, that actually you don't, you know, you don't discuss things, you keep it in. You know, because that's the way of the world when we were young. But I think it's got more, I think as the years have gone on it's got more and more, I think women definitely have changed to what they were. I mean, when I was young if you were a woman, you wouldn't go into a pub on your own. That was, you only went into a pub on your own if you were a hooker. So, but now, I mean, obviously you see all these television programmes of young women, you know, completely off their face not knowing what's happening to them. You know, I think it's a very worrying world, and if I had a daughter of that age I would be very worried.	Upbringing reinforced privacy Concept of privacy lost over time by generations women changing over time Concerned about vulnerability of drunken YW as see on tv Worrying world Would worry for daughters

Examples of turning points with Facebook which appeared to be theoretically significant had begun to emerge and this excerpt explores that investigation within an interview developing the line of theoretical sampling, as mentioned previously a key element of Constructivist Ground Theory practice (Charmaz, 2014). However, Evelyn states she had always been careful with the platform but in doing so reinforced elements of Chris's thoughts (Interview 4) regarding that which we bring to the online space in terms of emotional perspective. In this case Evelyn likens her emotional response to Facebook as being a result of the culture in her family and her experiences more generally rather than expanding on the element of emotional vulnerability it is possible to feel encountering the internet like Chris, Evelyn takes a more judgemental view of others' behaviour online.

Another example of theoretical sampling can be found in the last interview undertaken where despite being a professional woman Monica appears to feel under pressure online, to curate a persona. In this interview little in the way of new coding was arising from the analysis and it was felt that interviews could be considered to be finished unless further analysis required a return to the field, if a category was underdeveloped for example. The next section covers the theoretical justification for ending the collection of data.

Table 5-11 Theoretical Coding Monica Interview

Do you feel pressure from the images that you see on Facebook or are you acknowledging that they're there and could be pressurising, but do you ever feel it yourself? I don't feel pressurised by it but I would never put a picture… maybe I do, maybe I'm not being honest with myself. **I would never be able to say how fair it is?** I would never put a picture on there, oh god I look fat on there or god that's not my best picture, or I look absolutely piddled on that one. You know I wouldn't put those pictures up because to me Facebook is this artificial world. We put pictures of us having a fabulous holiday etc. I don't generally put pictures on there of me digging the garden up or you know walking the dog. My daughter says to me when I walk the dog, you look like a bag lady. But I'm taking the dog out for a walk you know. So, I suppose in a way I do feel that pressure and again I do have very strong feminist views but on the other hand I wouldn't got without my lipstick on you know. My partner who I've been with for a long time will say you're the most conflicted feminist I've ever met. I'm a very conflicted person really. But I again I suppose it's you know we…	Mainly does feel pressured by FB/ media 'maybe I do, maybe I'm not being honest with myself' Curates what the world sees online 'Facebook is this artificial world' 'fabulous' holiday picture go on 'walking the dog' do not Holds strong feminist views but wouldn't go out without lipstick (Feminism doesn't preclude this) Partner says she is 'the most conflicted feminist' they've ever met Feels like a conflicted person

5.7.7 Formulating the categories and gaining theoretical understanding

Working with the total collated data from the interviews allowed the combined categories to be regrouped and focussed. Around this time images were collected to illustrate this messy process. As can be seen below the final groupings of categories were literally cut apart and place upon a board to breakdown any self-imposed order that was arbitrary. This process allowed for the regrouping of the categories in a theoretical frame to test the analysis to this point and began the process of developing a coherent grounded theory from the data.

After splitting the categories following the last interview bringing them back into a coherent whole required a number adjustments but there appeared to be strong core elements emerging principally around the construction of sexual and digital identities but also around the specific ways women were sexual online. This resulted in the core categories represented in Section 5.7.8. As there appeared to be consistent well integrated core categories found in the data this was a final step in the process of theoretical sampling undertaken. After due consideration was given to the breadth of data gathered and considering the diversity of women interviewed these core categories were used to develop a grounded theory.

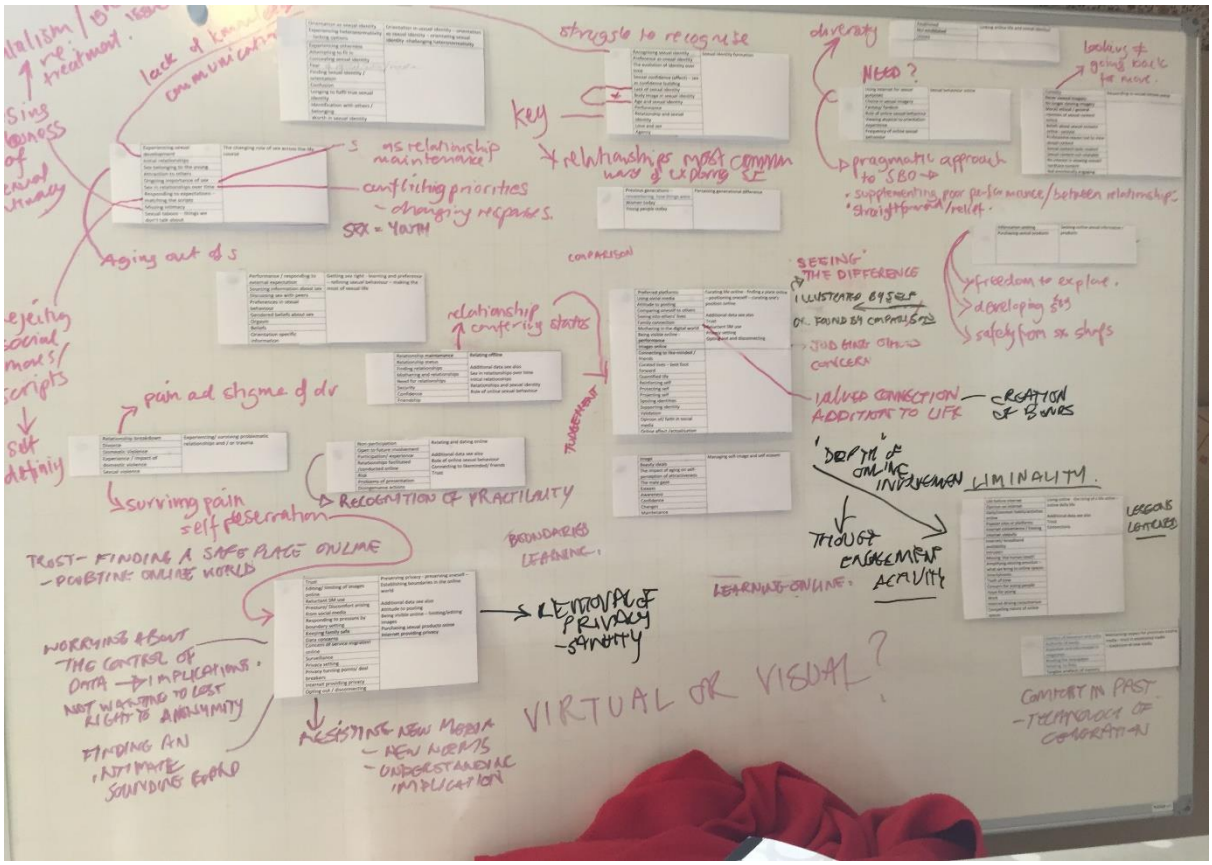

Figure 2 Re-configuring the Categories

5.7.8 The Three Core Categories

The nature of this study meant that data collected did not conform to one overall core category. The question was investigating whether there was interaction between two phenomena and as the codes from interviews built up from the women's words, many of which being in vivo codes (Charmaz, 2014), it became clear that the grounded theory was formed of three core categories. In effect this answered a top level of the research question that there was indeed interaction between sexual identity and internet in the lives of the women interviewed. The core categories described the structure of both elements which were studied and the nature of this interaction. The core categories revealed how sexual identity was developed as a concept through context, time and experience, the ways in which an online life developed and was refined over time and how this then created the specific ways in which the internet supported sexual identity.

Below are the final core categories established and sub-categories which compose them. These categories will be explored and put in context of the grounded theory in chapter 6.

Table 5-12 Final Core Categories

Core categories	**Higher categories**
Ongoing Development of Sexual Identity	Relating sexual identity
	Orientating sexual identity
	Sex in flux across the life course
	Getting sex right - learning and preference
Developing and Refining a Digital Life	Curating life online
	Preserving privacy
Online behaviours supporting sexual identity	Relating and dating online
	Seeking knowledge online
	Responding to sexual content online
	Indirect sexual identity support online
	Direct sexual behaviour online

6 Findings

6.1 The Grounded Theory

The Grounded Theory from this study was constructed from three core categories described in Figure 3. The study found for the women interviewed that sexual identity was subject to ongoing development through the life course (Core category 1– red box), that once introduced to internet refined nuanced digital lives were created informed by offline experience (Core category 2 – blue box) and that within these digital lives it was possible to engage in a range of behaviours supporting sexual identity (Core category 3 – purple box). In this way the study reveals that women experienced an epistemological break in their sexual lives facilitated by their introduction to the online world which contributed new elements to the ongoing constructions of their sexual identities.

The data revealed that the internet has become a key mediator in the ongoing constructions of sexual identity by offering the women both the means to test who they are and means to effect change in their sexual lives. The effect of this change was established to be beneficial in the main or benign where the women did not perceive it. However, within the group there were notable exceptions particularly where the women were subject to ongoing stress or had experience of trauma which in turn determined that online interaction had the potential to negatively impact on sexual identity.

A number of processes within women's online activity were identified within the analysis which contributed to the construction and development of both sexual and digital identities. This involved performing or positioning a presence online through social media profiles and other aspects of presentation. This presentation led to a degree of comparison and competition through which the women evaluated their own status online. The women responded by developing skills in managing digital reputation, and as a result began to critically evaluate their place online. These processes played a major role in the women's identification and management of risk in digital interaction.

By engaging in these processes the women were able to enact privacy, or what passed as an acceptable level of privacy, in their online lives. Enacting privacy in this way illustrated the women's capacity for control and indicates a degree of agency often thought to be absent in older internet users. The women used their existing skills in identifying personal risk to militate against the potential risks of opening up themselves to online connections. Not all aspects of online interaction were easily managed, however. The role and impact of comparison and

competition online was particularly singled out as an element which could require considerable emotional labour.

The mediation of sexual identity was shown to occur both directly and indirectly by both definitive action and online cultural influence. The novel interruption of the internet had allowed the women interviewed to use their life experience to put their online identities in greater context in their lives. In this way the women were ably equipped to deal with the emotional labour of maintaining social contacts online. Far from being naïve newcomers online the majority of the women interviewed negotiated the new complexities of digital existences with relative ease and considerable flexibility.

In essence the women had all constructed unique sexual identities which intersected with their digital identities to a greater or lesser degree circumstantially, using digital skills born of offline and online experience and cultural influence.

Grounded Theory

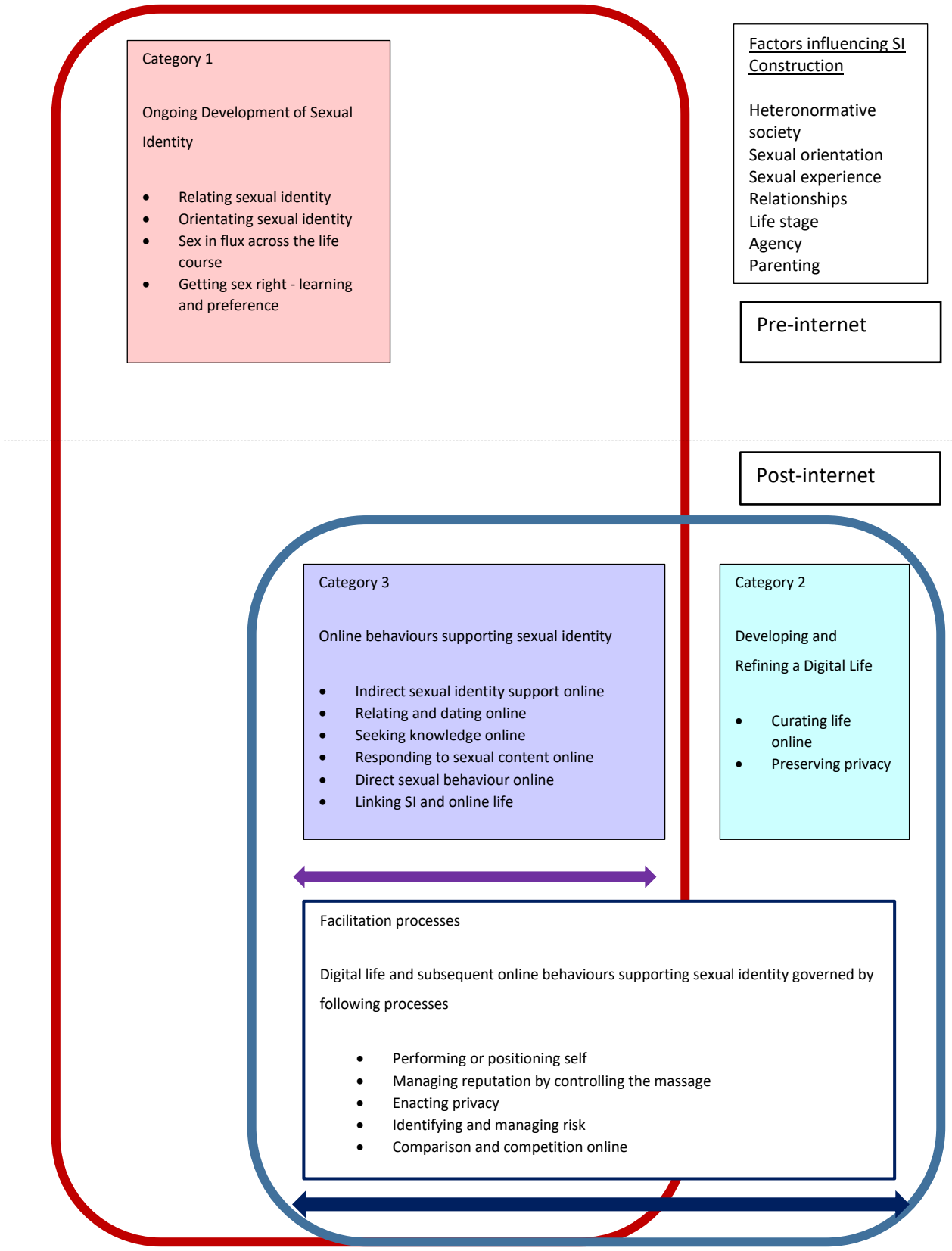

Figure 3 The Grounded Theory

The theory of this study develops the idea that an online life offers the means to construct sexual identity in ways which were previously either unavailable to women or so out of reach as to be seen to be unviable. The arrival of the internet introduced technology which provided the means to both consciously, and not, construct their sexual identity over time. Sexual identity was shown by the data to respond to life events, opportunity and social conditions. In this way it could be said sexual identity is constructed by a continuous process of adjustments mostly made unconsciously but the internet's unveiling of the quantifiable mechanics of social life has provided a means to be more proactive in the development of this aspect of one's self. Through social media, dating platforms and sexual content online women gained access to tangible data with which to review themselves against others in ways unimaginable a generation ago.

This experience has not been one way or without its disadvantages however as far ranging aspects of life from appearance, to financial situation, political affinity, and indeed social status have potentially become subject to scrutiny for the women. However, armed with offline experience the women interviewed have largely benefitted from their online lives and have successfully integrated their digital identities with their offline selves. The data showed the women recognised over time how to protect themselves online and adjusted their behaviour to social media in particular. Previous notions of privacy meant that the women in the main took control of the information they were divulging over time whilst still engaging online in ways helpful to their own needs. In terms of sexual identity this could be deriving confidence from positive responses on social media, presenting a defined profile online which serves a specific self-identified purpose, adapting to using online dating on their own terms, finding guidance online relating to their sexual lives, purchasing products to experiment with sexually, sourcing pornography or sending sexual messages and images.

From the data gathered it was clear that the sexual identity being explored in the research question was not easily described or explained. During the interviews the women revealed a diverse range of experiences from which the concept of sexual identity as ongoing entity adaptable and responsive to change across the life course began to emerge. The data suggested that sexual identity is not acquired and then fixed early in adult life, rather it evolves and responds to the individual circumstances in which a woman finds herself. When asked about sexual identity the women referenced sexual orientation, relationship status, their past sexual experiences and disposition towards sex and it was a coalescence of these elements that began to form a sense of sexual identity. Latterly the women had access to the internet and began to incorporate the elements noted above within their concepts of sexual identity. This process of forming a sexual identity appeared to occur unconsciously in the life of the

women in the main and it is this unconscious nature that made answering direct questions about sexual identity difficult for many of them at first.

Heterosexual married women tended to have the most difficulty relating sexual identity and most commonly spoke of their relationship to define this aspect of themselves. It appeared the women whose relationships were close to heteronormative ideals were less specifically conscious about their sexual identity as their experiences matched that which expected of them by society in their formative years.

In contrast women who identified as lesbian, or chose not to specify their sexual orientation, found defining this aspect somewhat easier as they had reflected more consciously about their sexual identity over time. The women described the differing ways they had navigated heteronormative expectation and sought to find their own identity away from unwanted sexual scripts ascribed to them. These women also were more likely to define the online aspects of the construction of sexual identity

The extent to which the women's online lives interacted with their sexual identity varied widely in the group. That said all the women demonstrated some aspect of intersection the degree to which this featured in the construction of sexual identity overtime appeared to be contingent on a number of factors including

- Relationship status
- Sexual orientation
- Satisfaction with their sexual lives
- Interest in their sexual lives
- Degree of online involvement

By means of example of the contingent nature of this interaction of online and sexual identity many of the older heterosexual married women showed indirect means of constructing their sexual identity by actively engaging social media and generating online feedback. Whilst in contrast younger single people had used the internet more extensively in deliberate ways which enhanced their sexual lives and enabled a more conscious construction of sexual identity.

The women related numerous ways in which the internet had shaped or informed their sexual experiences. Online dating for example had become normalised as a concept within the group and was widely accepted as a pragmatic means of meeting new partners. This illustrated the women's capacity to adopt new practices within relationships over time supporting the concept of the ongoing development of sexual identity as well as highlighting capability to adapt to the digital world.

The research question of the study concerned itself with the introduction of the internet into the lives of women after their adolescence and sexual development. The women interviewed had mostly navigated the process of gaining an online life successfully. Online lives developed usually from formal work or education activities which evolved into more daily embedded practices such as domestic finances and important social communication with family and friends.

Initial experiences were learned from and adapted to within the digital world demonstrating understanding and the ability to create ongoing strategies to optimise their online lives. In this way the women had created, and lived, digital experiences which support their offline lives and, in the process, had managed to keep perspective about the role of this online world in context in the main. That is not to say the online world had not caused the women any stress or difficulty rather they had used their previous experiences to gain control over their online lives adapting to new challenges they faced and making changes where necessary to protect themselves online. In this way digital identities were formed by a process similar to that of sexual identity that again were not fixed and intractable rather they were ongoing, responsive and therefore subject to change over time and circumstance.

Much of the interaction between the internet and women's sexual identity was categorised as indirect in that activity online that contributed to a women overall sense of self-esteem, emotional wellbeing and agency that could in turn be said to have a positive impact on sexual identity. Women mentioned feeling buoyed by being liked online from posts and photographs by way of example. Many of the women however did directly pursue strategies online to address unmet sexual need in a variety of ways; reconnecting with previous partners, finding new partners, sourcing sexual information and products or directly benefitting from sexual content. In pursuing sexual related matter online, the women were consciously addressing needs within their sexual lives and in this way actively contributing to the ongoing development of their sexual identities. In other words, the women interviewed used online resources in the ongoing construction of their sexual identities.

Conversely a small minority of the women appeared to have a less positive view of their sexual identity reinforced by these online processes. Some of the women revealed a sense of failing to meet cultural sexual expectations or feeling insecure about their place in relation to what they encountered online, particularly in social media. In this way the women's online lives can deconstruct sexual identity by negatively affecting self-esteem and in so doing have the potential to undermine sexual agency.

The online world enabled a process of both assessment and redress of sexual need that was previously unavailable to these women. During the interviews the women described strategies and a level of understanding of their online lives which clearly demonstrated their ability to negotiate this new digital realm informed by both their previous offline life experience, their evolving digital awareness and acquired online skills.

6.2 Core Category Overview

This section introduces each core category which arose from the analysis in turn. The subcategories of data which comprise each core category are presented later in section 6.5.

6.2.1 The ongoing development of sexual identity

Foremost in the importance of this core category is the concept of sexual identity being responsive to life circumstances and not fixed over time, because as such the internet could be seen to contribute to its construction once the women went online. The degree of influence of online life in the construction of sexual identity varied widely between the women interviewed but nonetheless could be seen across all the interviews.

During the interviews the concept of sexual identity was difficult to grasp for many of the women interviewed. Sexual identity defied straightforward description due to the personal and often unspoken nature of sexual lives. The women did however discuss what their sexual lives meant to them. The women's frank disclosures of the role of sex in their lives, despite this being a topic not usually open to discussion, indicated how important sexual behaviour was as a facet of their sense of selves and their relationships.

External influences such as prevailing sexual norms and societies view of women's sexuality did have a bearing on how the women felt about themselves as sexual beings. The assumed heterosexual norm in society had for many of the women been an obstacle to grapple within their sexual identity. Many of the women described their labours to escape the sexual scripts of society's pre-determined sexual roles that were assigned to them. Some of the women described trying to be someone they were not before finding for themselves the sexual lives they wished to live. In some cases, the internet proved a vital part of this process of finding their true sexual identity.

This heteronormativity may have been responsible for some of the women's difficulty in defining this aspect of their sexual identity as they lived very close to that which society expects of them and therefore had felt little need to examine their sexual lives beyond a generalised sense of satisfaction or lack of such in their sexual lives.

The breadth of responses given and the description of change throughout the life course indicated that sexual identity is not formed and then fixed; rather it is responsive to life and, for this group of women, was particularly contingent on relationship status. The women described the many ways their sexual identity changed through their lifetimes. For some this meant decrease in the importance of sex within their relationship over time where others it was a crucial factor in the maintaining their relationship on an ongoing basis.

A feature of this continuing development of sexual identity was an increasing sense of agency over time. Many of the women noted that sex occurred far more on their own terms as they had got older. In effect with age came a sense of agency that was not as well developed in their younger years. This increased sense of control made for a far more contented sexual identity irrespective of the frequency of sexual interaction in their relationships. This sense of agency also facilitated the women actively using online resources to support their sexual lives in terms of information seeking, relationship seeking, product purchasing and viewing online content.

Once the women had found their individual way in to talk about their sexual lives, they all expressed aspects of their sexual identity. The ongoing nature of sexual identity meant that any interview conducted can only ever provide a snapshot in time rather than what could be considered a full account. This demonstrates the complexity of working with the intangible nature of sexual identity from both interviewee's and researcher's standpoint.

All the women interviewed were online regularly, but the group split between those who stated they had little contact with any sexual content online women and those for whom the internet had become a supportive element of their sexual lives. From information to dating, sexual content or indeed sending sexual communication the women interviewed illustrated the many ways in which sexual identity can actively interact with the online world.

The research question asks what role the internet plays in the construction of identity, one answer is certainly that it allows women to address needs that become apparent to them at different stages of their life course. In periods of transition, loss or exploration the internet proved invaluable to the women interviewed. Despite concern often raised in popular culture and to some extent within the literature the women showed no ill effects from sexual explorations online. The women's use of sexual content was largely categorised as functional, helpful to sexual lives or simply not of interest.

The internet has come to this generation of women once their journey of sexual identity has begun and it has proven to be a tool to develop, maintain and support the sexual identity of a wide range of women with differing needs and expectations. Online community proved to be particularly valuable to the women who did not self-classify as heterosexual. The sense of belonging and ability to meet partners where offline this was more challenging was highlighted to be very important to the women interviewed.

6.2.2 Developing and refining a digital life

The women found it far easier to discuss their online lives than their sexual identity however many of the women saw little if any connection between the two. However, analysis of the interviews drew out aspects of online life which highlighted the mechanisms by which women used the internet to observe others, perform their best selves and thus refine a digital identity. These three elements of curating an online life by observation, performance and refinement are also the elements of construction which can be used to maintain sexual identity over time.

Online the women could now see, in a concrete sense, aspects of their lives they had only previously felt. When engaging with social media their social lives became visible, lasting and quantified. Nothing in a social sense happened online that they not previously experienced but wider interactivity and the reach of their online lives had taken some time to adjust to.

Clear benefits were described in terms of convenience and connection, with specific reference given to being closer to wider family members. However, the women did identify aspects of their lives which had been problematic particularly in relation to matters of privacy. Seeing into others' lives and comparing oneself negatively was widely discussed as an onerous aspect of a life online. A number of the women found that their ability to cope with the concrete and quantified nature of online life was highly contingent on mood; small slights online could have exaggerated consequences when feeling vulnerable. This aspect perhaps drives their often-expressed concern for young people online.

The women interviewed did not reject the internet when they experienced difficulties online rather they showed a wide range of coping strategies and techniques to adapt their online lives to protect themselves. In addition, a small notable group of the women discussed how they appreciated the online space to control their image away from the offline world. These women each spoke of consciously taking control of their visible presence online towards a particular specific end; to gain equal treatment, to avoid stereotyping or underestimation, or to otherwise redress peers' previous experiences of them.

All but one woman, who had never joined Facebook, continued to use the platform but most made experience specific adjustments to their use over time. There existed something of a parallel in this action which mirrored the gradual accumulation of agency with experience over time in relation to sexual identity. The adjustments the women made within the context online life however were easier to track; taking control of privacy settings, controlling their data or being less visible. In essence the women were actively engaging in the construction of evolving digital identities carved in much the same way as managing the societal pressures brought to bear on them as women in their offline lives.

6.2.3 Online behaviours supporting sexual identity

The women all exhibited behaviours which contributed knowingly or not the ongoing development of sexual identity. In curating online lives the women took control of constructing their digital identities through a range of processes (see the following section 6.4) and in so doing engaged in novel online behaviours which supported their sexual identity.

It may on the surface appear unorthodox to describe the online world as tangible compared to the social world offline however it is difficult to refute the quantitative nature of social media and lasting presence of data online. It is possible to 'see' far more of life online than some could ever hope to experience individually. Being online brought the potential to experience a myriad of personal viewpoints and fresh perspectives that previously were not easily accessible to the women interviewed.

By accessing the internet, a wealth of previously unavailable information and connection had opened up to the women. Although this was extremely valuable to them the women interviewed in the study showed skill in understanding that data/information and connection found online can and should be subject to scrutiny. Such was the scepticism of many of the women interviewed regarding online data/information several them specifically stated that trusted information could only be sourced from books, though these were ironically usually purchased online.

What was unprecedented for most of the women interviewed was the tangible nature of sex online. Although many chose not to engage with online sexual content, the internet had become an important source of information about sex unlike anything they has previously encountered. Many of the women spoke of a lack of sex education or education with a bias towards frightening them from engaging in sex at all. As result many of the women had utilised the internet to fill gaps in their knowledge they had otherwise been unable to address.

The lesbian women interviewed all had had positive experiences online either meeting people or having specific social networks which supported the orientation within their sexual identity. In this way one woman spoke about her hope for the future for young people because of the online connections that could support young LGBT people in ways that she had never been. This optimism however ran counter to the prevailing narrative of concern for young people online and was the only time this view was expressed.

Online dating was accepted widely by the women interviewed and though not always successful in relationship terms the women saw the practical nature of meeting people in this way to be helpful if carefully judged. The procedures of online dating enabled the some of the women to realise what they wanted from their relationships whether that was to meet someone offline, continue online dating or deciding to be happy on their own.

Whilst as has been said here previously many women chose not to engage with sexual content many had explored this aspect in the online realm. A number of women used pornography regularly and found it to be primarily be a positive adjunct to their sexual lives usually in times when partners were not available, or when they were between relationships. However, a small number had supplemented aspects of their relationships with online sexual content where their needs were not being met or in one case as a replacement for foreplay with a casual partner.

For all these women whether dating or viewing imagery online, sex and relationships have taken new tangible, often visible, forms online. Accessing this sexual content online could be said to be an extension of the comparative nature of social media. The women were using online sources to see farther than they had ever done before by accessing specific sexual information for their own needs or bearing witness to what other people do sexually, something not readily available to them offline. There is a strong and very reasonable counter argument to this point that online sexual content does not represent the average person's sexual life, but the women interviewed all showed critical skills in assessing the content they viewed and its relationship to reality. Indeed, one woman specifically stated she sought out 'amateur' material as she could relate to it better.

Whilst the tangible and/or visible nature of the online sexual content offered novel means of positioning one's sexual identity in relation to others, or to discern a more concrete assessment of one's sense of sexual identity, not all actively engaged in this process. Those women who did not use the internet directly to support their sexual identities did so in other ways by presenting themselves positively in a social sense online. By projecting positive aspects of themselves online they supported their sexual identities in less direct means in terms of confidence and agency. A developing sexual identity in an online space could therefore be said to have the potential to be supported by direct and/or indirect means. However, this comparative nature of life online can and did have some negative consequences for women interviewed largely around feelings of failure to live up to perceived cultural standards of appearance or sexual prowess. For these women, it could be said their online lives deconstructed their sexual identity to some degree.

6.3 Strategies Employed Curating a Life Online

Many of subcategories from the data gathered relating to developing and refining a digital life can be additionally grouped independently of the higher categories to illustrate the range of processes which contributed to the curation of an online life as outlined in the Table 6-1 overleaf. Much of the discussion about the internet with the women interviewed focussed on the comparative nature of a life online. The women explored the impact of seeing into other women's lives and discussed the subsequent adjustments they made to be seen as their best selves online over time. By being conscious of others' behaviour online and editing what they revealed in an online context the women began to curate digital identities. In the analysis several processes were identified as central to this curation of the women's online lives. These processes were a fine balance between revealing and concealing information through which the women knew they would be judged online.

In adopting the practices noted overleaf most of the women had gone through a period of transition and settlement online reacting to what they found there and adjusting their behaviour online accordingly. It could be said that women's offline lived experiences are comprised of a succession of adjustments to the rigours of each life stage and individual circumstance. In encountering the internet then the women used this existing expertise in adapting, managing risk and problem solving to keep themselves safe and in control online.

A small number of the women interviewed appeared to be still in the process of transition to a more stable online life. This group could see ways they could improve their internet experiences but not having achieved it yet were less content with their online lives. Those with a high degree of scepticism of the internet similarly had less content online lives and purposefully kept the digital involvement very narrow due to privacy and security concerns.

On the whole most of the women used the internet in ways that suited themselves and in ways that were mindful of the safety and security through lesson they had learned online, much in the way a woman would negotiate risks and rewards of a sexual life. They struck a balance between openness and privacy and recognised a need to manage risk rather than endeavouring to remove it altogether. In maintaining social media connections, despite some of the obvious drawbacks, by adapting settings and curating data online to protect themselves the women ably demonstrated the processes of adjustment to online life they had undertaken whilst keeping faith in the online world as a beneficial addition to their lives.

Table 6-1 Curating Online Life

Processes involved in curation of online life	Subcategory
Performing or positioning the self	Comparing oneself to others Seeing into others' lives Images online Curated lives – best foot forward Editing/ limiting of images online Being visible online – performance Problems of presentation in online dating
Managing reputation by controlling the message	Comparing oneself to others Curated lives – best foot forward Editing/ limiting of images online Images online Responding to pressure by boundary setting Privacy setting Data concerns Internet providing privacy Opting out / disconnecting Rejecting online dating Being visible online - performance
Enacting privacy	Privacy setting Editing/ limiting of images online Participation in dating online Responding to pressure by boundary setting Privacy turning points/ deal breakers Internet providing privacy Data concerns Opting out / disconnecting Rejecting online dating
Identifying and managing risk	Pressure/ Discomfort arising from social media Responding to pressure by boundary setting Privacy setting Privacy turning points/ deal breakers Internet providing privacy Data concerns Opting out / disconnecting Perceptions of risk in online dating Rejecting online dating Problems of presentation in online dating Disingenuous actions in online dating
Competition and comparison online	Comparing oneself to others Seeing into others' lives Images online Curiosity Curated lives – best foot forward Editing/ limiting of images online Being visible online – performance Participation in dating online Problems of presentation in online dating Opting out / disconnecting Amplifying existing emotion – what we bring to online spaces Pressure/ Discomfort arising from social media Comparing oneself to others

6.4 Defining the Grounded Theory's Core Categories

This section explores the nature of the core categories, below is a list of the women whose data constructed them.

Table 6-2 The Participants

Name	Age	Relationship status	Sexual orientation
Carole	40	Married	Heterosexual
Selina	48	In relationship	Heterosexual – with same sex experience
Lynne	45	In casual relationship	Heterosexual
Chris	52	Single	Heterosexual
Heather	50	Married	Lesbian
Katie	38	Married	Lesbian
Yvette	54	Married	Lesbian
Margot	64	Married	Heterosexual
Evelyn	65	Married	Heterosexual
Deidre	73	Married	Heterosexual
Helen	61	Married	Heterosexual
Louise	51	Single	Heterosexual
Lesley	39	In relationship	Heterosexual
Joanne	40	Single	Heterosexual– with same sex experience
Tara	42	Single	Not disclosed – with same sex experience
Linda	51	Single	Heterosexual
Rhiannon	53	Single	Heterosexual
Gina	63	Married	Heterosexual
Monica	58	In relationship	Heterosexual

6.4.1 Core Category One - Ongoing development of sexual identity

Together the responses given by the women provide a rich exploration of the key elements comprising sexual identity for them both conceptually and personally. Many individual factors were found to contribute to sexual identity and within this study the impact of online life was of chief concern. However, in order to frame the interaction of sexual identity with the internet it was important to gauge the nature of sexual identity. It was clear that sexual identity was subject to change, not fixed, and as such had potential to be altered by online life. In essence then by establishing the fluid nature of sexual identity it was possible to then investigate its later relationship to online life in subsequent categories including the actions which could contribute to the ongoing construction of sexual identity. The following higher categories and subcategories were drawn from the data.

Table 6-3 Core Category 1

Ongoing development of sexual identity	
Higher categories	Subcategories
Relating sexual identity	Recognition sexual identity
	Preference as sexual identity
	Evolution of sexual identity over time
	Sexual confidence
	Lacking sexual identity
	Embodying sexual identity
	Aging sexual identity
	Performing identity
	Relationship and sexual identity
	Linking love and sex
	Agency in sexual identity
Orientating sexual identity – the labour of challenging heteronormativity	Orientation as sexual identity
	Pressure from heteronormativity – lacking options
	Experiencing otherness
	Attempting to fit in

	Concealing sexual identity
	Fearing exposure/ rejection/ reprisal / unknown
	Finding sexual identity / orientation
	Confusion
	Longing to fulfil true sexual identity
	Identification with others / belonging
	Worth in sexual identity
Sex through the life course	Experiencing sexual development
	Initial relationships
	Sex belonging to the young
	Attraction to others
	Ongoing importance of sex
	Sex in relationships over time
	Responding to expectations – matching the scripts
	Missing intimacy
	Sexual taboos – things we don't talk about
Getting sex right - learning and preference – refining sexual behaviour – making the most of sexual life	Sexual performance / responding to external expectation
	Sourcing information about sex
	Discussing sex with peers
	Preferences in sexual behaviour
	Gendered beliefs about sex
	Orgasm as a signifier of sexual success
	Beliefs / myths about sex
	Seeking out orientation specific information

This section will now look at each higher category in turn and explore the subcategories gathered within each.

6.4.1.1 Relating sexual identity

This higher category explores the women's description of their personal sense of sexual identity. *Recognising sexual identity* encapsulated both the difficulties inherent in understanding this concept and the tentative beginnings of the interviewee's exploration of the importance of their sexual lives. Sexual orientation often was the first element described when discussing sexual identity and given its importance this was separated out into a separate category which will be discussed in the following section Orientating Sexual Identity. By talking of their sexual life and experiences the women illustrated their identities without necessarily creating a concrete definition for themselves or of the concept as a whole;

> 'Well, I've only ever had sex with one person. I met my husband at school in the sixth form, we got married in 1974, and we had, we've had an extremely enjoyable sex life until two or three years ago, when he went down with Type 2 Diabetes. And, I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, I do, I had thought, when the kids are gone and when we've got more spare time, we'll be able to enjoy sex…'
>
> Gina

This answer reveals in a couple of sentences almost the totality of this woman's sexual life and provides a clear insight into the elements which would likely contribute to her sense of sexual identity; sexual orientation, commitment to her marriage, positive attitude to sexual intimacy with her husband, hopes dashed for a sexual future, loss of intimacy.

The women reported a wide range of factors from their sexual lives in their explorations of sexual identity. Taken together the experiences of the women provide an overview of the range of constituent elements influencing and/or comprising sexual identity. In this regard *preferences as sexual identity* became a category covering some specific aspects of sexual behaviour the women had experienced and enjoyed in their sexual lives.

> 'I think then again it comes down to, of what is expected of you, I'm a mum of three, you wouldn't expect a mum of three having threesomes and… not necessarily sleeping with women, because if that's what your preference is, then that's fine, and I think I'd be more embarrassed if things like that come out, than I would if I was younger.'
>
> Joanne

Although a number of the women articulated quite specific preferences in their sexual lives this did not appear to support the idea of a fixed sexual identity. Instead the category relating the *evolution of sexual identity over time* emerged. Two further categories related to this change over time arose as women spoke of their youth in very different terms to their current

sexual lives revealing that *aging sexual identity* for some brought about comparative *sexual confidence* as older women.

> 'It's still in process. But I guess my self-esteem has grown enough for me to say, well, I like myself, you know, as I am I don't need to conform to somebody else's view of what I should wear or how I should be or who I sleep with, or ... I feel like I'm okay with making my own choices and knowing more about myself and more about how I feel comfortable and what is comfortable for me rather than what is comfortable for other people and what they can tolerate in me, actually that says more about them than it does about me, I don't need to bend to fit with them.'
>
> Tara

This increase in confidence over time was not however a uniform experience for all the women interviewed. In direct contrast some women reported feeling little if any sexual confidence currently and a small number felt that their age directly contributed to them feeling little interest in a sexual life resulting in the category *lacking sexual identity.*

> 'Internally I think desires, desire has certainly waned, I've been with my partner for 15 years but I'd be quite happy not to bother which sounds awful, I read a piece in the Guardian which made me laugh and she ... and this lady sort of described as, you know, having spent all day doing your housework and got ... I don't know if you've heard this one before, you've spent all day, you've done your housework like ... your living room looks immaculate, the last thing you want is someone to come in and mess it up, I'm not saying I spend all day keeping myself tidy down there but it's just like saying well, it's all nice and tidy like ... well what's the point in making a mess sort of thing and I thought, oh yeah, she put it a bit more eloquently than that but I thought, yeah, well, yeah, I could ...'
>
> Lesley

In much the same way as aging the category *embodying sexual identity* reflected both positive and negative outcomes of the women's body image and levels of body acceptance. Where some felt constrained by their bodies and felt a need to maintain youthful standards of appearance others found liberation in their current age. Here Margot explains her feelings regarding a hysterectomy.

> "And, you know, I mean, some people look at that as the end for some women, I think they look at it at the end of... "Oh I'll not have any more children and I won't do this, that and the other." I mean, for me it was "Oh great, no more periods, everything like that's stopped, get on with my life." (Laughing)
>
> Margot

Margot here shrugs off a condition often conflated with age and will not let her absence of fertility or her chronological age dictate her emotional wellbeing.

A small number of the women reflected on their experiences of *performing sexual identity.* This category explored the roles some women felt they had had to fulfil in their sexual lives, particularly in their youth, and conversely the roles they had developed for their own pleasure over time.

> 'actually, now I think about it. I think when you're younger you feel bit more under pressure to, you know be good in bed?' (half laughing)'you know and perform? I guess you know especially when you're, you know, you're trying to achieve a relationship. and you know you're maybe not so secure in your relationship. You know relationships come and go, I think you do want to, you have a bit more, you know performance anxiety. Whereas I think if you, when you are settled in a relationship, you don't worry so much about that, cos its more to do with, not just one part of a relationship, its many different aspects of a relationship, it's not just the sexual part.'
>
> Carole

Roles within sexual experience were discussed mainly in the context of reviewing previous and current relationships. Other than orientation *relationships and sexual identity* was by far the largest category through which the women explored their experiences and views. Stable relationships were often seen as the mainstay of a positive sexual life and many of the women treasured the long-term sexual relationship they had with their significant other.

> 'I think they're just two separate parts, my life. My sexuality and sexual side of me is totally with my husband.
>
> Helen

Here Helen is being asked about whether her sexual identity is influenced by the internet but returns to the role of her relationship to find an answer. That is not to say this approach is incorrect rather it illustrates that many of the women did not recognise wider influences on sexual identity or that sexual identity is individual.

However, despite realtionships being the mainstay of women's sexual experiences not all women felt happy with their sexual lot in life. A number of women felt their interest in sex had either dwindled over time, or their sex life was boring due to length of time together or that they had never developed a comfortable sexual life throughout their relationship.

> 'I mean, I've been married 30 years, I don't feel, I still don't feel particularly comfortable getting undressed in front of my husband, and if I can avoid it I will. Which is ridiculous'
>
> Evelyn

However alongside discussing relationships another significant category was *linking love and sex.* On the whole the women saw a really strong relationship between sex and love in their relationships. Sex was seen as expression of love and the means to maintain a loving relationship.

> 'Making love is a deeper thing from having sex isn't it? Having sex is a sexual activity which is great, making love is an extra dimension to it, I think'
>
> Helen

This intimate importance of sex was a common theme in the interviews with many of the women specifically commenting on sex as a means of being close and connected with their partner. In light of this connection some of the women reflected on their feelings of loss when sexual element of their relationship had reduced or ended altogether.

> 'So, for me, the sexuality, it's veering on the companionship nowadays, which is a bit difficult, because my wife is slightly older than I am and her, I suppose, interest in sexuality, it's diminishing in a way.'
>
> Yvette

> 'That's not to say, he's not affectionate, and there's a lot of physical contact but I really did enjoy sex, as every generation I thinks it has, despite what the current generation thinks, they've discovered it don't they, yes.'
>
> Gina

In talking through their experiences many of the women felt they had a far better idea of what they wanted from their sexual lives and how to manage their own boundaries about sex. So, though it was touched upon within the category exploring fluidity over time *agency in sexual identity* became a category in itself. For those women not in a relationship this agency was particularly important as they navigated their social lives and considered potential partners.

> 'I think, in my younger years I would have conformed a lot more than I would do now. I think, as I get older I'm not willing to compromise, I'm not willing to compromise my beliefs and my ideas, as I was when I was younger, I would have probably compromised more than probably I should have done at the detriment of my belief and my ideas. Age, with age has come that thing of, no I'm not willing to compromise anymore.'
>
> Joanne

Whilst it took the women a little time to work out what sexual identity meant for them observing the coding and categories arising from interviews cumulatively whole created a view

of sexual identity as many layered, individual and, importantly, subject to change through the life course. In other words, sexual identity brought together who the woman was and where she was in life. Whilst sexual orientation played an extremely important part in this identity orientation of itself did not account for all the situationally specific details from which sexual identity was comprised. However, it would not be acceptable to disregard the key influence that orientation plays in sexual identity formation and these experiences will be covered in the following section.

6.4.1.2 Orientating sexual identity

The next higher category explored the importance of orientation within sexual identity for many of the women interviewed. The subcategories that comprised this category are found in the table at the beginning of this section.

In the absence of a previously understood definition of sexual identity many of the woman spoke initially of their sexual orientation. *Orientation as sexual identity* as a higher category represented women across the range of orientations expressed in the interviews. In discussing heterosexuality some women struggled to find a term for their orientation with straight being the default often used. One woman in describing her demographic details referred to her sexual orientation as normal. This alongside a small number of the women who had had sexual experience with women but who specifically clarified their heterosexuality adds to the evidence that the women interviewed had very much lived through heteronormative culture.

> '…they see two girls together they love it, and there's always a bit of titillation I think women are beautiful anyway. I wouldn't say I was an out and out, I mean I'm obviously not a lesbian but, you know you can look at a girl and think 'oh god she's amazing you know?' probably more so than you can men to be honest'
>
> Selina

However, it was the lesbian women interviewed that truly felt the weight of this heteronormative culture having had experience trying to reconcile how they felt inside with how their society worked.

> '.. I spent a lot of time in my late teens and early twenties pretending I was straight and sometimes even engaging in sexual relationships with men, to yes, to give this impression that I wasn't gay and going along with it and being accepted and so on.'
>
> Katie

Experiences like this happened to several women and were categorised as *pressure from heteronormativity.* One woman explained she had been unaware growing up that being lesbian was even an option coming from the small town that she did. It was not until moving to the city that her exploration of her orientation and thus sexual identity could begin

> 'So, I went to the big city and I wanted to try and see what it was like, actually. You know, have a sexual relationship. So, I did try, but I wasn't ever, sort of, involved. It was purely, you know, just try it out, see what it's like and, yes, I wasn't attached to the men and it wasn't an unpleasant experience either, but there wasn't that connection. When I fell in love, it was with a girl. So, yes, and then I suppose I never really questioned it because I've never really been attracted to a man, as such.'
>
> Yvette

Not conforming to the norms which existed within one's immediate community brought about a number of related categories. Firstly, *experiencing otherness* highlighted the difficulty of managing difference particularly as a young person. One woman spoke of feelings she had for a television actress as a child that she had struggled to understand at the time.

> 'then in my early teens I became acutely aware that what I was feeling and what I was finding attractive and easy on the eye was not what my schoolmates were finding easy on the eye…'
>
> Heather

This led Heather and others interviewed to try to manage their orientation at a particularly vulnerable time in their lives. The categories *attempting to fit in, concealing sexual identity, fearing exposure/rejection/reprisal* and *confusion* arose from reflections of the women's struggle with their true orientation in the face of a culture that did not acknowledge their existence or attempt to recognise their needs.

> 'so I would say I became sexually active at the age of 19 with…I was going to say with boys but with one boy, so did that make me a sexual being? I guess it didn't feel like that, I was just performing something that I knew was expected of me'.
>
> Heather

This period of time in the women's lives created the category of *longing to fulfil true sexual identity.* Having experienced this longing and hardship gave great importance to the relationships they then later forged. Being free to live and have the relationships they wished for was not taken for granted by the women who valued greatly their *identification with others/belonging* and found *the worth in their identity.*

> ‘So yes, that’s when I came out, and I thought I will never ever have to sleep with a man again, thank god for that, I’m done with that, washed my hands of it, I’ll never have to pretend to be something that I’m not. So yes, that was a really significant time in my life’
>
> Heather

The internet played a significant role in the lives of these women in terms of belonging and a sense of community. The collective identity, the means to stay safe, the sourcing of both information and connection offer a strong illustration of the constructive nature of online life in sexual identity experienced by the LGBT women interviewed.

6.4.1.3 Sex through the life course

Living as a sexual being throughout the life course was subject to ever changing circumstances. The following subcategories described in this section provide evidence of the evolving role of sex and thus sexual identity within the women’s lives.

The constantly adapting and evolving nature of sexual identity was shown through the women’s response to aging and confidence and body image as shown above but additionally the role of sex through life course had a bearing on this process also. The elements that compose sexual identity were shown to be subject to change over time which both creates and requires the fluid nature of sexual identity. The women described how their life courses presented a series of contexts within which the role of sex changed.

The women spoke of the way sex moved from being a process of discovery in early relationships to being the means by which they communicated that which they know, and love, about their partner as discussed early in this section in Relating Sexual Identity (6.4.1.1) Life meant for some women that sex was prioritised to have children or deprioritised when children come along. Sex for some of the women interviewed was crucial to maintain relationships, whilst for others it was to all intents forgotten. For others finding relationship partners proved difficult or not compatible with parenting. In one case sex was the sum total of a woman’s casual online relationship. Sex was felt to be lost by some of the women due to health concerns or relationship breakdown. The sexual experience of each woman interviewed was shaped by the course of the rest of her life, and vice versa.

When considering their sexual lives overall the women spoke about a range of issues encompassing their youth categorised as *experiencing sexual development, initial relationships* and *sex belonging to the young*. The women generally found being analytical about their past sexual selves somewhat easier due to the passing of time. They recognised the naivety of their

past selves, the misinformation around them and a number felt ill prepared embarking on a sexual life due to lack of education.

> ‘I mean, I think that, obviously my generation, we didn’t talk about sex, you didn’t have, you had a little bit of sex education in school, which was really embarrassing, and people didn’t think about it, and you were very repressed, and I think I am still like that. Because I think what you learn in your childhood is really ingrained in your brain.’
>
> Evelyn

Other women spoke of the instability of young relationships and a feeling like sex was something to get out of the way. Some of the women referred to these early experiences in quite dismissive and flippant terms on a continuum from wild to underwhelming.

> ‘.. going back to years ago, when I was younger, I was in and out of all sorts of crazy relationships’
>
> Chris

> ‘.. I mean, I lost my virginity at seventeen. and that was kind of a bit of a you know it wasn’t, it was just, it wasn’t great, it wasn’t sort of, it just happened. It wasn’t really like, you know, romantic.'
>
> Selina

Beyond the dismissive a number of the women spoke of much darker themes including feeling compelled to have sex with men in an attempt to prove their heterosexuality or having sex as means to keep a partner. One woman Lynne, revealed she was raped whilst still at school, her first sexual experience which would go on to have a profound effect on how she viewed herself.

> ‘.. I was raped. Um so after that, that it was it then. To me it was like, out there, I’m afraid to say. I don’t know why, I don’t know why. I just kind of went that way. It was like 'ok its done now' it’s been and gone, and now I'm a sexually experienced woman,' laughs ' have you ever heard anything so stupid.’
>
> Lynne

At this point it should be noted Lynne was offered support after making this disclosure. Admirably Lynne chose to continue and her very valuable input illustrates the courage and selflessness of the women who came forward to help other women understand their life experiences by taking part in this research. Violence against women and girls arose on a

number of occasions within the interviews which confirmed the need to provide the supporting documents which had been created for the study (Appendix 6)

Despite the largely poor assessment of their early sexual lives a category emerged of *sex belonging to the young.*

> 'I think when you're younger you just assume everyone's having crazy wild sex' (briefly pauses) 'mm yeah and I suppose everything is new to you when you're younger as well, you're just discovering things for yourself'
>
> Carole

However, this sub-category may be a little skewed as much of the data came from women who also specified feeling a lack of sexual identity. It is possible that some of the women who saw sex as being the preserve of the young were offering a reflection of their dissatisfaction in their current sexual circumstances.

As the women went on to talk about later relationships in their adult lives the categories of the *ongoing importance of sex* and *sex in relationships over time* both contained examples of a divergence in the role of sex in relationships for women. In both these sections the women were divided between seeing sex as necessary to the ongoing success of relationships and those whose sexual activity had diminished in their relationships over time being replaced with alternative intimacies like companionship and greater understanding of their partners needs in other aspects of life.

> 'I think to me it's quite important, you know, it always has been. Even if you go through the worst of times, if you can have a good lovemaking session that clears the air, keeps you going'
>
> Margot
>
> 'After 47 years, it really isn't that important, I don't think. I'm, kind of, a bit past it'
>
> Deidre

As well as having a fuller appreciation of the context of their earlier sexual lives as the women took stock of their relationships over time some began to tease out some context of their own. In the category *responding to expectations - matching the scripts* two of the women unpicked societal expectation in relation to sexual behaviour and ongoing means of describing orientation. In both cases the women chose to push back.

> ‘It might just be that you don't feel like shouting and bawling, or I'm always conscious that the walls are thin and you know thinking about things like that rather than feeling that you have to be throwing your arms about or whatever or making a racket. I don't think when you’re having sex you need to be really vocal but I think there is an expectation’
>
> Lesley

> ‘it is a very strong belief that sexual orientation is a spectrum and it's fluid and it's not fixed and I'm not fixed and I can change and I can be attracted to a person rather than to a gender. And I don't want to be put in a box. You know, I've spent too long being put in boxes by other people and trying to kind of squeeze myself in and going, no, hang on it's quite liberating to not have a box around me, I can just be me, I don't have to be defined’
>
> Tara

Missing intimacy as a category was re-examined more broadly in the context of the life course. In addition to infirmity issues within long term relationships women discussed going without sex, or indeed the type of partner they might want, because of family commitment particularly in terms of single parenthood.

> ‘I think it’s the, having to deal with the expectations of my mum and dad and what they expect of me, and that if I got into a relationship with a woman what impact that would have on them, what it’ll have on my children, what my in laws would think and it’s all them, worrying about what other people would think.’
>
> Joanne

> ‘my children lived in my house and I didn’t want men coming in and out, that’s the end’
>
> Rhiannon

> 'I think when you're young you can leap in and out of relationships and when you get older you're more cautious… and you look at things and you think is this going to go anywhere and what’s it about and what is this person really thinking and ooh maybe they’ve got this habit that I don’t really like. So kind of by the time you’ve weighed all that up, nothing happens whatsoever!'
>
> Chris

Not having sex did not mean that women ceased to find people attractive. A number of comments were about crushes on film actors and actresses. In the sub-category *attraction to others* one woman spoke of her attraction to those she sees in real world situations.

'Yeah, so you know, I just sublimate, I enjoy watching everything, Chris Hemsworth for instance, just you know, I mean I don't, I'm not, I've never accessed porn or anything like that, I just…

Gina

In the course of the interviews the women were all reasonably frank in their discussions and therefore a category *sexual taboos - things we don't talk about* ended the coding period with only six codes.

'I don't **t**hink we really talked about (staged whisper) masturbation (laughs)'

Carole

Most of the conversations which lead to these codes related, as the one here, towards attitudes to female masturbation indicating this subject is perhaps still problematic to discuss or disclose within this age range.

6.4.1.4 Getting sex right; Learning preferences

The final higher category to develop in the data within this core category was concerned with how the women managed the quality of their sexual experiences or found ways to fill gaps in their sexual knowledge. The following section explores the subcategories of this higher category more fully.

In the previous higher categories, relating sexual identity, orientating sexual identity and the changing role of sex across the life course, an overarching view of sexual identity beginning and continuing through time emerges, but this is not a complete model until the notion of quality and problem solving is encompassed within it.

Within relating sexual identity some women responded in terms of their sexual preferences but by far the best indicator given for the quality of sexual experience was a committed relationship and love. The implication being here that a good relationship and love might provide the opportunity to learn about good sex.

'You find out about your sexuality with your husband, you know'

Helen

This woman felt she had had to learn about sex with her husband in the absence of any positive education but had subsequently felt very happy with the development of their sexual life together.

A number of others had not felt so fortunate in their experiences and felt the weight of societal expectation in their sexual experiences particularly in their youth. The category *sexual performance / responding to external expectation* brought together the thoughts of a number of the women regarding the nature of this expectation.

> 'I think maybe as lesbians we sort of like…/.. I do think there is this idea from the outside that we do all sorts and we're really, really exciting in the sack, and we perhaps put that pressure on ourselves to then do all of that'
>
> Heather

Societal and individual pressures coupled with absent or poor sex education meant the women interviewed often lacked reliable means of assessing their sexual lives. The category *discussing sex with peers* highlighted that some of the women turned to and bonded with their friends to make sense and to some extent relieve concerns about their own circumstances.

> 'if you're pissed off about something, if you're not getting enough of something that you want. You know it hasn't filtered through, or I don't know. It's just like, like a union like a woman's sort of you know, like chit chat and bonding, fun, isn't it? and sometimes you hear things from them that you want to help them with, that are different, and you think 'ooh' you know?'
>
> Selina

However just as many women would not entertain idea of discussing their sexual lives.

> 'I think I'm still, sort of, repressed, and I think there's still things that I wouldn't, that I'm happy to discuss with you in this interview because I'm likely never going to see you again, but that actually I wouldn't say to friends,'
>
> Evelyn

Traditionally women's magazines, or the newspaper problem page, filled the gap left by lack of communication and formal education on sexual matters but this was mentioned by only a small number of the women interviewed. The use of magazines and other media were brought together in the categories *sourcing information about sex and sourcing orientation specific information*. However, these subcategories also marked the first indication that the internet was providing a space for the women to glean information or materials about sexual matters that were previously unavailable to them. This online support to sexual life was found to be worthwhile by several of the women interviewed

> 'one of the things that the internet has done, I suppose, is something that I wouldn't admit to anybody, and nobody knows, not even my husband knows, but

> I've got a vibrator, and I bought it online, because it came in a sealed envelope, nobody knew what it was, and it's hidden in my wardrobe.'
>
> Evelyn

In this illustration the internet functioned as a means to provide answers and potential solutions to a sexual need or curiosity where a woman found it impossible to speak to her husband. This example runs contrary to what might be expected of communication within a sexual partnership. The expectation that women would discuss their sexual needs with their partners was not borne out in the interviews with only two direct references being made to ongoing discussions with partners about the sex in their relationship. Here Gina discusses how she struggles to speak to her husband about impotence issues relating to his diabetes.

> 'I don't know if he has. I asked the diabetes nurse on one of my six monthly visits, and she describes sort of physical interventions that I thought, well, you know I wouldn't ask him to go through that, never mind anything else, so… And, I'm not so sure that he misses it as much as I do, because he is, he goes to work at seven in the morning and if I'm lucky I get him home at seven at night, but often it's 8 o'clock, 9 o'clock because he runs his own small company and he's just…'
>
> Gina

Despite very much missing this aspect of her relationship she had not been able to communicate this with her partner for fear of upsetting him or putting him under undue pressure. The fact that so little if any discussion arose around sexual communication with partners in the interviews poses a number of questions. However, it may be that communication about sex was implied by the women in the many mentions of love, sex and deeper connection. This gap in the data was noticeable however and therefore indicates communication of sexual need in partnered relationships to be an area for further research.

This potential communication gap does not mean that the women lacked quality within their sexual lives, as many knew what good sex was for them. A small number of the women discussed the place of orgasm within their sexual lives, categorised as *orgasm as a signifier of sexual success*, either through their early sexual experiences or in relation to pornography which will be discussed later in this section.

> 'yeah and eh it was all very' (laughs) 'sort of in bed with my covers up to my neck kind of, I think I read it, about masturbation, in a magazine or something and I think it said a few tips and I think I was trying them out, so but I remember being like oh that's ok everything's working alright there then'
>
> Carole

However, in the main the quality of sex within relationships was indirectly referenced by the women in terms of describing an overall positive or negative sexual relationship with current or previous sexual partners.

In place of actively analysing sexual life two categories emerged delineating the belief systems around sex; *gendered beliefs about sex and beliefs/myths about sex.* Given the intimate nature of sex and the apparent difficulty in communicating sexual need an information gap can arise into which myth and belief can grow. A range of beliefs were expressed which highlighted the need for factual information and the promotion of communication skill.

> 'Well back in the day I would have said, "Carry a condom," but nowadays I wouldn't because it makes you look easy.'
>
> Rhiannon

> 'I think you know men have a need and a lot of women really punish men by with-holding sex.'
>
> Selina

These examples show that cultural stereotypes and a certain narrow view of gender dynamics did appear in the interviews. However, by engaging in an online life the women had shown they could access resources and information which improve their sexual lives in novel ways which could offer a potential challenge to some this gendered or stereotypical thinking. The women also engaged in a number of specific sexual behaviours online that would connect their online lives and their sexual identity which will be explored more fully in the next two core category breakdowns.

6.4.2 Core Category Two - Developing and refining a digital life

In the following sections the two main higher categories of the core category developing and refining a digital life are developed. The first higher category examines the curation of a life online illustrating the women's developing sense of digital identity and constituent processes of construction. The second higher category concerns itself with tracking how the women preserve privacy to ensure their online lives remain secure. In exploring these two higher categories a picture emerges of the active measures the women have undertaken to be open to technological change whilst being, or becoming, cognisant of the potential consequences of their actions online. The actions and processes described here allow for, and support, specific behaviours which contribute to the construction of sexual identity. These behaviours are explored in section 6.4.3.

Table 6-4 Core Category 2

Developing and refining an online life	
Curating life online	Preferred platforms online
	Using social media
	Compelling nature of online spaces
	Attitude to posting
	Comparing oneself to others
	Seeing into others' lives
	Family connection
	Mothering in the digital world
	Hope for young people
	Being visible online - performance
	Images online
	Connecting to like-minded / friends
	Curated lives – best foot forward
	Quantifying social life
	Reinforcing self
	Protecting self
	Projecting self

	Spoiling identities
	Missing the human touch
	Supporting identity
Preserving privacy	Memories of pre-internet time
	Issues of trust online
	Scepticism of online media
	Intrusion of online world in daily life
	Editing/ limiting of images online
	Reluctant SM use
	Amplifying existing emotion – what we bring to online spaces
	Pressure/ Discomfort arising from social media
	Responding to pressure by boundary setting
	Keeping family safe
	Concern for young people online
	Theft of time
	Data concerns
	Concern of service migration online
	Surveillance
	Privacy setting
	Privacy turning points/ deal breakers
	Internet providing privacy
	Opting out / disconnecting

As previously stated, the women involved in the study found discussing the nature and components of their online lives less onerous than sexual identity. However, similarity did exist between the two elements in that the women were able to describe much of their lives online but did so without previously considering this aspect of their lives in any overall conceptual frame. That is not to say the women used the internet in a random manner, far from it, rather the women had perhaps not previously considered in totality the range of experiences and choices they made which coalesced to form an online life.

Clearly the online lives of the women were individual, but a number of common features did appear in the development of the online life. Many women spoke of an educational or work need to be online before a more intrinsic daily digital life emerged. In this regard the internet was originally seen by several of the women as a formal entity rather than a place of leisure. the change in the home use of the internet or the internet for leisure purposes coincided with the widespread uptake of Facebook for most of the women interviewed. From this point the use of the internet as daily or intrinsic element of life became established.

6.4.2.1 Curating life online

This higher category describes the nature of the women's online lives and how they began to adapt, or curate, this life over time. This curation, like the formation of sexual identity, was not necessarily one specific defined practice rather it was the culmination of reacting to experiences, learning and making adjustments over time. The subcategories that comprised this higher category are outlined in Table 6-4. Many of the subcategories mentioned above are central components of the Strategies Employed Curating a Life Online (Section 6.3).

When discussing their current online lives social media was a central theme for the women interviewed. The *Preferred platforms online* subcategory was dominated by social media sites with Facebook leading the way in terms of online time and focus.

> 'Right, so I use Facebook on a daily basis just to, I don't know, probably just habit, I just go into my phone and press Facebook icon and just see who's doing what, I don't interact as much as I used to because my life's a bit busy so I don't have time to think about what I'm going to post or anything, so I don't really post that much, I just go and read around what other people are up to.'
>
> Heather

The colossal success of Facebook and other social media is illustrated by near total adoption of this platform by the diverse group of women interviewed. The impact and scale of these companies is easily seen from the data. The other major platforms like Twitter, Instagram and YouTube were also mentioned the women meaning that within a generation the women were completely familiar with social media.

> 'I use Facebook and I used to use twitter, but I've stopped with twitter because its um its too, you get into rows on twitter. You know and I do love a good argument, push and pull, bit of a debate. but again, it takes up too much time. And people you know it's not real is it? if you're face to face it's a very different, what with timings and stuff, but my own thought process was like 'this is really stupid actually what are you doing'.
>
> Selina

> Yeah, so someone talked me through the basics of Instagram when I was on a hen weekend ironically so coming back people were like oh well if you want to see pictures and de de de you'll have to get onto Instagram which I did so, yeah, definite convert, it's my can't sleep on a night just trawl through looking at pictures and things. Same in the morning, lunch time having a trawl, it's quite voyeuristic I suppose'
>
> Lesley

> 'the YouTube channel that she watches, that I stream for her (daughter), is called Little Baby Bum and it is really gentle and non-gendered and just lots of nursery rhymes and counting and stuff. I think that is okay, that can stay on in the background, I am happy with that'
>
> Katie

Although all of the women were *using social media* of some kind this did not mean they were universally happy with the role it had in their lives. The women interviewed were well past the novelty of social media and had begun to take a more critical view of its place in their lives.

> 'I do not see it as a means to connect at all, it's irrelevant. And also, I'm quite wary of actually putting some of my connections on Facebook because it's nobody else's business and I do feel it's all being monitored, and I don't give a shit about what I'm being monitored, they can pull me in and question me, I just think, "Why the hell would you want to know that anyway?" Why would I want to put it up on a public site? I'm talking privately to people, Facebook is public, it's just warts and all, you're out there. So if you want to see my warts about how angry I am there's still oil or plastic pellets in the water and tortoises are turning into hard plastic, you know, I don't mind but there are some things I just think, "I don't want anybody to know that." There was a bully once at my school who said, "Do you want to be my friend?" And I thought back to when I was at school and just thought, "Are you joking? Can you not remember?" I just blanked her. I just thought, "That is mad that somebody can't remember how shitty they were to everybody." So it's a bit weird.'
>
> Rhiannon

Others recognised the powerful potential in social media and had a strong concept of the audience available to them with this new technology. Selina used social media for more defined purposes and felt social media was too important to be used for frivolous reasons.

> ‘I’d say about 90% of it (Facebook use) is for animal rights, and to make something happen, because I don’t see and I will say if people moan about it and say 'oh why are you posting this stuff’ well I can’t understand, if you’re going to use social media at least make it mean something. Why do you want to know if I got up this morning and made a cup of tea, I think that’s so banal you know? its waste of very valuable resource I think'.
>
> Selina

This quote from Selina illustrates the value placed on social media by many of the interviewed albeit in a specific sense here. Having lived without the internet this group of women are very much aware of the valuable resource they have at their disposal. This value or pull can be illustrated in other terms by the subcategory compelling nature of online spaces. In this subcategory a number of the women detailed how embedded social media was in their lives and therefore how hard it was to walk away from their online connections.

> ‘So, then I thought, “That’s it. I’ll deactivate the account for seven days and I’ll just leave it and then it’ll come back next week,” because this other person kept messaging me and he was getting on my nerves. Anyway, so I deactivated the account. An hour later, Julie’s sat in the kitchen eating her breakfast, and she shouts, “Mum, where’s Facebook gone? I’m trying to tag you in this thing.” So, I said, “Oh, I’ve deactivated it.” “Well, why? can you reactivate it? I wanted to tag you in this.” So, I was like, “Right, okay,” and then she went off to college and Julie, so she has her illnesses, and she was in an accident last October, someone hit her. So, if I get a message from her or she rings me, I just panic constantly. 9:10, she rings me. “What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” “No, it’s Maria, she’s trying to get hold of you. She’s gone onto Facebook and she can’t find you.” I was like, “Oh my God!” So, I reactivated it because I just thought, you know, that’s within the space of three hours. ‘
>
> Louise

It can be seen then that despite the best of intentions it was difficult for the women to ignore their online lives, particularly social media. There was a distinction to be made however between passively looking at content online and actively engaging by posting on social media. The women’s *attitude to posting* was found to be varied within their own online lives over time and across the group as a whole.

> ‘I used to be quite, a prolific Facebooker, and put every aspect of my life on Facebook, from getting up in the morning, to going to bed at night, everything, my daily life used to be on Facebook. I think as I’ve got older and got more aware of Facebook and the darker reasons of Facebook and people looking more into things than they should be, I think I started to withdraw. Especially with my children, started to withdraw quite a lot of that information, especially being on my own and having the children, I think people, if I’m putting my daily life on there it’s easier to track me and what I’m doing, so no I don’t put, I don’t put anything on really.’

Joanne

In the previous statement we see change and diversity in the process of performing or positioning the self online. Joanne can be seen to move from the exuberance of early Facebook adoption to a more circumspect approach once the implications of Facebook appear in her life. This illustrates another process involved in curating an online life that of *managing reputation by controlling the message.*

Social media postings gave the women a deeper insight into the lives not just those directly around them but also those in wider networks, the friends of friends. These additional layers of contact written down and visually supported with photographs facilitated the women *seeing into others' lives* and in doing so prompted *comparing oneself to others*. These categories drove the processes of comparison and competition online.

> 'well I suppose with me its very sort of personal reasons. I used to get a bit fed up with Facebook anyway cos I just felt like, you know, nobody shows their true reality of their lives it's just what they want you to see, in the end. I used to go on and be a bit depressed, seeing everyone's lives and thinking oh they look a bit more exciting than mine and they've got more friends than me and you know I don't think that's particularly good for you to compare yourself negatively against other people'
>
> Carole

This scrutiny of others was fraught with the potential to deconstruct one's own achievements or the perceived lack thereof. However, for some *seeing into others' lives* was the positive benefit of a life online particularly where distance and family were involved. Social media was found by many of the women as being a welcomed enhancement to maintaining *family connection* and *connecting to likeminded/ friends*

> 'I was put on it. (Laughing) But it has been a life saver in some ways, if I've had spells in hospital – because I've had two new knees – so I was able to keep in touch with people which makes the hospital experience a lot nicer. Also, it got me in touch with friends that I'd lost contact with. I worked at a School for a long time which is in (Yorkshire Town) and it put me back in touch with friends from there, and we've kept in touch on Facebook and we can message each other, we can meet up. If I'm working at (Yorkshire town) I just email, you know, I usually send a message that I shall be there and I'll meet them in the pub. So that way it's kept me in touch with friends.'
>
> Margot

> ‘Well, I mean, basically, obviously, you’re looking to see what other people are doing on a day-to-day basis or depending on how often you go on it, because I’m friends with cousins that I don’t see, because they live all around the country. So, you get to see what they’re doing. On the Facebook, because I’m originally from (Yorkshire Town) and I went to a Hull school, and then somebody through Facebook set up a group for ex-pupils. Then, because of that, I’ve got in touch with quite a few people that I used to go to school with, and there’s some others that meet up every now and again. You know, we’ll go out for a drink, which we wouldn’t have been doing if it hadn’t have been for Facebook and someone setting up that site. Also, I can see what my children are doing as well, and one good thing that I actually find with Facebook, especially Messenger, is if Carole and Joanne are out, and I can’t get hold of them, the one thing I will do is go onto iMessage and look to see when they were last on Message. So, I can check. You know, so I know they’re still alive, if you like, whilst they’re out and about. So, I do find that, actually, handy.’
>
> Louise

Within the family a number of the women spoke of the ways in which their relationships with their children had become digital over the last decade. In the subcategory *mothering in the digital world* several women echoed Louise’s experiences of the efficacy of social media to connect them to their wider families but most importantly their children.

> ‘She is quite open, so… so we do have quite a good relationship that way, but not all teenagers are that open. They have certain secret things they like to keep to themselves and I think Facebook kind of like, gives you like that window of opportunity to see beyond what they’re saying. ‘
>
> Joanne

These examples provide an interesting counter narrative to prevailing levels of concerns voiced by the women about the impact of online life in young people which will be covered in the following section Preserving privacy. A balance had to be negotiated by the parents in ensuring their children’s safety whilst recognising their need for freedom to explore the online world. Direct family connections then illustrate well the process identifying and managing risk.

Not all the women believed there was inherent danger for young people. One woman spoke powerfully of her *hope for young people* to find greater understanding and by extension acceptance of themselves online.

> ‘I think like these days people are happy to kind of like come out at school and stuff and just be happy and say I fancy girls, I fancy boys, I don’t fancy either you know. They are so much happier now to just... to say it or even if they don’t say it to be happy about it, may be within them, a bit happier within themselves about it and for me that just wasn’t an option. It was completely unheard of you know…’

Katie

In essence, Katie expressed the opposite to most of the other women interviewed, feeling hopeful for young LGBT defined people growing up today as their access to online resources offered an outlet, a tangible visible example, she had never had.

The nature of visibility online created a number of subcategories in this section. *Images online, being visible online - performance and curated lives – best foot forward* highlighted the ways in which the women recognised the degree to which they themselves and others edited their online appearances.

> 'People think that of you put selfies online its because you think you're beautiful, and that may be case for some, good for them, but it's me thinking 'oh my god there's a good shot of me wow!' I normally take twenty pictures before I would put one online. So, it's not a vanity thing, it's like 'now that one looks good' but you know I took twenty to get there believe me' laughs'.
>
> Lynne

> 'I think it's one of those things that you only put pictures on there when you look great, you know. So, there was that sort of movement that came round, was it a year or so ago, where celebrity women were going on without any make up on, and you know a lot of people, younger people were doing it. I didn't do it. I didn't have the nerve, I won't out with my lippy on you know. But to me that's the sort of thing about Facebook. I'm using Facebook because it's the only thing I'll use but it creates an artificial snapshot of your life really. That's what I'm also wary of.'
>
> Monica

> ' Yeah I do, I think I do find myself looking at other people's life and think, they've got such a good life, as they're putting like the new BMW and the millions of Christmas presents that they've bought the kids for Christmas, but I do think that that's just a snap shot and I think you don't know what happens behind closed doors. But it does, it does, I do, it makes me question am I doing okay for my kids, am I doing this, why haven't I got this? I'm 40, I'm single, they have the perfect life and, it does make you question yourself as a mum and as a woman and, in your own identity. It makes you question are you good enough, are you good enough, what did I do with my life that was so different that they did in their life?'
>
> Joanne

Most of the women acknowledged that they edited themselves online but could sometimes struggle to apply this knowledge to posts of others. In this way whilst the women identify their own performances and positioning online, they struggled to envisage others had failings or insecurities which drove them to do the same.

> ‘Yeah, but then on the flip side you don't know, I don't know their personal story, I don't know their narrative, I don't know what they’ve gone through to get to the point where they are today. Different days look at it at different ways, but majority of the time I do feel, I do feel like I’ve kind of like failed, I’ve failed. But then I think any time will tell, I don't know what my kids are going to do, they could go on and be doctors or lawyers or whatever….’
>
> Joanne

Another way the disparity of online presence and reality became apparent was in the subcategory of *quantifying social life.* Several of the women took issue with the numbers attached to online interactions. The notion of counting friends was alien to the women and was at times an unsettling aspect of engaging in social media. Numbers provide particularly stark evidence for the process of comparison and competition online.

> ‘the reason I’m not on Facebook is I don’t need to take pictures of my life and display them for people who I don’t know seeing them. I believe that, if I wanted somebody to know something, I would rather contact them direct. I see it as a flamboyancy that people use Facebook, “Look how many friends I’ve got. Look how exciting my life is,” but then I know people that don’t necessarily have an exciting life,’
>
> Linda

However, the numbers did count for some women.

> ‘‘I think Facebook can make you quite paranoid. For example, you know the other day, I’ve got 195 friends at the moment and then I noticed the number had gone down by one.' both laugh ' So instantly it’s like 'who doesn’t like me? Who doesn’t want to be my friend? Da da da' And it probably isn’t, but it can make you, if you’re feeling a little bit wobbly emotionally, it can kind of plummet you, into thinking someone's unfriended you even though I've done the same myself.’
>
> Chris

This quote, though said with humour at the time, chimes with Joanne’s earlier statement that the content online affects women differently according to other emotional and situational factors. A simple metric has powerful effects otherwise it would not be included in social media platforms. The women interviewed were not immune from the worst effects of social media it appeared.

The subcategory *spoiling identities* further explored some of the other detrimental aspects the women encountered in their online lives. Empirical metrics were not the only pressure to be found in the social media, visual representation drove cultures online which could prove difficult to navigate even as an adult.

> ‘I think it’s perhaps, sort of, the online life may reinforce the idea that I’m part of a minority, because there is this obsession of looking attractive and all this, and young, and when I look at, say, profile pictures of … you know, even some of my classmates, I can hardly recognise them because they will be all made up and stuff.’
>
> Yvette

Yvette recognised a homogeneous approach to grooming, particularly make up, from her classmates posted images. Here despite recognising inherent differences in age and stage Yvette still finds herself in the process of comparing herself with her colleagues. Although Yvette did not feel the need to conform to such a grooming routine herself, by not doing so she felt this othered her visually from the rest her class.

Age played a role in this narrow visual look employed online. One woman outlined how the youth influenced online aesthetic drove her own fears of ageing.

> 'yeah but I don’t think I’m an unattractive person. I'm not one of those girls who walks about and is good looking and says, ' oh I’m so ugly' I know I’m alright looking I’ve been model. So, I must have been good looking once. but I’m very very scared of ageing. If I can find a good photo and people say go 'you look good for your age' I’m like oh gosh. And I know that in photos you can look a lot better than you do in real life. yeah chuck a filter on and catch the light right. yeah I worry about ageing very much'
>
> Lynne

As the online world reached further into their offline lives, as evidenced by online driven cultural trends in make-up and fashion, many of the women spoke of *missing the human touch in their lives*. The women observed over time that there were limits to the benefits that technology opened up for them.

> 'yeah, yeah. it’s like anything that’s extreme, the more good that it does the more bad potentially it does. so, that’s in everything in what you see online and what you can access online, so, and your time, I think, you know people are slaves to it (the internet) now.'
>
> Selina

Here Selina touches on the fact that being online and open to communication comes with risks that need to be identified and managed. Not all risk will be directly related to personal bodily safety, instead here Selina relates a more diffuse risk concerning autonomy and freedom and offers an important critical perspective on a life online.

Yet the power the internet had to support identities and foster community was very important in warding off isolation for others. Again the value of connection was balanced against the risk of exposure to the more negative elements mentioned previously.

> 'There's other elements of freedom there, you know, you could... As I say, you know, people go on holidays and they post their photos, well two years running in July I'd had a knee operation so I was incapacitated and I was just at home, and so people on holidays, I loved it because they'd put their pictures up and it was like going on holiday and not having to do anything. (Laughing)'
>
> Margot

From these subcategories it can be seen that the internet is used in ways beyond the practical or informational and that cultural elements and expectations influence online life. If the interactions online represented interacting with their wider culture this must have significance for the women's sense of identity and subsequently their sexual identity.

The subcategories *reinforcing self* and *projecting self* explored ways in which the women pushed back against the self-consciousness that could develop from social media by actively using online spaces to shape how they were portrayed to the outside world. In doing so they illustrate the process of managing reputation by controlling the message.

> ' I sometimes find that if I'm on the internet rather than meeting somebody, because when somebody meets me it's the old adage of the talking to the carer and not the... I mean, fortunately I often don't have anybody with me but it's... My mum was in a wheelchair in her latter years and people would talk to her... There was nowt wrong with her brain, you know, she could have told you anything. And sometimes I think people might see me as that; they didn't see me that a few years ago I was fit and healthy and... you know…/.. That way. On the internet it's me and, you know, they see me because there's just my face. Actually my favourite picture's me and my granddaughter and we're all dressed up to the nines anyway, so... (Laughs)
>
> Margot

Margot here illustrates the transformational opportunities available online by relating to her peer groups in ways in which she controls the message. This construction or support of self is central to the grounded theory of the study in that it acknowledges the active ways in which women see their identity and adapt their online lives accordingly. The following section will look in greater detail at the ways in which women control their online lives in terms of risk and opportunity.

6.4.2.2 Preserving privacy

For the most part the women interviewed gained from their online lives but still recognised some drawbacks they had experienced. Whilst connectivity was a crucial factor to the women's use of the internet participation online also exposed them to a range of risks. This higher category describes the strategies which the women adopted as a result of their experiences online to mitigate the effects of the online erosion of privacy. In this way, the process of enacting privacy runs through this higher category and demonstrates the skills the women acquired observing and participating in life online.

The women interviewed showed themselves to be eminently capable of protecting themselves online, developing a range of strategies to this end that will be discussed later in this section. That said one woman did yearn to turn back the clock on the encroachment of technology into daily life. The subcategory *Memories of pre-internet time* recognised some of the women's nostalgia for the pre-internet age.

> 'I think it's horrendous, it's sad. I do like the idea of a world back where, you know, you used to put 10p in phone box and if your mate didn't turn on the street corner after fifteen minutes. you'd think oh they're not coming. And we managed you know? I think we, it should give us more freedoms and in fact I don't think it does. I feel more restricted and restrained by it.'
>
> Selina

Here Selina mourns a less connected past largely as a result of the pressure she felt from being constantly accessible because of mobile communication. This idealised version of a past without internet was not generally representative as the women were largely ambivalently pragmatic about the internet. Most of the women in early interviews did not have Damascene memories of their first time online, rather they drifted into an online life gradually. After initial interviews yielded little data about the beginnings of online life subsequent interviews focussed on existing lives online and turning points within this life over time. From this line of questioning *issues of trust online* developed as a subcategory.

> 'When I was starting from the beeb or The Guardian or, yes, the Washington Post and stuff like that. French media as well, because I'm French. However, it's the fact that when somebody posts something, it may come from a random organisation and you're not entirely sure. So, if it's something that I find particularly interesting, I try and see if I find the same information on more reputable sources. So, starting to get into the software, we said to my grandma, "You can't believe everything that's on there." So, if it doesn't come from a reputable, identifiable source, then you have to take it with a pinch of salt, really. '
>
> Yvette

Many of the women interviewed outlined their means of establishing trust in online content. The provision of news through social media channels meant some of the women became aware that all was not as it seemed. The women understood verification was often required of news and indeed information found online. In this way some of the women adopted a more circuitous route altogether to source reliable information in the digital world.

> 'I'm really looking at sites that will give me history, sometimes history about the people I'm looking at, certainly history... Normally actually what I do is use Amazon because I need to find, have they got a book on that particular period in time? or that particular subject or that particular place, because that would just... I still... when it comes down to things like that I still like a book'
>
> Margot

The authority of the written word was spoken of by several of the women and it highlighted a general scepticism of online sources. Another area for scepticism which arose from the interviews was that of the motive of others one might encounter online.

> 'And, people are very naïve, I mean, I tend to think I'm naïve, but I'm not daft. You know, we have a friend, and this was when, before people realised what was happening, and he'd got an email and it said, "Ooh, somebody sent you this greetings card, you got a greetings card from a friend", you know. And "Oh great". Pressed the button and it just ruined is computer you know, because yes I do PayPal and PayPal say, they always your name, Dear Helen Smith, but I'd often get stuff from PayPal which says Dear Customer. Get away, no way. But I think it is from, I suppose what I'm saying, as the project you're doing as I see it, is that people have different levels of vulnerability, and if you're very vulnerable that is even magnified online, but how you deal with that, the only way I can think, it is for people not to be vulnerable, to be strong enough in themselves, to know that, you know, I'm me, I'm loved and what everybody says about me doesn't matter. '
>
> Helen

Criminal conduct of the nature mentioned above was mentioned by several of the older women in the group and like this example related the experience of peers. None of the women interviewed had experienced any hacking or other scams online and this was spoken of with a degree of pride.

> ‘and I thought, “Oh, date of birth is obviously something easily linked.” Yes, so I never put that on anything. I wouldn’t put my National Insurance number on anything either, not that I can remember it now I’m not working, because that’s easily stolen identity, but, apart from that.’
>
> ‘Are your experiences then of Facebook, based on that, generally quite positive? You’re in control and not had any, sort of, problems with it?’ researcher
>
> ‘I haven’t been hacked. Quite a few of my friends have, but I haven’t, no. No, I quite enjoy it, and I like sharing the jokes and funny pictures and stuff like that. ‘
>
> Deidre

However, such scepticism, or suspicion, of interaction online was not shared by all the women and many felt social media enabled the exercising of trust in their family lives. This consolidation of trust overlaps and expands the previously discussed subcategory *mothering in the digital world.* Bargaining and boundary setting could take place by following teenaged children on Facebook. This process offered the children access to a valuable social platform whilst the mothers could have degrees of access which they believed enabled their children’s safety.

> ‘I’m on my daughter’s Facebook, so I can see everything that’s going on her Facebook, and there was a couple of incidences of bullying, which I could, I dealt straight on because I was on that Facebook and I could see it and I could see what was going on, so she did unfriend me a couple of times, and I said, if you want Facebook, then I am your friend on Facebook, so I can have an idea what’s going on in her life.’
>
> Joanne

The ever-increasing encroachment of online elements of life did however prove to be a significant issue for the women. The amount of time and energy being used in the management of online life, particularly on social media, coalesced into the subcategory *intrusion of online world*.

> I just felt that there was a massive intrusion into my life and any photos that I put on there you don’t own any more basically. Anybody can see them and I realised that I didn’t want to know all this stuff about other people’s lives. I thought hang on a minute I am friends with this person on Facebook, I haven’t spoken to them for ages, I would rather pick up the phone and speak to them and say, “How are you doing?”
>
> So I explained that to people. I even put a post out saying I am coming off Facebook here are my reasons why, I will be in touch and the only reason I rejoined was because I had Rachel because... so I was off it for about two years, didn’t miss it, couldn’t... I felt like... I could hear all these stories about how much

trouble it caused and, have you seen she has been to this baby shower, she is not invited.

I thought I don't care, I don't want to hear it, I cannot stand it. The only reason I am back on there now is I went to Yoga and I met my tribe of women basically (laughter), and we all found each other on Facebook to become friends again, and so I rejoined and as a result like I am friends with... that is my network.

So it is sort of like my village but I am very, very careful. I would never put a picture of Rachel on there. I think I have got a couple of pictures on where you can sort of see her eyes and the top of her head, but she is in the sling and you can just sort of like see her little cheek but Partner and I do not put pictures of Rachel on Facebook, and if someone has unwittingly put one of Rachel on, I say can you just take that down.

Katie

This final quote illustrates both the struggle to deal with the pressure to maintain an active presence online and the concomitant difficulty to withdraw from social media, should the need arise. It is not surprising then the subcategory reluctant social media use arose in the data.

'I prefer it (Instagram) to Facebook because kind of Facebook's unfiltered, people are ... and people put things on that you don't necessarily want to see or ...

' so on Facebook you're saying it's not filtered and ...' researcher

'Yeah, so you know people are thrusting their opinions onto you, images and thoughts that you might not want to see or agree with, you know, if something really horrific happens in the news and images might appear or ... well I don't want to see that, if it's in the news ... if I'm reading ... the newspapers I would read online is the Guardian and the BBC so if I'm looking through that I know what's coming and I know if I press on that link so I can prepare myself or, you know ... '

Lesley

Despite the controls built into Facebook Lesley felt out of control in its online space at times. As result she preferred to seek news elsewhere due to the horrific content which could appear through Facebook's news feed which Lesley perceived to be badly regulated in relation to other new sources.

Lesley only continued to use Facebook after severely restricting access to her profile as a result of an offline incident and in doing so illustrated another subcategory in this section *editing/limiting images online*.

‘I was assaulted in the town centre by a gang of girls and I only knew one ... I could only recognise one of them and that made me very conscious of Facebook, for example.’

‘Because you were identified with these ...’ researcher

‘Yeah, because I felt ... yeah, I felt like they knew what I looked like and they knew me ... all psychological, you know, looking back I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time with a bunch of idiots basically. But I didn’t know that and I just felt like if they look for me because it went to court and the police ... they’d got one of them, I was going to say young lady but that’s probably too strong a term, but she wouldn't name the others and there was probably six others. So I felt very conscious about ... I wanted to erase my face so if they were to Google me they wouldn't be able to remind themselves what I looked like. I daren’t go for a loaf of bread on my own or ... I was really conscious that everybody passing me might have been involved in the attack. So that really made a difference to me.

‘Did you stop using Facebook then?’ researcher

‘I didn’t stop using it, but I pulled off all images and em...’

‘It increased your feelings of vulnerability at that time.’ researcher

‘Yeah, I already had really high privacy settings or as extreme as it could be but I asked friends, you can untag yourself, I untagged anything, anything that I could see that was linked to me I untagged, any image. So the words were still there but they couldn’t see me. Yeah.’

‘And how long did it take for you to ...’ researcher

‘Start sort of ... gosh, it was probably about three years (to return to Facebook), so a long time really. Yeah, 'cause we did ... it turned out that the girl who I did know had done it we did have ... yeah, so fortunately I removed the people in common and I had to block anyone who I thought had anything to do with her really. I think it was just an over ... it was me being over sensitive, I think it's just something that she did, I mean that's what they do is go out and get drunk and kick someone’s head in basically. And that's what they did for fun but you don't... I took it more personally at the time.’

Lesley

In this example, Lesley’s sense of concern after an assault was amplified by fear of the consequences of the visual imprint she had left online, prompting fear of exposure to her real life attackers. Given her safety had been compromised her reaction to remove all visual traces of herself is understandable and profound. An assault of a physical nature has real world consequences but here Lesley’s describes her physical presence online disappearing and in so

doing changing her online identity indefinitely. Now many years later Lesley's Facebook profile picture remains that of a musician not herself.

From Lesley's experience participating in social media is shown to be more than a frivolous pastime with no bearing on real life, her contacts on Facebook really did have the potential to lead to her identification. Lesley clearly had to go through a process of identifying and manging risk online or risk her digital identity causing her harm in real life.

Other women had similar concerns about the potential consequences of their visibility online. Here Joanne explains what led to her restriction of posting online, particularly pictures and information relating to her children.

> 'There was no incident, I think it was more, well I say there was no incident, I split up with my youngest two's dad, and he was finding out information about me which then made me think, he doesn't need to know all this, and he was, somebody else was feeding the information, so I stopped doing that and I think when I started my degree, I think the more knowledge you have, the more wary you become and you start assessing risks, and I think the less my children are out there, the less risk that there'll be to them'
>
> Joanne

This example showed the potential for new technology to be used against women as evidenced in the subcategory *surveillance.* In this instance Joanne altered her posting over time to regain control of the information circulating online about her family life. This identification and management of risk was all the more vital to Joanne as a newly single parent.

Joanne illustrates the paradox of an online life. As mentioned earlier in this section she welcomed the means to keep her daughter safe by following her on Facebook, yet her own use of this platform had to be moderated to protect her family from external monitoring.

Many of the women spoke of this balancing act between safety and exposure in their online experiences. Joanne was not alone in using online means in terms of keeping family safe that it became a subcategory.

> 'With the girls, it's definitely a degree of safety, because, you know, if I go back to when I used to go out to when they go out now, obviously, they're in clubs until 3:00am in the morning and, like any mother, you don't settle. If I'm ringing them and I can't find them, I'll Facebook stalk them, if you like, or go online or even WhatsApp. I can go on WhatsApp and look to see when the last time, you know, they were actually online.'

Louise

The benefits of young people being contactable online were clearly stated but this was countered in the women by a near universal concern for the young generation's habits online. In the subcategory *concern for young people online* a wide range of issues came to the fore from body image pressures, potential for bullying and career limiting posts or images. In this way the women worried about their children's and other young people's capacity to identify and manage risk online.

> 'I mean, there's cyber bullying isn't there, I mean that's horrendous. Oh gosh, I can't imagine what it's like, if you're alone and upset anyway and you've got your phone for your friends and then some horrible message comes up saying, to say how horrible you are or whatever they say, "I'm going to get you" or whatever they do.'
>
> Helen

> '…putting pictures of, you know, themselves drunk, and, "Oh wasn't this great," you know, "We went out, don't remember anything that happened." I've had, as I say, the young women that I used to work with, you know, saying, off went so and so, so and so, made ourselves sick in the toilet so we could drink more. You know, you think, just don't do it, you know, especially not posting it. It's not, you know, I know, there's, you know, some of the young women that were a bit more extreme I actually deleted them as friends on Facebook, because it used to upset me to think, you know, all that work we did with them to learn self-respect and, you know.'
>
> Evelyn

Many of the fears the women identified in relation to young people online lives however could easily be extended to their own experiences. *Theft of time* as subcategory was certainly of concern to the women themselves in addition to their fears for young people.

> 'I think it does become addictive, you can become addicted to it and I think that's the danger of the whole sort of ability of sitting in your sitting room and have a virtual friendship group, or have a virtual eye on the world really. You can spend all your time just looking at the world as presented through a small screen and not pick your head up and look around or go out and do stuff, you know. I think that's my concern is, I hear a lot, and I listen a lot, I listen to radio a lot, and it interests me sometimes when they do studies of how the use of screens etc, affects people's sleeping patterns and all kinds of stuff. I'm not neurotic about it but I'm just careful'
>
> Monica

Time pressure was not the only negative element the women identified relating to their online lives a number of issues combined in the subcategory *pressure /discomfort arising from social media*.

> 'there's people out there that are far worse off but yes, there is, kind of, that, I wouldn't say resentment, but you do think, "Oh, I wish that was me," but, you know, which, again, if you weren't on Facebook, obviously, you wouldn't see it and it wouldn't come to the forefront and you wouldn't think, "Oh, well, it's a bit of a shame," and that.'
>
> Louise

> ' So, I don't feel the pressure of having to look for more friends or to look for a sexual partner, but yes, as I say, it (social media) has reinforced the thing that, you know, I'm not one of the pretty girls, really, but that's been with me all my life, I suppose. So, I wouldn't say that it makes it worse, but it's just there in the background. Yes, it reinforces it a bit, yes.'
>
> Yvette

These examples illustrate the pressures women experience online that are not always direct and specific experiences or that are easy to recall rather they are insidious and chip away at confidence over time. Context is key in dealing with the stresses of an online life and the subcategory *amplifying existing emotion* explores this.

> 'I think the other thing where it can make you feel a bit em negative, is when people always post the positives, like what a great time they're having. And like for me I like Christmas day and the build-up but boxing day I've got a very small family and everybody battens down the hatches with their families, so boxing day I kind of, you know, hoover and go for a walk type of day. And people are sort of, people would never post a picture of themselves doing nothing, getting on with some work or, hoovering up or something. So you know what you get is this jolly family where everyone loves one another. And everyone's having loads of fun and smiling. And then you're sat there on your own and I'm thinking this is not good. So obviously it's up to me because it's voluntary involvement with it so, you don't have to look at it. You don't have to turn it on. but then there's that whole am I missing out on something concept'
>
> Chris

However, the women like Chris who recognised the effect of their online lives on their mood mostly were equipped to make the commensurate adjustments required to mitigate this problem. Most chose to avoid engaging at times they knew could be problematic or by engaging in other pursuits.

> ‘I made a conscious decision to start making art, because I’m an art teacher and I thought, “How can I stop talking so much about doing it and teaching other people how to do it and do it myself.” So I decided to take those 6 hours a day that you organise other people and organise myself in those 6 hours.’
>
> Rhiannon

Some of the women were less concerned about the time the internet took from them and instead were more concerned about the data they gave away. The subcategories *data concerns and concerns of service migration online* outlined the resistance many of the women had to completing much of the crucial administration of their lives online. Several of the women interviewed were concerned about what this meant for their attempts to enact privacy online.

> ‘See, I don’t do online banking because I’m frightened somebody will hack into it. It’s just ridiculous. I feel, like, old-school and old fashioned with the internet.’
>
> Linda

> ‘It annoys me, services are becoming more and more online and actually I’m trying to remind them that there are some people who can’t function; I’ve just recently been on the dole, the assumption with the dole is that you always have to be online and I made it an equality of access issue with my MP, the people next to me that I was listening to that had been sanctioned couldn’t even get a computer to turn on and they were being sanctioned – it was totally ridiculous’.
>
> Rhiannon

Given the amount of data that can be harvested online the women were right to be concerned, but identifying concern was the first step in curating a safe space for themselves in this realm. In the subcategory *responding to pressure by boundary setting* strategies for mitigating the negative elements of a life online were explored. A number of techniques were used to identify and manage risk online including selective posting, careful connections, disarming humour, learning from others and exercising control over contact numbers.

> ‘I don't tend to share a lot of photographs, if I do they’re usually photographs of my dog which is quite anonymous. The occasional photograph of my son but he's not too keen on being shared either as he's got older so ... Yeah. So I don't tend to share too much, I don't tend to make a lot of personal statements, I will share things that I find interesting or funny but, yes, as my self-awareness has grown over the last five years or so I think my awareness of what my profile says about me has grown and I’m more aware of that.’
>
> Tara

‘I was very careful to find out what the highest level of security was and I never accept friend request from people who I don't know and I never accept friends request form people of friends of friends, if you know what I mean because I don't know them, you know, so I'm very careful about. If you look at the number of friends I've got, I've only, I sound like a billy no mates here but I've got say 20 or 30 people who are in my friendship group.’

Monica

‘Well, I don’t know. I generally like a good laugh anyway. So, I tend to put things which I think are humorous, or presented in a humorous way and my sense of humour is quite self – deprecating... Yes, so that’s part of it. It will be, sort of, re-posting things I find interesting. For example, if it’s around, say, mental health, if I find articles or local news to do with mental health, I post it in our … we’ve got a personal group, fellow students. Yes, if there is information which I find is, you know, worth reposting, I will do that, but yes, generally, sort of, see bits of life and pictures and things like that and that I take, because it’s a nice picture or because it’s funny.’

Yvette

‘And sometimes my sister will post images of her and my niece and I think well I don't want people to see that, and it’s nothing like she’s not ...it’s not that she’s not got any clothes or anything, but I know I have some friends that they won't post any images of their children on’

Lesley

‘Like I did a 5 day course and then you make friends with all these people and you’re never going to set eyes on them again and some of them put real rubbish on the internet. So like a couple of time I’ve gone through and thought 'right' you know 'I’m never on gonna see that person' I met them for 5 days 5 years ago click delete delete delete.’

Chris

The key concept which drove the curation of online presence, and thus the creation of this sections higher category, was preserving privacy. Clearly other considerations including reputation management and social connection are both interlinked and important, but maintaining a private life was very important to most of the women interviewed. The point at which privacy became important for the women online differed within the group and the subcategory *privacy turning points/deal breakers* outlined this variation.

'I've always been very careful. I don't know if it's a generational thing. It's where from my generation you're always very careful of your privacy, although you were brought up that way and you didn't share your information with people. So, my starting point was always never to participate in surveys etc., which is why doing something like this, you know, which has got academic sort of an event to it, I'm much more comfortable with, I don't tend to do feedback things or anything like that. So, I have a suspicion of the state, let's just say. Therefore, my starting point for anything like social media outlet would be to start with the highest privacy settings anyway because I'm very careful about what I share in my life, and that's the way I am really.'

Monica

'It has changed, definitely. I'm very aware of my profession and that people might want to look me up. So I'm a lot more cautious these days than I would have been, say, three/five/eight years ago about what I put on there in terms of photographs, in terms of any kind of political content, any kind of self-disclosure about my whereabouts or my ... where I live, anything ... I'm just more cautious, a lot more cautious.'

'Has anything precipitated that?' researcher

'No. I say no, so I did use an online dating site a couple of years ago and met somebody through the dating site, ended up having a relationship with them for about 18 months. And I was quite shocked at that point how much he could see on my Facebook page before we were friends. So that reminded me to update my privacy settings and from that point onwards I've regularly checked what can be seen.'

Tara

The use of online dating and the specific issues of self-curation that this entails will be discussed further section 6.4.3. Although Tara and Monica approached social media differently originally both recognised a need for privacy specific to their own circumstances. *Privacy setting* as a subcategory further explored this theme by outlining the ongoing importance of privacy over time in an ever-changing online world.

'I periodically go and check what is seen and what ... 'cause I slipped up recently and something was posted and it was public content and I went back and changed it to friends only because then after it had been changed to public content everything that I posted after that or shared after that was also public so then I went back and changed it so ... I periodically check it to make sure and that's very much from a professional perspective.'

Tara

The ultimate in privacy online is not engaging at all online however as discussed earlier in this section with the migration of essential services online fewer and fewer people can or would

opt to disengage altogether. Whilst this research required that those coming forward did venture into the online world, a small number of the women interviewed maintained their privacy by keeping their involvement as little as narrow as possible.

> 'Most people you talk to are on Facebook. My colleagues in my previous job, all of them are on Facebook. I was the only one that wasn't on Facebook. So, I'm quite unique. The office where I'm in now, because I've only been there since November, I wouldn't know who's on Facebook and who isn't.'
>
> Linda

> 'I don't have internet at home because I couldn't afford it and also I resented its intrusion. If I have an online life I go to the library or I have specific lists of things I need to do online and I go to the place where it's free and I go and use it. I resent paying for it, I resent the charge.'
>
> Rhiannon

In the initial wave of the internet it was believed that online world offered a safe space for everyone to find connections that were most suited to themselves. In recent time this utopian view of the internet has been toppled but it is important to consider the role the internet may still play providing privacy the final subcategory in this section.

> 'I went through a period of time when I ordered quite a lot of books online about lesbian sex, and it wasn't I didn't know how to do lesbian sex, because my body had already been doing it, but I kind of wanted to find out if there was more about it that I maybe needed to know about before I went off and met these new people, so I sort of used it to facilitate my understanding or to facilitate my learning around lesbian sex…./… I never, ever would have thought of going into a bookshop.'
>
> Heather

Above we see a different view by which the women use online means to enact private behaviours or transactions that would not have otherwise been attempted offline. In much the same way other women found the internet was a boon in terms of privately accessing intimate information.

> '… I had used the internet to look it up and see what the prognosis was and what, if there's anything we could do, and I actually, because I've been diagnosed with Type 2 as well, but I have no medication.'
>
> Gina

As previously mentioned when Gina found it difficult to discuss the sexual impact of her husband's diabetes with him, she could at least access readily research the issue online. Whilst this did not solve her problem in itself it at least gave her understanding of the intrusive nature of the treatment her husband would need to address his impotence. In this way Gina illustrates one of the ways the internet can support sexual identity by providing information specific to individual need this will be explored further in the following section 6.5.3. outlining the higher category online behaviour supporting sexual identity.

6.4.3 Core Category Three - Online behaviours supporting sexual identity

Given the importance of privacy to the women, as described in the previous section, it perhaps could have been assumed that the women would be wary to link their sexual identities to their online lives. However, the data provided a number of examples, some already explored in previous sections, where the internet provided information and the means to connect which very much underpinned sexual life and thus the means to define and develop sexual identity over time.

It is true to say though in some cases, the women did not recognise any intersection themselves between these two aspects of their lives and when asked did not relate their sexual identity to their online lives. In this section, the various means by which all the women could be considered to have shown some interaction of the two will be explicated. For some of the women the intersection of these aspects of their lives is small and indirect and for others specific and chosen. In understanding how this occurs a theory of integral nature of sexual identity and online life grounded in the data can be shown.

The higher categories that were determined in this core category follow below (Table 6-5), the rest of this section will outline the subcategories within these higher categories which build to reflect the online behaviours which support sexual identity.

Table 6-5 Core Category 3

Online behaviours supporting sexual identity	
Indirect sexual identity support online	Projecting self
	Curated lives – best foot forward
	Being visible online - performance
	Connecting to likeminded / friends
Relating and dating online	Rejecting online dating
	Participation in dating online
	Openness to future dating online
	Facilitating /conducting relationships online
	Perceptions of risk in online dating
	Problems of presentation in online dating

	Disingenuous actions in online dating
Seeking knowledge online	Information seeking
	Purchasing sexual products
Responding to sexual content online	Curiosity
	Never viewed imagery
	No longer viewing imagery
	Moral/ ethical rejection of sexual content online
	Beliefs about sexual content online - context
	Professional reason not to view sexual content
	Sexual content lacks realism
	Sexual content not relatable
	No interest in viewing sexual/ hardcore content
	Not emotionally engaging
Direct sexual behaviour online	Using internet for sexual purposes
	Choice in sexual imagery
	Fantasy/ fandom
	Role of online sexual behaviour
	Viewing atypical to orientation

6.4.3.1 Indirect online sexual identity support

When discussing their online lives, the women outlined the various ways their identity intersected with the online world through the profiles they created, the sites they visited and the information and images they posted. For most of the women the online space specifically supported their sexual identity by providing information on sexual matters, access to potential partners or by engaging with online sexual content. A small number of women had not undertaken any of these specific activities which meant potential theory arising out of the data needed to show that sexual identity was supported in alternate way for these women in order that any theory generated by the study be applicable to all the women interviewed.

In the absence of direct sexual behaviour online other behaviour online can be considered to interact, support or otherwise link with sexual identity. The subcategories in this section

develop ideas of presentation online which may bridge this gap identified by the women who did not actively feel they participated in behaviour online supporting sexual identity.

All of the subcategories in this section have also been accounted for under the previous core category and this section aims to provide evidence for their role in support of sexual identity through indirect means.

When a woman projects an image or profile of herself online it performs a number of functions. In a practical sense all the women, bar one, answered a set of questions online which created a profile on Facebook. In providing data to be viewed by others in the form of a profile the women were representing who they were across a range of variables including their relationship status, interests, sexual orientation (explicitly and implicitly) and numbers of connections. Through this the women establish a tangible online expression of their social capital. This information serves as both an introduction to the woman for those who have never encountered her and an update to those who have.

As previously mentioned, a small number of the women interviewed used the internet directly to project an image of themselves, they chose to either supersede that which had gone before or correct/conceal a fact of their life they wished to downplay. In this way the social media profile mediates the woman's relationship with her own identity and serves as expression of that identity, directly or not.

> 'Well, I've never found the need to go on a dating site. I haven't any sexual preferences that I wish to discuss with anybody. I found it really interesting connecting with old school friends and establishing myself as a real person, as opposed to the little shrimp I used to be…/…Well, when I was actually at school, I will explain, my name was 'unusual', which I found very embarrassing at the time, and my parents were much, much older than anybody else's parents, which I also found embarrassing. I had bright red hair, which made me stand out in a crowd when I wanted to shrink into a corner. I very rarely spoke to other children. I had friends, but they were, you know, just one or two. The whole class, I probably never spoke to anybody else, whereas now, I can chat quite happily with any one of them.'
>
> Deirdre

Also coded in the higher category developing and refining a digital life, this quote illustrated the subcategory *projecting self* which could be argued to play a role in this section's exploration of the higher category indirect online sexual identity support in the following manner.

In the above quote, Deidre explains her social media use as a means to redress her previous social role and therefore increase her social capital. Deidre is clearly pleased with her social status online which contributes to her overall sense of self. Elsewhere in the interview Deidre reveals a number of aspects of her sexual identity.

> 'Well, it (sex/relationships) was all very exciting at first. Well, it's just part of life now. Growing old is growing invisible.'
>
> 'One of the reasons I've come here is because people don't see you as having an opinion anymore, when you're older. You just become invisible.'
>
> 'Well, I see young lads walking about and think, "Cor, they look alright," and then I think, "My God, I'm old enough to be their grandmother."
>
> Deidre

Together these quotes constitute a sub narrative within the interview in which it is established that Deidre felt unseen in her youth and now as a function of age once more struggles to be seen. Deidre also reveals that her age does not dictate her inner life and as consequence young men are still sexually attractive to her. Deidre's description of her use of Facebook illustrates how she has created the means to be seen online and therefore gains the social capital she feels she lacks offline due to aging. Social capital in this context is the feeling of social worth, or value, Deidre has. In this way, the internet indirectly supports Deidre's sexual identity, by supporting her sense of self by providing the means to improve her sense of her social standing, which in turn supports her youthful interior life which encompasses her sexual response to the world. Importantly all this could occur without any specific understanding of the processes taking place other than the desire to be seen for who she truly is. Simply put controlling an online persona can feed into a positive sense of self and in doing so maintain a sense of sexual identity.

Conversely women who do not feel a positive sense of social capital from social media may well feel their sexual identity diminishes through lack of support online, a negative interaction but an interaction, nonetheless. Two of the women interviewed explicitly reported a lack in their sexual identity expressed dissatisfaction with their experiences of online life.

> 'I don't really think of myself as primarily a sexual person, it doesn't really occur to me that much.'
>
> 'um it's a strange one cos it's (sexual preference/ identity) not something I really talk about much these days. Maybe it began more so when I was younger and you know we'd say aw he's fit or whatever and you know yeah but, I suppose, you

know now I'm so settled in my relationship it's not something that I focus on as much'

Carole

'you know, chatting with friends and what not all these things where people are at it all the time I just don't believe it. I think, you know, when you're looking at pictures on the internet and everybody's kissing and ... it's all really sexualised, I don't ... it's fake, it's false I can't believe it.'

'For me I think it's (Facebook) about ... I think really it is all about show and look how perfect my life is, look, I've got the, you know, 2.4 children and I'm on the fabulous holiday with the other half, you know, out for a day out in the big car or whatever ...

'Do you feel Facebook has contributed to conspicuous consumption, or do you think it just reflects an already existing conspicuous consumption?' researcher

'No, I think it definitely feeds it and forces it because otherwise where would it be, what would people do, I know people have always bought magazines but in the magazines there would be celebrities, it wouldn't be you or I would it, it wouldn't be your next door neighbour that's just got a new huge TV and why haven't we got a big TV, or ... how can they afford to go on holiday for so and so or she's just had an eyebrow pierced so I'll have eyebrows ... you know, it's not just the rich and famous having false eyelashes, it's your friend or it's someone you went to school with. '

Lesley

Lesley and Carole make no link themselves between their sense of sexual identity and their online lives. Both women have reasons for finding Facebook difficult in Carole's case fertility problems and in Lesley's as a victim of crime as mentioned in section 6.4.2.2. It could be said that both Carole and Lesley have specific issues that could contribute to a lowered sense of social capital which is only amplified online. Indirectly then their online lives by not supporting them socially may contribute the sense of lack in sexual identity they reported. Again, this process likely not to be apparent in a conscious sense but experienced in the motivations and drives the women consequently feel.

The other subcategories in this higher category *curated lives – best foot forward, being visible online – performance, and connecting to like-minded friends* all could be said to contribute to the process whereby a woman might influence or gauge her social capital online.

> ‘I would never put a picture on there, oh god I look fat on there or god that's not my best picture, or I look absolutely piddled on that one. You know I wouldn't put those pictures up because to me Facebook is this artificial world. We put pictures of us having a fabulous holiday etc. ‘
>
> Monica

> ‘in my twenties I was on, now it wasn’t quite internet dating, it was like a forum called Gaydar Girls and it was in my twenties. Now like if you are gay and unless you live in a city like London or Brighton, the scene is crap. I was brought up in Nottingham and the scene in Nottingham is similar to Hull, it is rubbish and like one night club and night at the uni once per month. So Gaydar Girls is a forum I used to go on in my early twenties and where you would... it wasn’t just for hooking up with people, it was kind of like making contact and then you would go out and see these people and then before you knew it you were mates. Oh yes I have seen your Gaydar Girl profile, because pretty much everybody had a Gaydar Girls profile with a photo on it. So yes, that very much. I used to go on there every day, several times per day (laughter). I used to either like chat to people or sometimes hook up with people or just have a bit of a flirt with people, update my profile.’
>
> Katie

Although all coming from differing perspectives, motivations and sexual orientation all the women above demonstrate the way they have as individuals constructed or evaluated their sense of social capital online and in so doing cultivated their sexual identities either knowingly or indirectly. Being online offers all these women the means to assess, compare, create or maintain who they are as people and as sexual beings through direct considered means or through general interaction that analogous to everyday life impacts our sense of self and the identities within that overall sense.

6.4.3.2 Relating and dating online

Having established that all the women had the potential to influence their sexual identity online through indirect and direct means this section will focus on one of the newly evolved aspects that women have encountered, online dating. Although dating services have existed throughout history within many cultures having systems of matchmaking, online dating offers an unprecedented immediacy and level of control to the women interviewed. The following subcategories explore the women’s opinions and experiences of this modern phenomena of the internet.

What was striking about the discussion of online dating with the women was generally how non-controversial it was as a topic area. By no means did everyone approve or participate in online dating but largely the women accepted this phenomenon as part and parcel of online life as much as social media or shopping. A small number of the women did stipulate their

disapproval in the subcategory *rejecting online dating* but in the main most women were not at all phased by its existence.

> 'Would I ever go on a dating thing if something happened to my husband, no, I don't think I would. I can't imagine living with anybody else.'
>
> Deidre

> 'I don't think I would, because there was someone I went to school with, who had fancied me, single, and we went out a couple of times, but, I mean, I didn't really fancy him, but, that's the thing, I just can't imagine … so, to me, I can communicate with someone online, but it has to be someone I know. I could never go on a dating website and put myself out there and start chatting to a complete stranger.'
>
> Louise

These women were however in the minority. Most of the women had either neutral or favourable views of online dating, even if they had not had cause to use it themselves. The fact that online dating was seen as integral to online life meant that many women contributed to the subcategory *participation in online dating*.

> '..I separated from my glamourous girlfriend I was a bit broken-hearted and after a period of time of licking my wounds, her and I became friends, and we both decided, separately, because we weren't going to get back together again and we both decided to go online and date, and at that time there weren't a great deal of online dating sites for women seeking other women, but we did find one, and I used it, and met quite a few women, actually, through that, about three or four, but for a start, I wasn't looking for a relationship as such, it was kind of just looking for somebody to date, and so yes, I used it and I used it successfully. I felt I used it successfully because I came out of that having had a few flings and boosting my self-esteem, as a consequence, because I felt good about myself.'
>
> Heather

> 'Yeah, when I first started online dating, it was kind of like a place to meet people, it was, you could meet genuine people, genuine people who was looking for a relationship or looking for dates or friendship or whatever you wanted out of that experience, that's a lot of people were looking for that kind of thing.'
>
> Joanne

> 'So yeah, I learnt the hard way and I learnt that actually having a fantasy relationship online might be exciting and it might be dramatic and it might be ... but actually when you meet in reality it's something very different and I learnt to ... so when I went back to online dating after another, a different relationship, I was very minimal with contact online and I was very quick to say, okay, we've had a chat we've got some interests, let meet and see if ... you know.'

Tara

Further evidence of the acceptance of the concept of online dating was to be found in comments of the women who had not dated online. Where women did not have experience of online dating, some were quite happy to say they were open to the option in future as noted in the subcategory *openness to future dating online.*

> 'As I say, I have, like, people saying, "Oh, why don't you go on online dating?" and I thought, well, one, I haven't got time. I'm studying. I don't have time because I know if I went on online dating, that I would be constantly wanting to check my messages and I don't have time for it. I don't really have time to start a new relationship but maybe when I've finished with my studying, it could be something, but then I'm wary. You hear of these horror stories.'
>
> Linda

As Linda indicates here although there was widespread acceptance and participation in online dating not all the experiences were positive. In fact, a significant number of the women who had undertaken online dating in the subcategory *participation in dating online* classified their experiences in varying levels of disappointment.

> *'When I'm online I don't do dating, I did try it once and I got weirded out because I was overwhelmed with the amount of strange people responding.'*
>
> *Rhiannon*
>
> 'I joined an online dating group, but I left because I thought it was, I realised that they actually sell your details on to other online groups'
>
> Chris
>
> 'yeah, I think I think it was late twenties or early thirties I dabbled in that (online dating) a little bit. just because I wasn't meeting anyone at all in Hull. Cos everyone was married off, yeah but I found, I found it very superficial you know cos it'll be, you know all the men my age were seen to have not aged very well. and I didn't really want to date, you know, the younger ones.'
>
> Carole

The pitfalls of online dating were varied across the group of women interviewed and were subcategorised into three main groupings *perceptions of risk in online dating, problems of presentation in online dating, and disingenuous actions in online dating illustrated by following examples in turn.*

‘I think you know this person that retired, at one point I think several of us at work we were quite worried about because she was desperately keen to get into a relationship and like at one point, I mean yeah there was one bloke and it turned out he was married and then she was going to meet somebody in a hotel in London, and she’d never met them before, and he like was paying for her to go down to London to a hotel and like, you know and this about a year ago in this place. And we were like 'this is not right'…./…you don’t know who these people are at all you just don’t know at all. And to go off and stay in a hotel with someone you've never met before’

Chris

‘back when I was using it in the early days, when I was in my early thirties, I do remember on two occasions I met two different women, I met them online, talked with them for a while, exchanged mobile numbers, text messaged them, emailed them for a period of time, then I went to meet them and on both occasions when I met them, I thought, oh my god, you are not the person, A, you don’t look like your profile photograph’

Heather

‘and it seems more seedy now, and more a place to hook up and to find someone to have sex with or to go online and have a girlfriend or boyfriend and find something and hook up and cheat and things like that. My ex, that’s what he used to do, he used to go online, find girls and sleep with them, and so it kind of like swayed my opinion, opinion of it.’

Joanne

On a more positive note the women who did not identify as heterosexual tended in the main to relate an experience of online dating that was more positive than their heterosexual counterparts. This experience could demonstrate the powerful role the online world has in connecting LGBTQ communities safely and reliably that was not available to women in previous generations.

‘ you would go on and there would be like three lesbians and like a load of gay men and the rest of the people were straight. Whereas now the pool is loads bigger. It is... so when it came to Match.com although it took me a while to shift through and find my partner, the pool was very much bigger and yes so that is why I re-engaged with it’

Katie

‘ I call it kind of my coming out phase, post-divorce, was ... I got a lot of support, a lot of information, I got a lot of affirmation, yeah, affirmation, from exploring myself within the safety of one particular site that was just aimed at women. And, yeah, I met some, I say met, I made online friends with some really supportive

> people who weren't just on there for dating it was the kind of site where people were there to be friends and offer support as well as ...'
>
> Tara

In addition to the successful experiences noted here a number of the relationships spoken of by the women would not exist without online methods of communication. In the final subcategory of this section one woman spoke of relationships that relied on online communication in the grouping *facilitating /conducting relationships online.*

> 'I've met people online, men, that I wouldn't otherwise have met. or certainly I've kept in touch with, Darren for example. he was someone I met at a party and we wouldn't have kept in touch had we just swapped numbers. We never talk on the phone. I don't think I've ever had a phone conversation with him once. so, if it wasn't for Facebook messenger and things like that, I don't actually have his number. So, it's all messenger. so yeah, my current sex life, or what there is of it, is only because of that online connection.'
>
> Lynne

In the course of a generation this group of women have embraced new means of communication to both find and maintain sexual relationships, another indication that far from being passive consumers in the online world the women interviewed were active participants using the internet for their own specific purposes. The following section will explore the importance of the internet as a discreet provider of information about sexual matters.

6.4.3.3 *Seeking knowledge online*

For some of the women interviewed talking about sex was difficult which meant problem solving in their sexual lives was almost impossible to achieve. Even within friendship groups, as discussed in section 6.4.1.4, talking about sexual matters was out of the question for many of the women interviewed. In addition, not all women were not open about their sexual orientation within friendship groups as evidenced in 6.4.1.4.

Accessing written material in women's magazines was a traditional method in the past to elicit sexual information but this method was patchy as it lacked specificity and timeliness. The introduction of the internet, and more importantly the use of the internet at home, offered many advantages when seeking specific sex information. In this using the internet to find sexual information specific to their needs the women found privacy online that had previously largely eluded them. In the course of the interviews the women described numerous ways they learned about sex or indeed their sexual selves online. Following sections will look specifically at the role of sexual content online but this section will explore information and

problem solving and is divided into the following subcategories, *information seeking and purchasing sexual products*.

As noted previously where discussion of sex is impossible with either partners or friends there lies a possibility of an information gap developing. Where previously privacy dictated that questions could not be asked and information was scant, or poorly targeted, the women were potentially at a loss. The ubiquity of computers and other internet enabled devices in the home marked a step forward for women in terms of access to information. This subcategory *information seeking* overlapped with data highlighted in section 6.4.1.4 *Getting sex right/ learning preferences* where Gina outlined her use of the internet to investigate treatments that could aid her husband who suffered from type 2 diabetes.

Despite the obvious advantages few of the women talked of using the internet for information purposes although a couple spoke of purchasing products online like books or sex toys in the subcategory purchasing sexual products, as mentioned by Heather earlier in this chapter, and Evelyn here discussing how she would consider reading sexual content bought online digitally.

> 'Well that's a thing that you actually, you wouldn't go into a shop and buy a magazine but actually you might, you know, you might read it on a Kindle because nobody knows what you're reading, So, you know..'
>
> Evelyn

Although the women did not bring forth many examples in which they had sought specific information online, it did serve as a source, like magazines before, of incidental information about sex.

> 'I mean I've looked at articles relating to sex when it's come my way, but I haven't looked around the internet to actually find them. Or anything like that.'
>
> Chris.

That women did not access, or least discuss this aspect of their online lives is perhaps cause for further questioning outside this research. Although the women sought little in the way of information online this did not mean they were not accessing sexual content, rather they did not do so for information purposes, the following section explores the motivations for engaging with sexual content online.

6.4.3.4 *Responding to sexual content online*

Although most of the women interviewed did not speak of seeking out sexual information or products online many of the women had viewed sexual content. This section explores the

subcategories that arose in the data in relation to the higher category responding to sexual content as outlined in table at the beginning of this section.

The scale of sexual content online has long been apparent to anyone with access to internet however viewing sexual content does not happen by accident as people would apocryphally believe. Although easy to find sexual content is also easy to avoid but the subcategory *curiosity* highlighted the fact many women chose to look at sexual content to see for themselves this aspect of the online world.

> 'I suppose I have looked at few other things just out of curiosity, really just out of interest'
>
> 'I suppose it's just being nosey really just seeing…a bit voyeuristic is that the right word,'
>
> Carole
>
> '.once I had a look thinking about, well, because all these things about, oh, there's porn on the internet, everyone's looking at porn on the internet, maybe I should have a look, but I found that either it was, sort of, what somebody might consider to be soft porn, I don't consider it to be soft porn, I considered that to be quite full on, so therefore I don't want to look at that.'
>
> Evelyn

Here it can be seen that curiosity does not necessarily make for an ongoing engagement with sexual content online. A number of the women like Evelyn spoke of having viewed sexual content with no intention to do so again subcategorised under *no longer viewing imagery.*

> 'Yes, I would say funnily enough, like prior to being pregnant and having Rachel as well, although I might have engaged with sort of online... watched some online porn and it would end up... I'd end up just watching straight stuff instead of gay stuff. Now I have absolutely zero interest in watching any at all.'
>
> Katie

Viewing pornography for some women was not at all acceptable with a number being included in the subcategories of n*o interest in viewing sexual/ hardcore content or never viewing imagery.*

> I'm not catholic but I was educated in a catholic school and I guess some of it must have leeched into me. So, I won't watch pornography because it's kind of demeaning. I'm absolutely ridiculous, I just burst out laughing, I can't take this seriously it's ridiculous you know, and I find pornography, I find page 3 deeply offensive and exploitative I have to say as well. Maybe that's my feminism coming

> out. So, I can't hand on heart say that I would watch willingly watch anything pornographic and sometimes like on television which is now seems to be pushing the boundaries more and more, I feel uncomfortable.'
>
> Monica

Here Monica not only states she has never viewed imagery but gives clear political and moral reasons for her decision. These reasons were echoed by other women in the subcategory *moral/ethical rejection of sexual content online.*

> '..when the stuff I used to watch online... yes it feels like in a previous life now, that was straight and I think it was because, yes I am trying to justify it and I am not I am trying to sort of explain it, yes because the girl on girl stuff almost seemed really fake and for a man's titillation do you know what I mean. So I kind of had no interest in watching that whereas the straight stuff at least there was real, something about it. Like I said, now I just have no interest in watching anything like, anything at all and I think it is because I have got my own. I don't know if I would feel differently if my child was a son, I just don't know but just the thought of that is someone's daughter on screen and then they are often young and I think when you are in your early twenties you don't think about those consequences. I just think, god those poor girls in twenty years' time when they are in their forties and they have got children of their own, that is still going to be available on the TV for someone to be bashing themselves off to and it is just awful, it just makes me feel sick. '
>
> Katie

In this quote, Katie highlights concern for the performers in online sexual content. Few of the women spoke of their concern for the performers of online sexual content more were concerned about the impact of viewing online content. These *beliefs about sexual content online – context* became an additional subcategory in this section.

> 'I thought, "It's actually about violence towards women and the images fucking up people's heads," which is PTSD when you have images in your head, it's another form of PTSD, porn, really, isn't it? The boys who have seen it can't get it out of their heads and neither can the girls, and the girls are therefore obliged by that pressure or that shock of seeing those images to perform.'
>
> Rhiannon

Not all the beliefs the women held about sexual content online were related to concerns about watching. A number of the women took a more pragmatic view of pornographic material. Some participants could see potential benefits in pornography particularly in relation to fulfilling fantasies they would not otherwise pursue.

'maybe cos it is different, maybe cos it is really, you like just something that I wouldn't do, so you've got that outlet, that, see I have used it and I've shared with my other half and I, but only rarely, really we've quite a traditional sort of sex life now. But when we looked at it, the last time, we sort of laughed a lot because it just seemed ludicrous.'

Selina

Yet many of the women struggled to see a place for online sexual content in their lives. A number of the women felt their career meant using this material was too much of a risk, fearing exposure to illegal content, or exposure of their use to their employers. Concerns of this nature formed the subcategory *professional reason not to view sexual content*.

'And I haven't used it (the internet) for sexual pleasure or anything because I'm so... It goes back to what I do. I'm very, very aware that I still have a role in education, and I do not want to have anything coming up on my computer which could be misconstrued, I don't want that happening at all. So I just don't use... I would never dream of using a computer for that. '

'I just would be so concerned that I would hit some wrong button or something, something er, and somebody somewhere would see it and know that I worked in education and everything would just crumble around, and I don't want that. Because I have known somebody who was sent to jail for having porn on his computer and he was... You'd think some people don't have any brain but.. I mean, it doesn't surprise me but..'

Margot

For other women sexual content did not speak to who they were as women and did not reflect their lives or emotional needs. The subcategories *sexual content not relatable* and *not emotionally engaging outlined this data.*

If I just wanted to say, look at, say, a man, then actually that's all gay sites, there actually doesn't seem to be anything for, like, just women that, you know, and I don't want to look at that either. So therefore, it was, you know, oh right, okay, oh well, I'm just going … so that was the end of that.

Evelyn

'Yes, again like, so like online sexual stuff tends to be just geared towards the straight men and so no (laughter) no basically. So, you would rather just not watch anything. So I tend to... and I am sort of like an emotional... so even when I was like growing up, I mean there is a book in there which I refer to all the time called the Lesbian Film Guide and it was basically any kind of reference to lesbians in a film from 1920s right up to, I don't know when I bought the book, which I think was about 1998, it was like fantastic. I made a point of trying to find those references, physically going and buying the videos and I don't mean for like explicit scenes.'

Katie

From these examples it can be seen that often women want a different offer to that which they find online. Though the majority of women struggled to relate to sexual content online a number of the women had no such concerns and used this relatively recent resource on a regular basis in their sexual lives as described in the following section.

6.4.3.5 *Direct sexual behaviour online*

Although many of the women interviewed showed reticence when it came to sexual content online a number actively engaged with this content on regular basis. The subcategories identified in the data for this section can found in the table at the beginning of this core category.

The women used the internet for a range of sexual purposes and largely this activity served as an adjunct to the rest of their sexual lives. The use of sexual imagery was also highly contingent on their relationships meeting needs when women were single, spent time away from their partner or where aspects of relationship was lacking. As might be expected the range of behaviours the women engaged were varied and included online telecommunications as well as using the internet. However, within the subcategory *using the internet for sexual purposes* the most common use of the internet for sexual purposes was the viewing of pornography.

> 'just porn, looking at porn. Love pornography!.../…its functional yeah and it can be fun, and it can actually turn you on, you've had few glasses of wine or something. let's watch something. You have giggles or it turns you on or you know? Yeah, it's great, it is just what it is there for it isn't it? its source of fun really and its cheap, a cheap orgasm or it can be part of it. And you know you can enjoy it with your partner or…'
>
> Selina

Selina's unapologetic appreciation of pornography was shared by a number of the other women interviewed. In the main the use of pornography was described as a functional response to situational sexual need in their lives and not something that was given much in the way of thought or preparation. Rather the women spoke of opportunistic online pornography use when they had the time or inclination.

> ‘I just, I’m quite, I do masturbate probably about two or three times a week, but if I do it, I’m quite quick, just get it over and done with. It’s more like a need thing, I just need that kind of relief, so the kind of stuff that I watch is probably, I go straight to like the sex, pure sex stuff… orgasm and then it’s over and done with. It takes probably about five, 10 minutes. So it’s not something that I go and think, “Oh tonight I’ll go in bed and I’ll watch a whole movie” it’s just not like that. It’s kind of like, wham, bam, thank you mam, kind of thing, just get it over with.’
>
> Joanne

> ‘So, I mean I’ve used it when I was in a relationship, in my last relationship, because I was in a relationship for nine years and then, subsequently, I’ve looked at it after on my own.’
>
> Linda

Engaging with pornography was not the only online sexual behaviour revealed by the women. One woman who did not use pornography used the internet for other purposes, sexting. The following comments outline how Louise had not previously classified sexting as sexual behaviour online.

> ‘No. I don’t use the internet for sexual purposes, but when I saw this Ewen, I would send photographs to him…/..
>
> ‘Right, okay. So, yes. I will hold my hand up. I’ll tell you what I’m really good at and he used to say to me I should write a book, I’m very good at sexting. …/.
>
> ‘I mean, some of the sex texts that I used to send him would, you know, literally blow his mind, and I’m not bragging…./.
>
> ‘I am though, because the amount I sent him is unreal and I actually wish I’d kept a copy, because he would be like, “Jesus Christ!” and, because of that, then he would maybe say, you know, “Send me a photograph,” and because I was really turned on by him../.
>
> ‘So no, I haven’t gone on to look at anything or research anything or anything like that, but the only thing I have done is I’ve sent him photographs.’
>
> Louise

It is apparent then from Louise’s discussion of her experiences that it is possible to be sexual online without considering or classifying it as such. This may be the case for other women conducting sexting conversations or sharing photographs. It could be argued in some sense the intimacy shared between Louise and her partner proved so disinhibiting that it erased the notion of data sharing in an online context. Simply put the sharing took over and the mechanisms for that communication were all but forgotten about.

Having established the nature of the women's sexual behaviour online it was important to develop the context of this sexual exploration. This process began with the subcategory *choice of sexual imagery*. Here Linda describes why she prefers sexual content that might be classified as amateur on mainstream pornography aggregation sites.

> 'I think it's because it seems more like real people and that's what it is, whereas I think, you know, a model figure type, you know you're not that, whereas somebody that might look like a next door neighbour, it is because you can relate more to it. So, I feel that's why I prefer that. That they're like normal people and that they may not be doing it for the money. Well, I don't know how it works but if they do get … I don't know '
>
> Linda

Whilst none of the other women shared Linda's preferences for realism many did agree with that much of pornography was not relatable as outlined in the previous section. Many of the women built on this theme by expressing concern about the narrow depiction of women in the media in general as well as in porn. Other women saw porn as more of a fantasy portrayal of sex an outlet to explore things they would not engage in themselves.

> 'Sometimes I like quite odd stuff I went through a phase with sort of I don't know why, and I don't know where it come from, it something that I need to probably, and it's gone, it's gone. I haven't fantasised about this but old men fucking young girls, not young, young nothing disgusting. but just this whole idea of, I don't know where that came from. That was a weird thing and that kinda turned me on. Sort of like, oh god. Sometimes out of curiosity looking at weird stuff like granny sites and things but it doesn't turn me on its like 'urrghh gawd …/..
>
> 'There's definitely a curiosity! (laughing)but on the whole I'd say it's just… yeah the thing that turns me on mostly is like strangely is like women with lots of different men…/..
>
> 'now that is weird because I don't get turned on in reality by that. You know what I mean?'
>
> Selina
>
> 'In myself, you know, it's just me. But em bizarrely I'm not interested in the guy in the porn film. I'd rather he weren't there. I'd rather see two girls with each other or a girl on her own. Or a girl having a toy used by a man. But I don't actually want to see more of the bit where you see his hand I suppose. erm I once saw and totally by accident, a film where two guys started kissing in the shower and I found that a real turn on. Which was quite strange. I was really surprised at myself.'
>
> Lynne

In this way Selina recognised the role of fantasy within her choices online and accepted this as part and parcel of her ongoing developing sexual identity. However, the others found they were surprised by the content they found most stimulating, particularly when the content ran counter to their sexual orientation. Here Lynne explores the fact the preferences she discovered online were not what she expected of herself.

> 'mm yeah not at all. mm not at all. I'm not gay but I prefer to see, if I'm going to look at a naked man or a naked woman, I'd prefer to look at a naked woman. Any day of the week.'
>
> Lynne

Many of the women echoed Lynne's experience and spoke of their interest in pornography or images that otherwise did not figure in their sense of sexual orientation and this was collated in the subcategory *viewing atypical to orientation*.

> So I'm a lesbian woman but I can find a scene on the television, heterosexual sex, if it's done in a sort of tasteful sexy way where intimacy is a big part of it, I can find that really sexy.
>
> Heather

> 'because the girl on girl stuff almost seemed really fake and for a man's titillation do you know what I mean. So I kind of had no interest in watching that whereas the straight stuff at least there was real, something about it.'
>
> Katie

> 'I probably just look at the thumbnails and think, that one will do. I do, I don't know if it's strange or not, but I do quite like gay porn like men, I don't know why, but I just quite like it.'
>
> Joanne

From the preceding subcategories, it can be seen that fantasy and exploring the 'other' were important elements of sexual behaviour online. Elements of this behaviour were also found in the data provided from women who did not view sexual content online but had a fantasy life nonetheless as seen in the subcategory *fantasy/fandom.*

'it was mainly just like, at the time I was (laughs) I was single for a while and there was this series with these two hunky actors in and sometimes we'd do like fan vids and things, you know we'd put like collages of images together, so I'd use a couple of them, you know, that they'd put together of these two hunky actors that I liked'

Carole

In this way it could be said that some of the women who did not access sexual content online in fact used content found online sexually. In addition to this many of the women spoke of finding a sexual outlet in books. It appeared that reading erotica was seen as preferable to pornography by many of the women, even those that did regularly use visual imagery.

'I do read some stories. I do read the occasional story, I tend to find that takes longer if I'm reading, it takes longer than just watching it. '

Joanne

The subcategory *the role of sexual behaviour online* was not uniformly about fantasy across the group, however. Some of the women used sexual content online for more specific purposes. Linda, who discussed her need to see realistic representations of sex, had used pornography in her relationship where she, by her own account, prioritised her partner's sexual needs over her own. In this way Linda found she had needs she fulfilled herself online. Similarly, Lynne spoke of a specific reason to use pornography.

'I have been online for sexual purposes, yes. I personally don't masturbate, I don't know why, never have. I don't know how (laughs) I actually have it on a mental to do list, because whenever I say this to my girlfriends or boyfriends, they're like 'Oh my god! You're joking. Oh, I get one off every night!' and all this shit and I'm like but you know I've got acrylic nails how does that work? But I'm told its fine. Oh, whatever, so I have it on a to do list. And I will start to enjoy my body one day whatever (laughs) But no eh internet-wise if I was to do that yes I would because I'm very stimulated by it, I do like watching a porn film.'

Lynne in this way described her use of online imagery in conjunction with her casual relationship as a means of foreplay leading to messaging her partner over for sex, or in preparation for sex once her partner had messaged her. In both these cases the women had developed strategies to supplement their real-world sexual lives using online resources.

6.4.3.6 *Assessing sexual identity and online life*

Finally, in this section the women answered the research question itself as to whether they saw a link between their sexual identity and online life. As with rest of the interviews the women were frank in their replies.

> 'No, not in any way whatsoever.'
>
> Deidre
>
> 'I think they're just two separate parts, my life. My sexuality and sexual side of me is totally with my husband.'
>
> Helen
>
> 'You're asking me, and my thought would be I don't see the correlation of the internet and my sexual identity at all. I don't see any connection with it.'
>
> Linda
>
> 'em, none, none really, no'
>
> Carole
>
> 'So, to go back to your question. I don't feel any less, well I haven't really thought about it I suppose, I don't feel my sexuality any more or less because of my Facebook life.
>
> 'So just two things that are happening that you don't see a connection?' researcher
>
> 'I don't see a connection with it. I don't…'
>
> Monica

As can be seen many of the women interviewed did not in any way feel that their sexual identity was in any way influenced by their online lives. Often the reason given relied on the fact they had been sexual people for so long before the internet entered their lives it (the internet) had to them had no substantial effect.

Some of the women were less definite in their responses feeling somewhat unsure what to make of the question.

‘I think the internet… I don’t know if it’s played a part. It’s played a part in perhaps helping me to… I don’t think it’s played any part in helping me to understand my sexual orientation or… I guess from what you’re saying about your sexual identity and how that is so much more than just what you find, what turns you on, et cetera, I’m trying to think how the internet has played a part in that, it’s really hard to answer. ‘

Heather

‘For me I don't think there's a connection, I don't feel there is. There might be one subconsciously but I don't feel there is. But I do feel that for others there may be, yeah. ‘

Lesley

‘Previous years I’d say there was quite merged, because I used to meet people online and so that’s where my sexual being came from because that’s where I met people. Now, as I’m older online stuff just tends to be porn and that’s it. So, my sexual identity comes from meeting people, rather than online now. ‘

Joanne

‘I always think there is a little bit of a connection, because obviously I’ve done things that actually I wouldn’t have done without the internet, but I don’t think it’s particularly changed me per se as a person. I don’t think it’s had a massive influence on me. You know, if it hadn’t been there, I don’t think I’m particularly changed by it.

‘Right, so it’s offered you a small degree of freedom and choice, but it’s not overly changed you.’ researcher

‘No, I don’t think it has. But not in my perception, you know, maybe sub consciously it has, and you know, but..‘

Evelyn

Here Evelyn articulates the point on which the validity of the grounded theory could rest. Processes happening between sexual identity and online life are not necessarily apparent to the women, but this does not mean they are not happening. Social processes are not easy to track and are often experienced yet never defined or considered by individuals as has been argued on this thesis for sexual identity as a whole.

However, a number of the women could see a clear link between their sexual identity and their online lives.

‘‘You know if I had may be just been able to get that little bit of support and or even if I had Googled something and read anecdotes and stories and thought okay there is hope out there you know, not every lesbian looks really butch because I just didn’t think that wasn’t me you know. There are women like me, they exist because I didn’t even know there were women like me that really existed that were like on the feminine side. I wouldn’t have been so frightened. Yes I think it has shaped... it has shaped my identity and I think it is a positive thing’

Katie

‘I would say it’s a correlation because em like I say I’ve told you about myself and I am what I kind of am now. I would say what I put online, you know like, is the same as what it is in real life. But I’m very aware that there’s scope for that to be different. So if I wanted to I could join an online sex group take a load of pictures of myself, bung it all online and then be you know living a double life. Completely living a double life, you know and having a respectable job. and stuff like that but I’m not, but I could be because it gives that scope for kind of, it gives that completely you know for having that completely other persona that could develop if you chose to do so.'

Chris

‘Yeah, they definitely interact, I suppose I feel very aware that the interactions need to be choiceful and need to be carefully considered at times because it's very easy to kind of get swept along with something, like the drama of something or with the interest and, you know, excitement of something. It can be overwhelming at times, the opportunities and the amount of stuff out there so it's very ... for me it's very careful kind of considered interaction, I’m not saying at times I don't get swept away with it and overwhelmed with it but I’d like to think that most of the time it's very choiceful.’

Tara

To see these descriptions was heartening even though they were in the minority of the women interviewed.

6.5 Conclusions

In this chapter the three core categories and the relationship between them have been delineated and developed. All the women had interacted online the but the depth to which sexual identity informed their interaction with the online world differed greatly, though all could be said to have gone through the process of testing who they were online sexually to a greater or lesser degree. The Grounded Theory recognised that the mediation of sexual identity online was happening but was contingent on a number of factors based on individual life experience and level of perceived need.

Key to this process of using the online world to perform, challenge and explore sexual identity was the fact sexual identity could be shown to be subject to change. The emergence of themes which built on the notion of continuing constructions of sexual identity responsive circumstance over time allowed for the question to be raised as to whether the internet could become part of this ongoing process.

The women showed that clearly the online environment could in fact have a bearing on the construction of sexual identity. The first steps to understanding this process was the recognition of the women of the performative aspects of their online lives. Whilst some relayed an expected 'best foot forward' approach to life online curating data available about themselves in much the same way they would in real life, others went further and explained dedicating time to pursuing a very specific sense of self online. Aspects of privacy were clearly understood and learning online could be shown. In this way the women could be seen to manipulate their online worlds to some extent to suit their needs which lead to how their sexual identities might best be contemplated.

A malleability of the self online and sexual identity capable of change were brought together online. The women explored, modified or expressed the sexual identities online in a variety of ways. Curating their selves online usually through social media profiles was the simplest means by which the women engaged in constructing sexual identity online. The act of defining relationship status or orientation could be seen to contribute to this process. However, access to services, information and imagery were also widely used. A notable aspect of the expression of sexual identity online was the use of online dating which unlike other aspects like the viewing of imagery was widely accepted as a pragmatic response to meeting needs over time.

In terms of relationship and sexual identity the women strongly considered their relationship status as key to their sense of sexual identity which led to many of the women struggling to view themselves as independent sexual beings some going so far as saying they only felt sexual

in relationships. Other women used the internet to enhance their relationships using sexual imagery to fulfil needs lacking in their sexual lives. This choice though technically always available to women should in effect be seen as novel as previous generations did not have access to the sheer volume and specificity of material online.

From the perspective of the LGBT women interviewed the sense of finding belonging online was notably valuable. In a heteronormative society the internet offered the women far more opportunity to relate other LGBT in a safe environment. Additionally, the LGBT women tended to show far more positive experiences of dating online than their heterosexual counterparts.

The women shared potentially sensitive information and in doing so gave a sense of more conscious approach that could be explored in relation to sexual identity by women online. By engaging with the process of the study the women provided a dataset which as a whole serves to show an ongoing cycle of need, knowledge, experience and action in relation to sexual identity in the online world. Both directly and indirectly the women illustrated how sexual identity was both supported and challenged by a life online, a process which will continue in their lives. In the following chapter the findings will be discussed and framed in relation to social theory.

7 Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter will explicate and reveal the study's unique contribution, the concept of reflexive sexual habitus. The chapter will first explore how the study has addressed the research question filling gaps in the literature in relation to the distinction of sexual terminology and the benefit to women of uncovering a more exact frame for sexuality and sexual identity. It will go on to reveal the reflexive capacities which have been opened up to women through their online lives and what this has meant for their conceptualisation and experience of sexual identity.

The chapter will then develop the grounded theory established from the findings using a Bourdieuian frame in conjunction with Decoteau's (2016) reflexive model of habitus, and a feminist critique of heteronormativity, to illustrate the evolving nature of sexual identity, and the potential for sexual agency afforded by the digital turn.

7.2 Answering the research question

After reviewing the literature, a number of questions relating to women's sexual lives foreshadowed the enquiry of the study (section 3.5) most notably with regard to definitions of sexual identity, understanding agency and acquisition of agency in relation to sex. Further questions arose from the digital perspective regarding the development of the women's lives online particularly in terms of managing the oppositional constraints and freedoms offered by the internet. These considerations coalesced into the following research question

> What role does the online world play in the way adult women construct their sexual identities?

The study found for the women interviewed that sexual identity was subject to ongoing development through the life course, that once introduced to the digital fields of their choice, refined nuanced digital lives were created informed by both online and offline experience. Within these digital lives it was possible to engage in a range of behaviours supportive of sexual identity directly through digitally mediated sexual behaviours or by consolidating or developing depositions which could support later sexual decision making. In short then the digital turn had provided women additional affordances in the development of their sexual identities, should they choose to use them. In addition, a strong argument can be made that presenting an outward persona online in any form contributes to the process of sexual identity construction by virtue of internal and external deliberation, feedback, trial, error and adaptation to the digital, by establishing mechanisms for practicing reflexivity in its broadest sense.

Therefore, the question was answered by revealing the ways the women use the internet both directly, through sexual means and indirectly, by developing reflexivity, to shape the view and course of their sexual identities. Many examples of behaviours supporting sexual identity were illustrated as well supporting curation processes which underpin self-presentation online. The following sections will explore in more detail ways in which the question was answered and the gaps the study addressed in the literature.

7.2.1 Reinforcing the nature, complexity and importance of sexual identity

The study question used the term sexual identity as the means to establish a marker for how women view themselves as sexual beings. In the literature review sexual identity was often analogous to sexual orientation (Albright, 2008; Farr, 2011; Coon Sells, 2013; Daneback et al. 2013, DeHaan et al., 2013; Dir et el., 2013; Rubin & McLelland, 2015; Walker, 2014), particularly LGBTQ orientation, but this interpretation was not used in the study. Rather for the purposes of this study sexual identity was taken be a wider concept similar in nature to

Epstein's (1991) suggested model, with the sexual-self incorporating notions of orientation, preference, confidence, communication and as a culmination of these factors, degrees of agency.

Orientation, although a key element in the understanding of sexual identity, is often used as the only signifier of sexuality, which does not offer a wide enough appreciation of the complexities of a woman's sexual life. These narrow ciphers of women's sexual experience serve to maintain heteronormative binary cultures and restrict the parameters through which women may define themselves sexually and will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter (7.5.2). In a culture such as this, it would be expected that women would be far less likely to question their sexual lives. Navigation of orientation in heteronormative cultures however is very important to the way in which the construction of sexual identity might be explored, and this was demonstrated in the study (Section 6.4.1.2).

The lack of questioning of the sexual self was evident within the data when women, particularly heterosexual women struggled to make sense of the term sexual identity. The conflation of sexual identity with orientation was widely reflected in answers which given the literature review, was to be expected. Within sexual studies the concept of sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 1986) suggest that women learn sexual scripts on three levels and that from structural perspective heterosexual monogamous relationships are the standard by which society expects women to live. The study found that married older heterosexual women whose lives most closely mirrored these traditional sexual scripts (section 6.4.1.1) appeared to struggle most to define sexual identity. Within the frame offered in section 7.5 it could be argued these women lack reflexivity as they have conformed to these scripts as result of their heteronormative doxa; the unspoken and unquestioning sense of their sexuality.

As described in section 6.4.1 a broader concept of sexual identity was arrived at within the data which encompassed communicating sexual experience, orientation, the changing role of sex through the life course and a qualitative sense of what the women wanted from their sexual experiences. This framing of sexual identity illustrates more accurately the complexity of women's sexual experiences and demonstrates both the ability to question sexual norms in order to both provoke and reflect a sense of who women are sexually beyond passive sexual scripts. In other words, their reflexive capacity. This definition of sexual identity constructs a model of sexual experience which allows for quality rather than conformity which centres agency within it, with which women may continue to reflexively construct sexual lives more fitting to their needs.

This establishment of sexual identity having many elements but also being temporally subject to change enabled the research question to continue to be explored, in that, if sexual identity had been seen by the women as fixed and immutable the digital turn would have been of no relevance and the research question rendered moot.

7.2.2 Considering a digital life.

The women's description of their online lives illustrated the tension between their need to connect but to do safely by maintaining their privacy. The interplay between curating an online life and preserving themselves was managed by social processes or strategies as reviewed in section 6.3. In essence this interplay illustrates a wider phenomenon applicable to both social and sexual life namely how does one negotiate the freedoms and restrictions brought to bear living in our society. From a feminist perspective, women are subject to additional confounding patriarchal expectations which restrict this navigation with LGBT women facing further constraints. This layering of complexity and restraint is also conditional on class, disability, race and religion and other social determinants to bring identities into an intersectional focus whereby addition of oppressions further truncate or marginalise actions in the wider social world (Crenshaw, 1989). In other words, whilst these structural factors do not preclude reflexivity, they may restrict choices to enact changes identified as necessary.

Whilst the women modified their presences over time in relation to individual circumstances only a small number of the women experienced any real consistent difficulty with their lives online. The main critical issue online was the stress experienced by some women brought on by the perception of risk; the woman scared of relationships with men after viewing extreme pornography on a young man's phone in a teaching setting, the older woman limiting her online life for fear of security concerns, and the woman fearful to be identified after being assaulted by another woman. More commonly the women had intermittent issues with their online lives contingent on circumstance and affect, in other words when they were vulnerable the vicissitudes of online life were harder to bear.

In the main online lives continued because the women got something from them, be that connection, reflection or information. The LGBT women interviewed highlighted that far from reproducing society's homophobia online the internet provided welcome belonging and safety echoing findings in the literature review (Farr, 2011; Coon Sells, 2013; Dehaan et. Al, 2013;). Meeting other women online had been a welcome and successful endeavour for the many of the LGBT women, and indeed one woman had recently explored relationships with women for the first time and described herself as transformed by the experience. This capability to

transform the sexual was the basis for the final category of the grounded theory (section 6.1) and explored in the next section.

7.2.3 The sexual-self online - constructing sexual identity in the digital world.

The study found multiple ways in which the women supported their sexual lives online and in so doing played active roles in constructing their sexual identities. In the specific actions collated the women found support for their concerns, their own and partners, further developed a sense of who they were as sexual beings, exercised control over their profiles for both social and sexual means and sought pleasure to meet their own specific needs.

A subset of the women turned to the internet because of deficits within their existing relationships due to specific sexual dysfunction in their partner or from a lack of satisfaction in their partners sexual performance. This use of the internet could be interpreted from a number of perspectives. It could be said the internet is providing a novel proactive resource to find answers to problems in relationships or this action could be seen as discouraging women from seeking redress within their relationships. There is in fact no one correct interpretation but within the study a lack of specific communication between partners was spoken of on a number of occasions. The failure of adults to communicate clearly their needs or more aptly their problems within their sexual lives is particularly worthy of further research.

The main uses of the internet to support sexual identity were positive however and indicated both a pragmatism and curiosity about sexual life. The use of pornography amply illustrated these two facets in approach with women either taking a functional and often opportunistic approach to sexual content while others experimented and sought out content specific to aspects of sex, they would not ordinarily indulge in. Using pornography therefore offered a range of outcomes from pleasure, to insight into the diversity of sexual behaviour and sometimes for purely humorous entertainment value.

7.2.4 Reflection on the question

Although Orton-Johnson and Prior (2013), and Herzig (2016) rightly point out, the time of shock of the new has come and gone for internet research, there is a significant transition to be reckoned with for the generation of women who lived without online connection for a significant part of their sexual lives. Crossley (2005; 72-4) in relating Bachelard's (1970, in Crossley, 2005) notion of the epistemological break, notes that the advancement of science is often contingent on upending received 'common sense' and furthermore that science must break with its own theoretical histories over time for 'new forms of scientific reasoning to emerge'. This concept then of epistemological break echoes Thomas Kuhn's (1970, in Crossley 2005) 'paradigm shifts' in recognising that in epistemological terms moments do emerge in

time which can fundamentally alter the way things are seen (Crossley, 2005; 74). The arrival of internet must be considered as one of these moments of fundamental shift. The study has identified three interlinking categories in a grounded theory which contends that women experienced what amounts to an epistemological break in their sexual lives facilitated by their introduction to the online world which in turn contributed new elements to the ongoing constructions of their sexual identities, their reflexive sexual habitus. The social theory underpinning this conclusion is fully explicated in section 7.5. In this way the research question 'What role does the online world play in the way adult women construct their sexual identities?' can be answered as follows.

The online world can be considered a digital field, or collections of digital fields and as such has afforded women considerable resources and environments with which to frame and reframe their sexual identities through connection, reflection, feedback and action, in other words to employ reflexivity in the consideration of their sexual identities. In effect for many women the internet has given them a first conscious interpretation of their sexual identity and means with which to continue to engage this aspect of their lives, a process of reflexive sexual habitus. In this way the internet could be said to have been the mechanism for many women to discover their sexual identity, or least begin to engage with it in a conscious manner. Not all women have felt such transformative effects however and it is correct to say there exists real potential for harm online for women but from the testimony of the women interviewed most women do have the skills to navigate this risk. There is a considerable argument that by examining or questioning their experiences through the framing of sexual identity online or off women will be agentic rather than doxic in their sexual lives.

Knowing the research question has been answered is the first step to contribute to the body of knowledge relating to women's sexual lives but it is important to develop a sense of where this answer fits within the literature. The following sections explicate the ways in which this study supports the existing literature and will move on to demonstrate the ways it has served to fill gaps identified in the review process.

7.3 Findings in Relation to the Literature

In this section the four themes from the literature review and gaps in the literature identified by the review will be revisited. This section will illustrate the strength of the findings in developing specificity around terminology and the value in contributing this to field of sexuality study.

7.3.1 Developing a broader concept of sexual identity

Sexual identity was widely assumed in the literature as a catch all term for sexual orientation in exploring LGBT experience (Albright, 2008; Farr, 2011; Coon Sells, 2013; Daneback et al. 2013, DeHaan et al., 2013; Dir et al., 2013; Walker, 2014; Rubin & McLelland, 2015). Echoing the literature within the study the notion of orientation as identity figured strongly, indeed it became a significant sub-category within the analysis and featured within the overall higher category of orientating sexual identity. Whilst the study took a different definition of sexual identity to that which was used commonly in the literature the women had a clear sense that orientation was a major component of sexual lives as one would expect (6.4.1.2). However, the study gave a broader view of the concept by recognising the temporal quality of sexual identity, illustrated in way the women the discussed the changing role of sex throughout their life course (6.4.1.3).

This temporal nature that was empirically described also gave credence to sexual identity being contingent on other factors including external societal pressure (see section 6.4.1.3.) and as such contributed to the strengthening of the overall core category of the ongoing development of sexual identity (6.4.1). This concept was crucially important to the grounded theory developed as in order for the online world to have had any significant role in sexual identity it was important to demonstrate that sexual identity was subject to change, not established early in life and fixed. This was not well reflected in the literature and was a factor in decision to explore sexual identity as a concept. In this way then the study extends the view of sexual identity found in the literature beyond being indicative of sexual orientation. The temporal nature describes capacity for change within sexual identity which underpins the concepts of reflexive habitus. The literature in this way offered a far narrower view of sexual identity and the study has developed this considerably.

Within the literature LGBT women's experience was an exemplar (Coon Sells, 2013) to open up the possibility that the internet could offer the means to support, facilitate or indeed create sexual identity. Sexual orientation within the study provided further insight into how sexual identity is constructed outside of and in relation to heteronormative scripts. Notions of othering, confusion, yearning, searching and eventual belonging were significant milestones in

the construction of sexual identities of the LGBT women interviewed. The intersection of these processes with the internet as described by the women in terms of successful online dating and a sense of community online serves to illustrate the importance of the digital world in affording a 'view' of oneself in relation to others socially and sexually online (6.4.1.2). In so doing it also demonstrated the constructive elements of sexual identity online - identifying with others, forming relationships and indeed finding sexual materials online, both tangible and visual. Tracking these constructive elements allowed for the analysis to consider the ways in which the rest of the women interviewed may have experienced similar processes. In this way the literature was extended by applying the principles of reflexive action online within both and LGBT and heterosexual context. Recognition of these elements then allowed for the data from the other women to be assessed according to this frame and reinforced the notion that online life did indeed support sexual identity through a range of elements that appeared in the coding.

Notions of performance of sexual identity online (Bosch, 2011; Hall et al., 2012; Chan, 2013) and the subversion of sexual identity (Chan, 2013; Walker, 2014) figured within the literature. In projecting the self (section 6.4.3.1) many of the women delineated the processes of curation that underpinned their online identities. Whilst not always consciously sexual in nature these activities enabled a similar safety to that afforded the LGBT women to explore who they were in relatively benign context. That is to say the women could, should they choose, to not just put their best foot forward online, but to ensure that foot was metaphorically clad in the most flattering shoe of their choosing. This illustrated well developed digital competence in that the women were reflexively finding strategies to better position themselves within their chosen digital fields. This framing of their self offered a level of control that could potentially mask what they found problematic in the real world or just enhance a sense of self, self-confidence and agency which all contribute to underpin elements of identity such as sexual identity. In this way the work of Coon Sells (2013) was replicated across the group of women interviewed and thus extended the context of that particular study.

Furthermore, the women could facilitate relationships (section 6.4.3.2) and use the internet directly for sexual purposes (section 6.4.3.6). Along with seeking knowledge and responding to content online (sections 6.4.3.3, 6.4.3.4) a comprehensive view of the elements relating to the construction of sexual identity was illustrated by the study. In doing so the role of larger platforms such as Facebook in maintaining social norms were outlined in detail in curating life online (section 6.4.2.1) and preserving privacy (section 6.4.2.2). In this way the study recognised the significant central role of sexual orientation has within the concept but clarified its definition by clearly illustrating the other key elements inherent to build a stronger

conceptual understanding of sexual identity as it was examined by the research question. The study also highlighted the processes of performance and positioning online, as well the strategies which lay behind these processes, clearly demonstrating the reflexive practices necessary for maintaining sexual identity.

7.3.2 Relating in the digital age

Within the literature a clear case was made for women online means to be both seek (Lever et al., 2008; Toma et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2010; Farr, 2011; Robnett and Feliciano, 2011; Wysocki and Childers, 2011; Lange et al., 2014; Walker, 2014) but also to maintain their relationships (Delevi and Weisskirch, 2013; Shaughnessy and Byers, 2013). The research supported the position that women use the internet to seek relationships with a significant number of the women having used online dating services or who mediated their relationships through social media. Even those women who had not used or currently have no need of online dating services approved of their use in a practical sense. The study therefore deepened the understanding of this generation's beliefs about this aspect of online life and illustrated the women's pragmatic approach to their sexual lives, given the online resources to do so. In this way notions of naïve digital immigrant are refuted strongly, and a sense of their digital agency becomes apparent. Indeed, where online means of finding relationships were explored the women had shown nuanced approaches to their dating lives. Chris used her experiences of online dating to develop her sense of what she wanted from a partner and found she was not in any way willing to compromise the life that she had to make way for a sub-par relationship. This demonstrated the complex relationships that exist between the digital fields encountered by the women, their reflexivity and their agency to react to these dynamics. In this way the study challenged the more stereotypical views seen in some of the literature (Lever et. al, 2008)

In addition, the study highlighted differences amongst the women using dating platforms which divided the group along orientational lines. In general, the LGBT women had had far more successful and fulfilling experiences of online dating whereas the heterosexual women interviewed had remained largely underwhelmed by theirs. The LGBT women could be said to be predisposed to reflexively use online means to meet partners given the constructions of their sexual identities had already required them to challenge the structural heteronormativity they had encountered. Accessing their agentic potential then was logical first step online and knowing what they wanted meant greater likelihood of success perhaps. This disparity of experience was explored in detail in section 6.4.3.2. The LGBT women's positive response to online dating reflected their experiences of effectively maximising opportunities to meet women particularly where their dating pools were small in their local communities. Online

dating for the LGBT women offered a safe means of introduction. Offline although LGBT acceptance has grown steadily in the UK, meeting partners does engender some degree of difficulty and can indeed be fraught with risk in some communities. Therefore, the distance afforded by online dating was valued more by these women.

The heterosexual women by contrast found the dates they did eventually meet either did not match up to their appeal 'on paper' or lacked a 'spark' in terms of connection. As the heterosexual women dating lacked the degree of risk the LGBT women encountered, it could be that these women missed the luxury of frisson that is more rarely afforded LGBT women meeting new partners in offline contexts. Concerns were also raised about men's changing use of dating sites to look specifically for sex rather than relationships. Where once connections could be made some women reported a race to progress the discussion to sexual matters on dating platforms. The use of dating platforms did allow the women pause for reflection however and a number felt their experiences and subsequent withdrawal from these platforms was a positive step for their sense of self, like Chris, illustrating they were not prepared to give up their autonomy for a relationship for the sake of it. In this way the single heterosexual women of the group were using their experiences of an online life to push back against heteronormative scripts. By reflexively engaging online they had begun to demonstrate greater agency within their relationships. This is a much stronger engagement with the process of online dating than much of literature which focused on performance within dating profiles (Toma et al., 2008; Lever et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2010; Farr, 2011; Robnett and Feliciano, 2011; Lange et al., 2014; Walker, 2014).

The study did not find much evidence to support the notion of maintaining relationships online like those explored by Shaughnessy and Byers (2013) or Delevi and Weisskirch (2013) other than using social media to organise aspects of their social lives. However, one woman did illustrate the possibilities of purely online relationships. In this way the study suggests the women tend to use the online space to work things out for themselves or even to provide space away from their relationships.

In addition, the issue of jealousy within the study did not conform well to the literature, either. Most of the women had little concern for their partners behaviour online although a small number of the women reported men in relationships making inappropriate advances towards them on both personal and professional networking sites. The two of the women who did detail infidelity (one online, one off) both continued to use online methods for meeting partners although with adaptations to their approaches. The data around comparing oneself to others (6.4.2.1) did explore the ways in which the women felt a sense of envy towards others

who projected perfect lives including their relationships. This element was found to be particularly difficult where the women were single, or when they felt vulnerable for other reasons. In this way the study found little evidence that the women had used the internet to seek approval for their relationship (Fox and Warber, 2013) but rather had found other women's attempts to do so alienating or irritating. The act of being Facebook official was of little consequence to the women interviewed.

The study found that relating via digital methods was widely adopted and approved of across the age range of the women interviewed. This degree of acceptance not only provides an insight into the embedded nature of the digital fields in the women's lives but also their clear abilities to engage with them effectively. The notion of success within digital relating can perhaps be questioned from the data as where clearly the LGBT women had far better relationship outcomes from dating online than the heterosexual women. However even poor experiences of this means to meet partners provided the means to reflexively re-calibrate what the women wanted from their relationships in a wider sense. Similarly, problem areas outlined in the literature, in relation to jealousy and infidelity, proved to be far less substantial to women interviewed than suggested. The findings from the study would propose a change in emphasis is required in relation to broader categories of jealousy or envy in digital fields, not specific to infidelity but to broader issues of social capital and status.

7.3.3 Supporting sexual identity online

The literature outlined the diversity of sexual behaviours that women take part in online and that attitudes were evolving in relation to this behaviour (Grov, et al., 2011; Daneback et al. 2011, 2012, 2013; Shaughnessy & Byers, 2013, 2014; Byers & Shaughnessy, 2014; Lupton, 2014; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). The study definitely supported this in that the women identified diverse range of sexual behaviour they engaged in online. Within the sexual behaviour online literature there was a focus on sexting as a distinct activity in a number of the papers (Wysocki and Childers, 2011; Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Dir et al., 2013; Strassberg et al., 2013, 2014;). However, there was little to support for sexting being an issue for specific attention in this age group, although two people did make reference to participating in such behaviour. This did however reflect the research found in the review which stated sexting behaviours whilst widely distributed amongst populations only took place on relatively rare occasions and within very specific boundaried relationships, which was referenced in the experiences of the two women who spoke of this activity. The data did support however the widespread adoption and approval of online dating as outlined in the previous section.

The use of pornography was established in the literature as the most common sexual behaviour online (Albright, 2008; Paul & Shim, 2008; Paul, 2009; Wright 2013). This was reflected in the study as many of the women also recounted their use of pornography in responding to sexual content online (section 6.4.3.4). The use of pornography was in the main an individual behaviour for the women although Selina spoke of watching pornography with her partner and Lynne recounted watching sexual content online before meeting with a specific partner she only contacted online. The women who used pornography then did so alongside their existing sexual lives.

The literature had highlighted sexual behaviour online could become problematic (Whitty and Quigley, 2008; Ross et al., 2011; Corley and Hook, 2012; Green et al., 2012; Wetterneck et al., 2012; Dijkstra et al., 2013; O'Sullivan & Ronis, 2013; Laier et al., 2014). In the study none of the women demonstrated that pornography distracted from their relationships, rather in a small number of cases it fulfilled a role a partner did not or more likely was use when a woman was single. In this way nothing problematic or intrusive to relationships was reported and therefore the emphasis on problematic use within the literature can be countered. The women's explanations of their use of pornography were in the main indicative of a reflexive response to sexual need in other words purposeful sexual decision-making demonstrating agency. In this manner it positions these women as active sexual beings not mere passive damsels in distress waiting to be afforded sexual pleasure through a relationship. This study offers an important counterpoint to the preponderance of research offering a problematising perspective on what can be seen to be a straightforward aspect of modern sexuality.

In this way it was also found that women had few if any issues with the use of the internet for sexual purposes. That said many of the women did not engage with sexual content for moral ethical or personal reasons (section 6.4.3.5). The women's discussion of sexual behaviour online was that of unproblematic pragmatic engagement with sexual content. The women who used pornography for example described no ill effects of their engagement with sexual content but rather presented their experiences as opportunistic and prosaic or driven by curiosity (section 6.4.3.4). Therefore, the diversity of sexual behaviours online demonstrated in section 6.4.3. illustrated a high degree of specificity in this behaviour in the women interviewed. This in turn lends weight to position that the internet affords access to materials that women can employ in the construction of complex individual sexual identities.

The study found also no evidence of women using pornography for anything other than the sexual purposes as noted previously and therefore claims in the literature around anti-social behaviour and interest extreme pornographic content were not supported here.

The development of the core category online behaviours supporting sexual identity supports the points made above, in that a wide variety of behaviours were described by women interviewed (see 6.4.3) supporting the findings of the literature review. The study therefore confirms and illustrates that women are sexual online and but qualifies this further by offering a less problematised view of this behaviour in the context of everyday sexual life. In this way the study demonstrates agentic sexual behaviour online and the means then to improve dispositional elements which could contribute the defining of sexual identity and an ongoing construction through reflexive sexual habitus.

7.3.4 Tearing up sexual scripts

In the literature review one paper suggested that the initial optimism engendered by the free spirit of the early internet was being eroded as cultural and sexual scripts were beginning to exert an influence online particularly in large scale social media sites such as Facebook (Bosch, 2011). Some evidence supported the reviews findings of the imposition of sexual scripts online with Katie's experience of Mumsnet the best example of this. Sexual scripts were discussed more in relation to the women's views of sexual identity. Some of the women, like Carole, spoke of their feelings of pressure in relation to expectation about sex, feeling out of step with the rest of society even ignorant of sexual matters. Carole and Lesley were somewhat intimated by the sexual mores of the modern day found online and professed themselves to be lacking sexual identity (6.4.1.1). In this way the notion of an exploratory internet with digital fields supportive of sexual identity has a flip side where women can feel bombarded by ways to be sexual in an overwhelming fashion which could have negative consequences for sexual identity construction. This experience was countered however by those women that had reflexively used the internet to fill gaps in this knowledge and thus had found a level of confidence or acceptance of who they were a sexual being, their sexual identity, as result of being online (6.4.3.1).

However, performativity in digital fields did weigh more heavily on some of the women as a number felt a degree of pressure to keep up socially with other women online in social media contexts. Digital fields then for them exerted less pressure sexually in the main but did invoke women to feel pressured in terms of social and cultural capital. From a more visual perspective selfie culture, the taking of numerous pictures of oneself usually on a smartphone, was not commented on widely by the women of the study though there was a pervasive sense from the data that photographs online had to be carefully curated for clear reasons of social standing (see 6.4.2.1).

Rejecting sexual scripts was a strong theme in the data as the LGBT women revealed their means of navigating their sexual identities away from scripts that did not fit their lives and demonstrated well the assertion of their agency online (6.4.1.2). In the main the LGBT women had found solace online rather than finding heteronormative scripts being reinforced. This supported literature on elements of transgression and subversion of sexual scripts (Chan, 2012; Walker, 2014) found in the literature review. The LGBT women interviewed had the wherewithal, the agency, to subvert scripts and find belonging, exploration and connection in the online world, through reflexive practice in the digital fields they occupied.

It would appear from this study then the women interviewed used the online world, in its various digital fields, to write their own scripts and forgo those offered up to them in the past, challenging heterodoxy where it arose to re-establish themselves back to doxic homology more suited to their true sexual identities. This process is described in detail in section 7.5.4.

7.4 Addressing the gaps in the literature

The following section outlines the additions the study makes to knowledge in this field by addressing the study findings in relation to the gaps found in the literature review process.

7.4.1 Filling the qualitative gaps in the literature

Investigations specific to adult women's online sexual lives were lacking in the literature most particularly in the qualitative sense. Within the literature itself Wright (2014) recognised the surfeit of evidence based on college age women's experience in this way adult women's experiences were not adequately accounted for. This lack of qualitative understanding became a central driver for the sampling design of the study and underpinned the need for a qualitative methodology to begin to address these deficits in the literature. The study therefore contributes both additional depth of knowledge in the subject matter and extends the diversity of women studied in relation to digital life and sexual identity providing evidence of behaviours and context.

However more importantly the research addressed a lack of specificity in the way that sexual terminology was used to describe the sexual experiences of women. In developing a distinction between sexuality and sexual identity a more coherent vocabulary has been produced in this study which better represents women experience and fills a gap in understanding which was all too visible in the literature. By recognising not just the components contributing to sexual identity but placing them within a clear framework of the process of a reflexive sexual habitus the research has attempted to move the study of sexuality forward by offering a novel approach to the problem structure versus agency in sexual behaviour. This theoretical position is outlined in full in section 7.5

7.4.2 Extending the range of voices heard in sexuality research

As well as the methodological gaps in the literature issues related to privacy, presentation and performance, key areas of social media experience, were mostly focussed on young women's experiences at the expense of understanding older women's lives. The study did much to extend this knowledge by addressing them in relation to older adult women with key areas of the impact of social media being explored in the findings (sections 6.4.2.1, 6.4.2.2). The study delineated ways in which privacy were enacted online and how this was addressed over time. Furthermore, the data gathered Illustrated the pressures inherent in managing social media for older women and the attendant emotional labours of living a life online. Whilst the women did feel some pressures online these were generally managed effectively as their online lives evolved. In summary the data found that illustrated the complexity of women's engagement with digital fields as both a site of practice and means to effect dispositional change are an

addition to the literature on both sexuality and digital research and explicated within section7.5.

7.4.3 Resisting the problematising of sexual behaviour online

It was seen to be the case that the literature was lacking when it came to evaluating women's meaning making and subjective experiences of pornography. As well as this gap the potential for problems in the use of internet for sexual purposes appeared to be over emphasised.

The design of the study addressed the gap in lived experience data and also serve to de-escalate concern regarding risk and sexual behaviour online. The women's experiences of sexual behaviour online were found mainly benefit their lives and were a significant element within formation of the understanding of reflexive sexual habitus which is outlined in the following section 7.5.

Although a small number of the women, as previously mentioned, expressed some regret regarding their somewhat disappointing experiences of online dating (section 6.4.3.2) most had not experienced much in the way of difficulty with regard to sexual aspects of their online lives. In terms of active sexual engagement online by sharing images or sexual messaging, this behaviour was minimal within the group as only 2 women, Lynne and Louise, spoke of this within trusted relationships (section 6.4.3.5). The focus on sexting behaviour in research may be somewhat alarmist as the study found similarly to Delevi (2013) that this behaviour was well controlled, not entered into regularly, and was used to maintain rather than establish relationships.

The study evinced the ways in which women use the internet for both immediate sexual purposes and for information to improve their sexual lives. Evaluating the role of this behaviour for the women involved allowed the women to show that the place of sexual content online was controlled by them for their own needs in a proactive and deliberative sense. This behaviour can be seen to be part of wider reflexive practices which inform the notion of a reflexive sexual habitus a concept which will be explored in the following section 7.5. The use of online material also fills the theoretical gap said to exist in terms of the social learning of the sexual within sexual scripting frameworks (Gagnon and Simon, 1986) which has been a criticism of sexual scripting theory by some in the field (Epstein, 1991).

7.5 Theoretically positioning the study

In this section the grounded theory from the study will be framed in relation to contemporary social theory. In doing so the core categories will be reviewed and reconfigured within existing theoretical constructs to redefine the nature of study's findings more clearly. The reason for placing this work in wider theoretical context is to address the following extract.

> Must Grounded theory aim for the general level abstracted from empirical realities? No. Situating grounded theories in their social, historical, local and interactional contexts strengthens them and supports making nuanced comparisons between data and among studies. Subsequently these comparisons can result in more abstract – and, paradoxically, general – theories. The generality arises here from scrutinising numerous particulars and after developing a substantive theory, may include analysing and conceptualising the results of multiple studies to construct a formal theory.'
>
> Charmaz (2014; 332)

In this way by contextualising the grounded theory produced a researcher both acknowledges the reflexivity inherent in this kind of study by framing it in relation to others in the field and in so doing completes their analysis in consultation with the wider academy.

The following sections will situate the study in terms of its relationship with existing social theory and firstly working through the concepts which have brought the study to its theoretical conclusions.

7.5.1 Introduction

This study has assumed a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology (4.3.3) using grounded theory methods as espoused by Charmaz (2014) and as such recognises that the data presented in this thesis represents the researchers understanding of the data co-constructed with the participants. That is to say whilst this study has been conducted rigorously according to grounded theory methods any study can only hope to offer a partial view framed by the beliefs and experiences of those involved, when acknowledging a constructivist perspective. The research question was answered by illustrating the temporal evolving nature of sexual identity and the identification of the internet's new established role in this ongoing construction by both direct and indirect means. The study also addressed gaps in the literature in relation to adult women's concepts of their sexual lives and the multiplicity of factors contributing to sexual identity in the digital age.

Whilst this study has been undertaken historically significant political change has been underway in the UK and beyond. As a result, much scrutiny has fallen on the role of digital life in these events. However, although political issues did arise in some of the interviews other

situational factors in online life were more pressing for the women in the study. The women appeared to sense that the egalitarian, free to connect, era of the internet was over, and they understood the potential for risk engaging online. The idea of the internet being a foreign and unwelcoming place to women was however very much tempered by data from the study though there remains an understanding that women are subject to social pressures online that reflect their offline experience. Data showed the women were capable digital participants and negotiated risk well in the main. In addition, the notion that the internet, particularly social media, could be harmful to mental health was not borne out in the findings, rather it appeared existing issues may have the potential to be either exploited or exacerbated through online exposure and habits. Although some of the participants expressed concerns about the safety of the internet most of the women had very straightforward uncontentious online lives.

The internet then could be said to be a newly established mediator for the development of sexual identity in these women's lives. The processes that LGBT women have gone through both online and off have served as an exemplar of the action of sexual identity construction and in the processes underpinning constructive elements that were replicated for the other women as they traversed issues within their sexual and social lives. From the beginning of the planning of this study concepts of agency within sexual life and notions of how identities are formed in relation to patterns, scripts and or expectations in society have driven the work.

The following section of the chapter will briefly draw from the work of key feminists of the second wave Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler, Sandra Wittig and Gayle Rubin in conjunction with the queer theorist Michael Warner to establish why heteronormativity still figured so strongly in the lives of the women interviewed. It will then go on to use the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu to expand the grounded theory produced. In doing so it will relate the core categories to key elements of Bourdieu's work, namely doxa, agency, capital and habitus, allowing a more theoretical frame to be drawn from the study.

7.5.2 Persistent heteronormativity

What became clear within both the literature (Albright, 2008; Farr, 2011; Coon Sells, 2013; Daneback et al. 2013, DeHaan et al., 2013; Dir et el., 2013; Walker, 2014; Rubin & McLelland, 2015) and the study data was a pervasive sense that sexual orientation was taken as analogous with sexual identity and that heteronormative expectations of orientation were dictated by societally produced sexual scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 1986). Given that the study used a wider definition (Epstein, 1991) and was able to empirically delineate sexual identity as a broader concept it is notable that the description of sexual identity often began with a description of orientation as a starting point for both heterosexual and lesbian participants.

The concept of heteronormativity has been discussed within the findings but at this point it is salient to explore further the concept's aetiology and continuing influence. In the 1990s a generation of theorists, post the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s, began to question the appropriateness of the canon of social theory when it came to lived experiences of LGBTQ people (Warner, 1993). Warner (1993) argued that although great strides and a significant body of queer cultural and political work had been created the major social theorists of the time were largely unconcerned with issues of sexuality and some produced work which could be seen to be openly homophobic. In developing the notion of heteronormativity Warner (1993) revealed the assumption of heterosexuality by default and that, by extension, the structural belief that sex between a man and a woman constituted a natural order.

> 'Het culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of community and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist. Materialistic thinking about society has in many cases reinforced these tendencies, inherent in heterosexual ideology, toward a totalized view of the social. I think this is what Monica Wittig has in mind when she writes that the social contract in heterosexuality. "[T]o live in society is to live in heterosexuality… Heterosexuality is always there within all mental categories. It has sneaked into dialectical thought (or thought difference) as its main category" '
>
> Warner (1993, xxi)

In acknowledging Wittig's work from a 'The Straight Mind' (1990) Warner placed himself alongside feminist queer theorists who challenged heterosexual orthodoxy in the 1980s and 1990s by illustrating the structures which maintained heteronormative hegemony within society and sought alternative socio-political models of sexual identity and behaviour.

Adrienne Rich's influential essay Compulsory Heterosexuality (1980; 640) sought to explicate *'the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives*.'. Rich's proposition that women become heterosexual by interacting with, and being beholden to, a dominant male culture echoed Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in the Second Sex (1953) '*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*'. Both Rich (1980) and De Beauvoir's (1953) examples theoretically propose women being subject to external restriction and coercion that privilege prevailing conditions, and positions, continuing the assumption of sexual practices emanating from a male dominated heteronormative natural order. Put simply women were expected to conform to 'nature' as to challenge these forces risked social reprisal, or worse. This could be seen within the data as Joanne talked of fear social fear of

reprisal within her family in relation to sexual experiences she had had with women for example, section 6.4.1.3.

However, a variety of sexual identities clearly operate outwith heterosexual convention as attested to and codified as sexual hierarchy within Gail Rubin's work Thinking Sex (1984). The pinnacle of privilege of the pyramid of sexual behaviour in this work was given over to married heterosexual couples and the levels below represented successive cultural steps away from acceptance in mainstream consciousness. Rooted in sexual essentialism the 'erotic pyramid' Rubin (1984; 151) described reflected the reification of sex as a '*natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions'* and as such the othering of any person or behaviour that did not fit tightly defined socially accepted heterosexual boundaries.

Akin to the natural order described previously according to Rubin (1984; 149) essentialism was rooted in the medicalised study of sex from the later nineteenth century onward which attributed sex '*as a property of individuals*' which may '*reside in their hormones or their psyches'*; therefore thoroughly of the body and orientated to addressing destructive human desire, an extension of Christian tradition of positioning sex as '*inherently sinful*'. Within an essentialist system then concepts of transgressive identities appear in relation to sex by associating sexual acts with moral coding.

Rubin (1984; 153) formalised this concept into a two-tiered model representing a '*Charmed Circle'* which set out behaviour and relationships deemed to be acceptable against the '*Outer Limits'* of '*Damned Sexuality'* which were not and therefore subject to stricture. This stratification of sexual behaviour and determination of moral value was considerable cause for concern.

> 'This kind of sexual morality has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics. It grants virtue to the dominant groups and relegates vice to the underprivileged. A democratic morality should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide. Whether sex acts are gay or straight, coupled or in groups, naked or in underwear, commercial or free, with or without video, should not be ethical concerns.'
>
> Rubin (1984; 153)

In response to this Rubin proposed a radical theory of sexual behaviour was needed to guard against the inevitable injustice of essentialist hierarchical models. In Rubin's view a constructivist response was needed to the resist the punitive nature of essentialism that existed at this time.

> ‘The new scholarship on sexual behaviour has given sex a history and created a constructivist alternative to sexual essentialism. Underlying this body of work is an assumption that sexuality is constituted in society and history, not biologically ordained.[8] This does not mean the biological capacities are not prerequisites for human sexuality. It does mean that human sexuality is not comprehensible in purely biological terms. Human organisms with human brains are necessary for human cultures, but no examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature and variety of human social systems.’
>
> Rubin (1984; 153)

This shift offered the chance to situate sexuality politically and allow for the questioning of the nature of legislative and social opprobrium in the milieu of human relationships. Relationships and sexual practices should be free from discrimination as ‘If sex is taken too seriously, sexual persecution is not taken seriously enough’ (Rubin, 1984; 171).

Where Rubin (1984) revealed the similarity between sexual oppression and racism by virtue of the creation of dichotomous positions of power within society later thinkers would insist this analogy was not fully realised. Race and sexuality should not just inform the understanding of each on a structural level, rather their interaction and the subsequent implication for position within society need to be acknowledged. Kimberley Crenshaw (1989) brought attention to the need to delineate the multiple oppressions that impact on black women facing the American employment law system. The importance of Crenshaw’s (1989) work in highlighting the deficit of understanding from white feminists of what constituted the unique oppressive systems lived through by black women cannot be underestimated. The recognition that individuals’ identities carry multiple oppressions or privilege creating the field of intersectional thought has been vital to the understanding of broader sociological principles in examining power within society. Therefore, one’s sexual identity is not merely the sexual expression of oneself but also is hugely contingent on the social position one occupies. The recognition of the intersecting bearing of class, race, ability, gender or religion on sexuality directly refutes previously held notions of biological essentialism by enabling an understanding of the complexity of the construction of identity in a western political landscape.

Judith Butler’s ‘Gender Trouble’ (1990) echoed much of the theory above in its the rejection of a contrived naturalistic order of gender and sexuality proposing instead mechanisms of ‘social practices’ of ‘cultural production’ which enact them (Weeks, 2010). Butler (1990) contended the category of woman in and of itself to be problematic and by extension any notion of a uniform sexual identity attached to it. Both gender and sexual identity were practices of culture repeated until instilled, and as result capable of infinite variety rather than just replicating dominant heterosexual norms.

The concept of heteronormativity then revealed and critiqued a naturalistic order of sexual expression that conformed to heterosexual ideals reinforcing the position of traditional marriage a reproductive imperative. The prescriptive nature of societal expectation of women's sexual behaviour could be said to be additionally policed as a cultural reaction to fears of female sexuality rooted in a moral historically derived rejection of anything outside Christian notions of suitable sexual behaviour. Taking a constructivist approach to sexual identity then operationalises feminist critique of essentialist approaches to sex and rejecting untoward scrutiny for freedom of sexual expression. A notion well understood by some of the women who engaged in more reflexive practices within their sexual lives as related in 6.4.1.3.

> 'it is a very strong belief that sexual orientation is a spectrum and it's fluid and it's not fixed and I'm not fixed and I can change and I can be attracted to a person rather than to a gender. And I don't want to be put in a box. You know, I've spent too long being put in boxes by other people and trying to kind of squeeze myself in and going, no, hang on it's quite liberating to not have a box around me, I can just be me, I don't have to be defined'
>
> Tara

These papers (Rich, 1980; Rubin, 1984; Warner 1993) reach back over thirty years but with equal marriage rights, equal consent legislation and defined legal protection in the U.K. against discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, the expectation would be that heteronormative assumptions of women's sexual behaviour would have abated. Yet the women interviewed for this study encountered many of the changes noted here in adulthood, and heteronormative statements were widespread in the data. By way of example a number of the women used normal to demarcate heterosexuality in demographic questioning and as mentioned previously described sexual identity primarily in terms of orientation. Two women, Selina and Joanne, related taking part in sex with women whilst with a male partner but very specifically separated this behaviour from their overall heterosexual orientation. Both women spoke frankly and favourably about experiences with women from both an aesthetic and a sexual perspective within their interviews. Yet, Selina maintained this same sex experience did not affect how she viewed her orientation whereas Joanne described rejecting anything other than a heterosexual orientation for fear of upsetting her family, especially her parents. This example is not being used to suggest Selina or Joanne were in any way incorrect in their description of themselves but in this context, though it does illustrate that stepping outside a default heteronormative frame is not an easy task.

It is puzzling that despite some degree of societal change that heteronormativity still appeared to influence the participants view of their sexual identity. Clearly two things must be separated at this point heteronormative assumptions are most definitely problematic given their expectation of heterosexuality by default, a point which will be returned to shortly, but the study is not claiming heterosexual orientation is a concern. Heterosexual desire is not problematic in and of itself, that it is learned and not derived of some natural force, should be cause for optimism rather than an affront to either heterosexuality or to nature. Thousands of years of culture and art would not have ruminated on the relations between men and women if they did not bring pleasure and joy as well as ennui and heartbreak. Rather our culture has ignored, pathologized or even forgotten other ways of love to most of our detriment. This cultural blind spot has been created by differentials of power within our societies through history and has fostered concepts, which by being overly prescriptive of a heterosexual imperative, have taken away agency from women by encouraging and structuralising conditions to bring about sexual orientation by default (Wittig, 1990).

Going back to cultural narratives many may ask what is wrong with a default sexuality, surely a 'natural' sexual life would bring comfort and familiarity knowing what to expect. The problem with a default sexual identity is that an unexamined sexual life cannot hope to be optimised, as it is unquestioned, it instead becomes subsumed within a relational context. Intuitively many would argue that humans are driven to relationships, which is correct, however if culture prioritises the relationship above all else might sexuality be relegated to an afterthought. In this way the natural order narrative can create another issue beyond the default to heterosexuality and that is sexuality as contingent of being in a relationship, not an independent understanding of that which would be preferable sexually. If a woman has not ascertained an independent idea of her sexual preferences how might she negotiate a sexual life best suited to her needs and establish clear boundaries of what she does not want. One woman within the study, Helen, said that she her and husband learned about sex together, yet many more spoke of being unable to speak with their partner about their sexual needs as they lacked either the language or the confidence to do so. This lack of language also contributed to their difficulty describing how they viewed their sexual identities.

One possible explanation for the lack of language or ability to negotiate sexually, and the women's lack of familiarity with the concept of sexual identity is that these effects are indicative of exposure to an essentialist model of sexuality in their youth and therefore could be considered evidence of the heterosexual default. In other words, heteronormativity can be expressed as a taken for granted expectation of heterosexuality, a doxa instilled into the women from the social conditions they have lived through (Bourdieu, 1992). Doxa has a

significant role in the group of concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu as both a theoretical and methodological framework through which one might effectively question the social world.

> 'Doxa is the relationship of immediate adherence that is established in practice between a habitus and the field to which it is attuned, the pre-verbal taken-for-granted of the world that flows from practical sense. Enacted belief instilled by the childhood learning that treats the body as a living memory pad,'
>
> Bourdieu (1992; 68)

Taking this perspective then could provide a theoretical frame through which to better understand the normative nature of sexuality and subsequent understanding of the concept of sexual identity. In essence Bourdieu sought to examine how the social world comes to be organised structurally and the effects these, largely hidden, structures enact on upon the members of this world. The notion of habitus and field will be returned to later in the chapter but first the significance of doxa requires focus in relation to this study to establish some key principles developed earlier within this section.

Systems of power have been touched on within this section but not fully explicated, however the work of Bourdieu examined carefully and conceptualised power. Crossley (2005; 68) contends Bourdieu's concept of doxa fulfils a key role in the maintenance of certain forms of political 'status quo' by enhancing its 'taken-for-grantedness' whilst simultaneously erasing past resistance from' the collective memory' benefitting those in positions of power.

> 'Doxa is a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view, the point of view of those who dominate by dominating the state and who have continued their point of view as universal by constituting the state.'
>
> (Bourdieu 1998; 57).

However, the role of doxa can transcend the political as Crossley (2001;99) points out in relation to Bourdieu's claim that doxa are in fact 'dispositions of the body' (1998, p.54)

> 'Doxic beliefs are unquestioned beliefs, embodied in actions and feelings but seldom formulated into words. They manifest as sentiments, routines, assertions aversions and 'calls to order'
>
> Crossley (2001; 99)

Bourdieu than was could be seen to develop the notion of 'taken for granted' ness by placing this sense within our bodily systems of understanding. Our physical unconscious knowing of the world.

> ‘the social world is riddled with calls to order that function as such only for those who are predisposed to heeding them as they awaken deeply buried corporeal dispositions, outside the channels of consciousness and calculation.
>
> Bourdieu (1998; 54/ 55).

Given Bourdieu’s focus on the societal structures imbuing the body with their tenets, the nature of the taken for granted principles of heteronormativity could be taken as the doxic representation of the dominant form of sexual expression in society for the women interviewed. This doxa may then account for the difficulty the women had in removing themselves from a heteronormative frame of reference and may contribute to their sense of difficulty in describing their sexual identity when interviewed. This theoretical position does not however assume a completely disengaged passive sexuality on the part of the women interviewed rather it represents some of the difficulty navigating a sexual life as women in a patriarchal system.

Within British culture however the idea of the sexually passive or indeed sexually reluctant woman has long been a trope with which women must contend. So ingrained was this notion of reluctant sexuality within the common lexicon it informed a collective particular national sense of sexual identity in ‘lying back and thinking of England’, which other nations of the union appear to have escaped. This may seem frivolous comment but the commonality of these conceptions within society are cultural elements that could be argued to serve to inform collective meaning-making around sex contributing to a particularly narrow ongoing doxa informing women’s sexuality. Jackson and Scott (2010) relate how Stanley (1995) noted effects of this projected reluctance in research examining the Mass Observation study in 1949. The qualitative raw data from this study examined by Stanley (1995, in Jackson & Scott, 2010; 8) revealed a nuanced representation of women sexual lives which acknowledged ‘women’s dissatisfaction with heterosex, often articulated as discontent with narrow genital sexual activity, devoid of sensuality or tenderness’. However Stanley (1995, in Jackson & Scott, 2010; 8) found this insight was not integrated in any productive sense in the analysis of the data at the time and was instead misinterpreted as indicative of ‘sexual conservatism’ rather than any social issue relating to women’s position in society at the time.

In considering the doxic nature of heterosexuality a model begins to come into focus in terms of how women’s sexual identities may relate to their wider social lives and the conditions to which they have become accustomed. In developing this frame further, the concepts with which Bourdieu interrogates the social world need to be explicated more fully.

7.5.3 Using Bourdieu's conceptual tools in the digital age

Bourdieu's life was lived in a particular social tension between his working-class origins and his later lauded academic career moving in and between disparate social worlds (Schirato & Roberts, 2018). This experience afforded Bourdieu a unique vantage point from which he built a considerable body work delineating the structures, processes and practices of social life (Schirato & Roberts, 2018). The overarching philosophy of Bourdieu was distilled by Atkinson as 'the three R's' *recognition, relationalism* and applied or historicized *rationalism*' (2016; 3). Countering claims that Bourdieu's work on capital indicated an inherent human drive to 'maximise profit or reproduce domination' Atkinson reframed this process as the individual's 'emotive search for their *reason for being' (their emphasis),* as recognition*,* being valued by one's peers, was a powerful social benefit and motivation (Atkinson, 2016; 3). This need for recognition then creates systems of differentiation across groups and situations within the social world which attribute power, success or failure not as inherent to the individual but in relation to others (Atkinson, 2016). In systems such these actors are a product of not just of their qualities but how these qualities position them in relation to their peers, and thus no man is an island in this world view, we are all related through social systems. Atkinson (2016; 4) concluded that Bourdieu's concepts were grounded in French historical epistemology,

> ' in which systematic reason and the quest for objectivity are only made possible by the development of certain social conditions and in which reality can never be grasped 'as is' but can only serve as an ideal to be approximated to a better and worse degree (as judged by logic and evidence) through constructed models of the object under investigation'

Put simply reality is only ever really produced to the degree to which one has the means to apprehend it.

Bourdieu's work remains widely applied as both a theoretical and methodological frame within social science, education, humanities and has been adopted within more contemporary fields such as digital sociology, despite the fact his work did not directly address '*digital communication technologies'* (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017; 950). Selwyn (2019; 2) notes *'one of the central features of digital sociology is inherently interdisciplinary nature – pushing sociologist to make connections with other areas that are already engaging critically in digital questions and digital settings'*. This definition relates well to this study which though conducted within health studies operates at the boundary of such by investigating the intersection of sexual health and the digital milieu.

Within digital sociology then the 'social aspects' of the digital realm are investigated and evolving digital methods are employed to make sense of social world (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017; 951). It is pertinent given the nature of the research question to consider Bourdieu's work in relation to its application within digital sociology as this should provide key insights into the framing of the data found in this study.

7.5.3.1 Using fields in internet study

In making sense of the construction of the social world Bourdieu theorised society across 'horizontal' and 'vertical' axes ; the horizontal representing the various social fields one inhabits within daily life and the vertical representing the structural differentiation at a more macro level in terms of 'capital, class and domination' (Crossley, 2001; 99/100). In this way Bourdieu could precisely 'conceptualise' the manner in which agents came to be positioned in accordance with others within the fields in which they interacted (Crossley 2001; 100). To Bourdieu then to 'think in terms of field is to *think relationally*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; 96). It is through contact with various fields that agents ascertain their roles and worth based on interaction and relationships to others based on the accumulation of various species of capital relevant to those specific fields (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017). Fields then are the social sites where we make sense of ourselves and begin to understand our place within the various worlds we inhabit, even unknowingly. Our work life/ field though influenced by our home life /field are nonetheless separate and bound by differing expectations. We position ourselves, and are positioned, within these different settings through the mainly unspoken social rules laid out by both.

Ignatow and Robinson (2017; 952) cite a wide range of researchers within digital sociology using field theory within their work (Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008;Zillien and Marr, 2013) including Levina and Arriaga (2014) who posit the concept of the 'online field'.

> 'an online field, a social space in which producers and consumers, held together by a shared interest deploy different forms of internally generated and externally produced capital to gain influence. The interaction among agents pursuing a given interest in a particular social setting determines what will count as status and how it may be achieved.'
>
> Levina and Arriaga (2014; 485)

Herzig (2016; 116) confirms the notion of the online field as a viable way of considering areas of online practice like specific social media platforms and goes on to state the internet itself could be considered a field in itself as it 'exhibits its own logic, distinct form of power, and semi-autonomy vis-à-vis the real world'. This autonomy has never been more evident in recent

years as even our own government has struggled to find ways to legislate to provide governance for social media platform such as Facebook operating extra-nationally (DCMS, 2019).

Field theory then is seen, in relation to internet research, as a flexible and responsive set of principles or components, contextually specific to the areas in which they are applied, either online or off, finding a new form in each case (Herzig, 2016). In this way Bourdieu's concepts of field, and related notions of capital, habitus, and distinction, are considered valuable in approaching the study of the internet. Herzig (2016; 115) argues that the use of Bourdieu's theories go beyond merely delineating the novel nature of the internet in relation to wider social world and instead affords the chance to 'rethink our assumptions regarding the sources and forms of power that are implicated in the instances of practice that arise around the internet.' It is important Herzig (2016;115) counsels to think more broadly about the impact of the internet in daily life, as to look at what the internet provides or enables narrows the scope of research to considering the internet as a 'resource or tool, rather than a site of practice'. To this end it is worth considering the research question again.

> What role does the online world play in the way adult women construct their sexual identities?

The grounded theory from the study (Section 6.1) found three core categories arising from the data namely the temporal evolving nature of sexual identity, the evolving nature of online life and the establishment of the internet as a potential functional component in relation sexual identity. Whilst the novelty of the internet was acknowledged within the set up and the data from the study, the study's focus was the 'role' of the internet in the women's lives. That is to say establishing both the practical ways the women utilised the online space but also why, and what that meant for the concept of sexual identity. As noted previously the temporal nature of sexual identity established within the study allowed for the exploration of the role of the online world in constructions of sexual identity and the study did also delineate what the women did in this process, Bourdieu's concepts allow the analysis to move beyond the interaction of these factors to contextualise the social processes underpinning why this occurred.

7.5.3.2 Capital online

A major concept within field theory is that of capital. Within common language, principles of capital are understood to be items of worth or value in either financial or metaphorical terms. It was with this common lexicon as reference that the data analysis (section 6.4.3.1) described the ways in which Deidre's social capital were conceptualised and modified online. Within the

analysis social capital was described as Deidre's feelings of social value, however this could perhaps be better described as her self-worth in relation to others. For Bourdieu capital took a number of forms, or species, and directly influenced how one might be seen within any given field by providing a positional effect.

> 'social agents are not particles that are pushed and pulled about by external forces. They are, rather, bearers of capitals and depending on their trajectory and on the position they occupy in the by virtue of their endowment (volume and structure) in capital, they have a propensity to orient themselves actively either toward the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution.'
>
> Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992; 108/9)

The capital one accumulates through interacting in any field represents one's abilities to negotiate that field effectively. Agents entering any field will bring with them a range of capacities both in terms already accrued capital and also dispositions that inherently predispose them to success or otherwise in that sphere. Herzig (2016) argues that studying fields can shed light on the species of capital in operation online and the power dynamics which drive them.

Attention was drawn in the study to the ways the women described the internet, social media particularly, as a means of positioning themselves like Deidre or performing particular roles like activism in the case of Selina. Issues of comparison, competition and pressure to conform had altered the course of the women's digital identities over time. In field theory terms it could be said that in digitally navigating online world using skills informed by both their online and their wider life experience the women had both operationalised and accumulated numerous species of capital online according to the various fields they were involved in. Deidre both shored up and developed her social capital via her foray into social media, and Selina arguably enhanced her cultural capital exhibiting her knowledge and commitment to animal welfare.

The relationship between capital and the internet has been explored from a number of different perspectives are cited by Ignatow and Robinson (2017; 957) including the notion of digital capital (Seale, Ziebland and Charteris-Black, 2006) online components of social capital (Hofer and Aubert, 2013) and recognising the digital elements of cultural capital (Paino and Renzulli, 2013). In examining fields, and the sources of capital and power ordering them, a clearer relational picture can emerge of social life. Herzig (2016; 112) referencing Postill (2011;7) warns of the need for internet studies to concern themselves with more than 'social

capital' when interrogating fields online lest other elements 'such as cultural and symbolic capital' be ignored.

A further error in internet studies is the positive reading of community in online contexts to mean shared interest and connection when so many problems can arise in digitally cloistered groups, from narrow viewpoints, through to extremism (Herzig, 2016).

> By contrast, a Bourdieuian perspective recognises that users may exhibits both combative and cooperative practices, depending on the particular motives and interests invested in different contexts. This approach benefits from seeking to explain practice in terms of users' dispositions and relations to power rather an concerning itself with general or essential features of online social spaces'
>
> Herzig (2016;112)

In serving notice of the peril of overselling the benefits of community online Herzig (2016) encourages researchers to explore the digital realm more critically. In heeding this call researchers can avoid the risk of removing the human context from the analysis of the online milieu which fails to acknowledge both 'the power disparities' and the 'diversity of motivations, behaviours and positions within such a space' (Herzig, 2016;113). From the beginning this study was developed with a frame that expected the online lives of the women to be diverse. The study data confirmed this revealing wide variation in the approach to online life, only Facebook use linked most of the participants, and in the main the higher-level coding in the study represented broad continuums of experience online.

The findings reflected the women's capacity to reflect and be critical about the notion of digital communities with both Carole and Katie discussing in detail the particular difficulties inherent in the emotionally laden discourse around child rearing online. Both women described experiences in different online fields but revealed power differentials within each of these spaces. Katie found being a lesbian parent using a heteronormative space, Mumsnet, meant she limited her use to very specific informational purposes and did not engage socially on the site despite having needs as new mother. For Carole navigating the performative parenting omnipresent on Facebook was extremely difficult whilst she underwent infertility treatment prompting numerous attempts to withdraw from the platform. As result both women struggled to maintain their places within their online fields, dominated as they were heterosexual expectation or idealised natural motherhood, and so more or less withdrew from them. Both Katie and Carole then felt pushed out by the fields they moved in as they did not meet all the expectations of them.

However, despite feeling unwelcome or under pressure within these fields both Katie and Carole modified their engagement with them maintaining a semblance of connection where required. This involved weighing up the costs of re-entering the field according to presenting need; a childcare question to investigate or a 'noseying' session to satisfy social curiosity. This responsiveness to experience online and ability to change to be mindful of its potential pitfalls was widely noted in the data. Most of the women interviewed had altered their digital lives on an ongoing basis learning their rules of online life as they went along, without conscious thought necessarily. Whilst the women did not actively reveal their trajectories online without being prompted it was clear they had individual recourse to change with much of this related to notions of privacy and preserving their sense of self online, in effect their online autonomy.

Much of the work in this chapter has focussed on the social pressure governing decision making, and doxic expectation of sexuality particularly, that it is important now to consider where the women's individual actions fit into this picture. Herzig (2016, 118) notes that the investigation of fields in internet research can demonstrate 'fresh insights into the power dynamics surrounding the Internet.' but that having fixed notions of fields prior to research such as sites, or an online offline split stymies creativity and the ability find more nuanced fields within a study. The development of this study did not specify fields that it would investigate but did highlight the role of moving online and asked how this incorporation may alter an already existing aspect of life, sexual identity. In doing so avoiding demarcating too strongly online and offline worlds but recognising from the outset the likelihood that these two areas off life would interconnect, though even this could not be assured until data was gathered. The question remains however what governs change or adaption within these contexts particularly if as in the case of Carole and Katie they seem to circumvent the power structure inherent in the fields they enter. The final concept within Bourdieu's field theory, habitus provides the frame which can enable this question to be answered as it explores the process that links his theory of social structure to the action of agents, a complex notion and still the site of much debate within social science.

7.5.3.3 Habitus online and off

As the theory relates earlier in this chapter, social behaviour can be theorised to be influenced in unseen ways often as a result of structures within social worlds which we feel yet do not consciously apprehend. Yet social actors are not automatons, they can make esoteric decisions which can seem to fly in face of logic. Looking around us it can even be incredibly difficult to fathom the intentions of our peers and even those closest to us. However, most of society operates on systems of shared norms and behaviours which are seen to be appropriate within their contexts, the knowledge surrounding these norms are often cultural, sometimes

unspoken and can reflect power dynamics within social systems. The balance between being social and being an individual actor can be explored through the concept of habitus the means by which an agent gains a sense of their way through these systems themselves. Put another way the division between social structure and individual agency runs through the work of Bourdieu (Costa and Murphy, 2015).

The habitus represented Bourdieu' s resistance to positivist notions of 'the spectacle' of an objective social world observed from 'high positions in the social structure 'Bourdieu (1992;52). Instead Bourdieu put forward his 'Theory of Practice' as a counter to this view.

> 'The theory of practice as practice insists, contrary to positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectual idealism, that the principle of this construction is the structured structuring dispositions, the *habitus,* which is constituted in practice and is always oriented to practical functions'
>
> Bourdieu (1992; 52)

The theory of practice then assumes notions of competence acquired over time often as result of input from parents, or wider environs such as school which are later reproduced through the life course. Our social experiences teach us the 'feel for the game' in different social fields which reinforces or creates dispositions which later are relied upon in these fields (Crossley, 2005; 107)

> 'The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the correctness of practices and their constancy over time more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norm.'
>
> Bourdieu (1992; 54)

In this way Bourdieu argues that agents are imbued with qualities which are a product of their lived experiences which create within their embodied state a sense of meaning of the world and the therefore the capacity to continue to exist, indeed thrive, within it. In this way habitus exists as a 'socialised subjectivity that agents embody both individually and collectively' in their specific social fields (Costa and Murphy; 2016; 7). The 'dispositions' underpinning habitus, those elements which are 'physically incorporated, habitual and manifest in attributes such as taste' are of particular interest within a digital world in relation to the maintenance of online presence and its elements of performance (Herzig, 2016; 119). The expressions of the self-

online then could be indicative of existing dispositions or indeed be means by which agents could be argued to attain them.

However, returning to the cases of Carole and Katie applying a notion of habitus in this situation does not appear to work. It could be argued both Carole and Katie had a feel for the game in their respective fields but subverted these rules and disengaged. In this way they expressed their own agency and found paths that were correct for themselves. Accounting for this could be difficult, however the tension between structure and agency has long been a criticism of the concept of habitus. Both Herzig (2016) and Ignatow and Robinson (2017) highlight the value of habitus within digital sociology as a means of exploring digital inequalities. In a paper challenging the merit of a government approach to digital skills Davies and Eynon (2018) approach inequality and agency applying an analytic frame which recognises the difficulties arising in relation to agency and digital fields.

In the paper 'Is digital upskilling the next generation our 'pipeline to prosperity'?' (2018) Davies and Eynon contest the notion that economic inequality can be addressed by targeting young people with digital skills. The study conducted was methodologically and analytically framed with reference to both field and agency but additionally made use of a 'modified conceptualisation of habitus' which accounted for 'forms agency expressed in the data' (Davies and Eynon, 2018 ;3963). This model of habitus was developed from the work of Decoteau (2016; 303) and re-visited Bourdieu's work to suggest a habitus 'capable of reflexivity and social change'. Reflexivity in Bourdieu's work is most often a principle of sociological practice where the researcher must reckon with their place with the world which they are attempting to unpick. Or as Costa and Murphy (2015;6) describe *'The guiding principle for reflexivity is to encourage critical understandings of social realities in both researcher and the researched.'*

In theorising a reflexive habitus Decoteau (2016; 313) moves past Bourdieu's previous position that only allowed for reflexivity to be 'achieved through expert deliberation or structural crisis'. Decoteau (2016) argues an alternative view that the social world, as described by Bourdieu in field theory, allows for reflexivity by the very nature of its multiple fields. By existing within multiple field positions habitus is subject to the 'often contradictory' vagaries of each of them (fields) creating multiple viewpoints and 'perspectives' (Decoteau, 2016; 316).

Decoteau (2016) further elaborates that the notion that both fields and habitus are stable entities is a misreading of Bourdieu's concepts. This misreading contributes to the misapprehension of agency within Bourdieu's work. By way of explanation Decoteau (2016) posits that identity forms through the interaction a range of 'overlapping' fields and elaborates

on this process using the notion of doxic homology and heterodoxy; whereby the relationships between fields are either settled in the case of homology or at odds resulting in heterodoxy. It is this production of doxic heterodoxy within life experiences between fields that then engenders reflexivity on the part of the agents as this heterodoxy is reckoned with.

'Our interstitial positionality offers us unique positions from which to reflexively evaluate and navigate our structural and cultural conditioning through embodied practices' (Decoteau, 2106; 316). Thus, the complexities of our lives created through the competing perspectives of the fields we engage in present opportunities to question our values and reorienting our action according to our needs. Davies and Eynon (2018; 3974) utilise this concept to propose that interactions with digital fields can produce the necessary 'disjoints in young people's reality and challenges their way of thinking, they are more likely to think reflexively about their participation in other fields'. In this way the notion of reflexive habitus can be seen to be the mechanism whereby actions in the social fields of life contribute to the ongoing systems of habitus utilised by the young people in navigating their social world.

Which brings back the cases of Carole and Katie. It could be argued then that their decisions to use the fields in a way that is beneficial to them, by eschewing the rules they found in place in these fields, is a result of habitus, a reflexive habitus. In this way both Katie and Carole's actions could be considered to be informed by their individual embodied histories, subject to change over time, in accordance with their perception of their field's heterodoxy, subject to their dispositions and capital at these points. Thus, they both exhibited behaviour which could be attributed to being result of them employing a reflexive habitus. The following section will expand this framing to the grounded theory and the core categories arrived at through the study.

7.5.4 Using reflexive habitus to reveal sexual identity

To recap, Davies and Eynon's (2018) paper delineates the ways young people adapt, strategize and reflexively engage within their fields and in doing so reveals the contingent nature of agency limited as it is by disposition and life contexts. In this way agency can be contextualised as a product of the self and its situational context, subject to limits specific to the position this creates. This concept of agency as limited by context is useful for accounting for the range of understanding and action taken in relation to sexuality within the study, and allows for breadth of understanding exhibited towards notions of sexual identity, in addition to the role of a heteronormative doxa as described in the previous section.

The introduction of the concept of doxic homology and heterodoxy by Decoteau (2016) allows for call to action without the levels of crisis assumed to be required within the earlier work of

Bourdieu. As Davies and Eynon (2018) describe that doxic homology is contingent on the various fields one encounters being synchronous it is possible to view the ways in which this notion might apply to disruption of a new field into the lives of the women interviewed in the form of the digital field. The fields of life referred to here being the social domains a woman engages with in course of her life including family, workplace, school, and include social distinctions such as gender and class, aspects of life bound by specific rules and expectations laid down over time as part of the function of their history.

The interjection of an entirely new field, the internet, brought about a shared step into asynchronicity albeit to varying degrees for the women involved in the study. Put simply for some women this was important, for others hardly significant at all. Each woman interviewed was presented with the challenge of relating this new digital field into the various others she encountered family, work, relationship to sexuality as well as gender and class.

Some re-adjusted their concurrent fields with little issue, returning quickly to doxic homology as they incorporated the digital field into their others. Others found a disconnect between them far stronger and entered into a period of doxic heterodoxy which impelled them to act or recognise this disconnect and began reflexive practices. Not all incidences of doxic heterodoxy mentioned within the data were attributable to sexual matters. Lesley gave the example of realising their colleagues lives outside of work impinged on their own through social media for example, and thus she had to find way find ways of re-orientating her privacy online.

The experience of doxic heterodoxy then is the nexus for one of two things

- recognition of disconnect, consideration its consequence and then being unable/unwilling to act
- recognition of disconnect, consideration of consequence and searching the means to act/acting.

This process occurs on an ongoing basis as new events/ people or circumstances online or off bring potential for fields to become asynchronous. However now the women have at their disposal a new tool incorporated into their positional/ dispositional milieu in the form of the digital potentiality to address disconnects – so the internet exists both as a field and also a frame of reference which could impact on both disposition and position.

The following section explores more specifically how the notion of field theory and an adoption of a reflexive habitus might relate to the question of the role of the internet in the construction of sexual identity in the digital age.

Across the life course sexually specific disruptions/changes/ improvements occurred in the women's lives as noted in the data relating to role of sex through the life course. Over the last decade all of the women have encountered ways in which their sexual lives have intersected with the internet as a digital field. In relation to Decouteau's (2016) notion reflexive habitus and Bourdieu's field theory (1992) where change occurs this may disrupt the synchronicity of the fields in which woman inhabits prompting reflection and action contingent on her circumstances including her life circumstances, confidence, previous experiences - her social contingencies perhaps - and the structural constitution of the wider world she inhabits.

Deliberation on changes and course of action taken are the expression of agency the woman has which are contingent on the resources available to her. This is reflexive practice which informs the ongoing construction of sexual identity. This deliberation and action/ inaction can also be viewed as her ongoing habitus in relation to her sexual life

Where women's sexual lives appeared to them to be contingent on factors beyond their control/capacity/ knowledge they may continue on in a state of doxic heterodoxy. Alternatively, the absence of agency may occur at a subconscious level as the woman inculcate their external conditions allowing asynchronicity to be incorporated into her frame of reference and experienced as the new doxic homology. This could present a potential model for women staying with abusive partners for example.

Where change could be effected, and is followed through, this process of reflection and action will inform any further actions they may need to take in future in relation to their sexual lives thus producing a reflexive habitus in relation to sexual behaviour and relationships. The women of the study did report a sense of feeling far more in control of their sexual experiences as they got older with the accumulation of experience they had in their sexual lives and wider social milieu.

With the digital turn the women experienced a new mechanism which fulfilled a number of roles within their sexual lives. The various fields of a woman's life interact concurrently and therefore any one field could influence the rest for sake of ease this example will isolate the sexual and digital fields. Given the above the women could

- recognise a deficit/ disconnect in her sexual life and embrace opportunities within the digital field to address this deficit
- the use of the internet could reveal a deficit in a woman's sexual life
- the continuing use of the internet could provide skills which may in turn improve sexual life

- faith or lack thereof in these processes will be built into ongoing systems of habitus contingent on their production of doxic homology / heterodoxy

The actions taken above can impact on the other fields the women occupy and may have unforeseen consequences on those other aspects. In other words, the internet has the capacity to either reveal or react to needs within a woman's sexual life which merit action based on their disruptive influence on the fields of her social existence. A woman's ability to effect change will be contingent on the degree of agency she has in relation to her past experiences, her social/ economic/cultural conditions and the prevailing social milieu within which she lives.

Where the women have inculcated a doxa which is synchronous with the rest of their social fields the internet will likely prove amusing and possibly helpful for minor aspects of her sexual life and where women find that they experience doxa asynchronous to their existence the internet offer opportunities which can be transformational if coupled with the social conditions to exploit them.

In terms discussed earlier in the chapter digital fields could present a frame to interrogate or indeed escape heteronormative doxa, by enabling reflexive practices challenging the self and ultimately producing and enabling a reflexive sexual habitus. Where sexual identity is the understanding a woman has of her sexuality, questioning that sexuality could be said to be a function of her reflexive sexual habitus. Indeed, it could be said the result of the recursive nature of reflexive sexual habitus is sexual identity, they constitute each other. In other words, sexual identity is the apprehension of a reflexive sexual habitus.

8 Conclusion

8.1 The research reviewed

This chapter brings together the research data in context and evaluates its significance to the academy. The research identified three core categories within the findings and contextualised them within a Bourdieuian frame with reference to a model of habitus suggested by Decoteau (2016). This has offered a unique insight into the nature of agentic sexual behaviour in women and the structural mechanisms within a patriarchal society which can, and do, serve to inhibit this agency. The study revealed both the social heteronormative elements which can inhibit or obstruct women's capacity to find their sexual identities, and also demonstrated, through a reflexive sexual habitus, the capacity for online means to contribute structurally against these negative forces; particularly for LGBT women and heterosexual women with specific issues to address.

In terms of online life, it appeared that the heterosexual women interviewed moved their existing communities online in a more seamless continuation of their offline social lives. From a Bourdieuian perspective, in sexuality terms, these women probably entered the digital field in state of doxic homology as their social circumstances and online experiences were very similar, supporting research which suggests the online offline relationship is not a easily definable split (Valentine and Holloway, 2002; Herzig, 2016). That is not to say the heterosexual women have little to gain online rather they may need a call to action, a relationship breakdown, a specific sexual curiosity or sense something of deficit within their sexual lives before the dispositional elements practiced within the rest of their online life would coalesce to evoke a reflexive sexual habitus.

In contrast the LGBT women found their communities online and, in this way, often had more transformative positive experiences as a result. It could be said that the LGBT women were likely to have entered the online world in a state of doxic heterodoxy caused by the structural disconnection of living in a predominantly heteronormative society and/or locale. In finding safe online communities the LGBT women found doxic homology relating to their sexuality in the main. Heather spoke of feelings of isolation in her community in Hull and the lack social spaces for where she could be her authentic self. Using online dating Heather found her life partner and subsequently started a family. Katie spoke of similar doxic homology after using Gaydar girls as a young woman. Yet Katie also illustrated the individual nature of experiences of online worlds, and existing within multiple fields, in that as a new mother she had found the

heteronormative field visible on Mumsnet meant she had felt unable to interact with the potentially valuable social elements of the site. It is important to consider that online interaction can be destructive to sexual identity in this context. The fields the women entered online and the competitive and performance contingent elements therein had the potential to amplify situational vulnerabilities.

These are broad descriptors of the results and Katie's experience Illustrates the importance of recognising that agency within online worlds is not uniform but contingent on a range of positioning factors such as sexual orientation, gender or class. Therefore, it is important to think of the interaction of the processes happening in situations where the sexual identity intersects with other life fields. The following figure has adapted the original grounded theory category diagram to produce a visual representation of the social theory framing of the results of the study.

Theoretically Positioned Grounded Theory

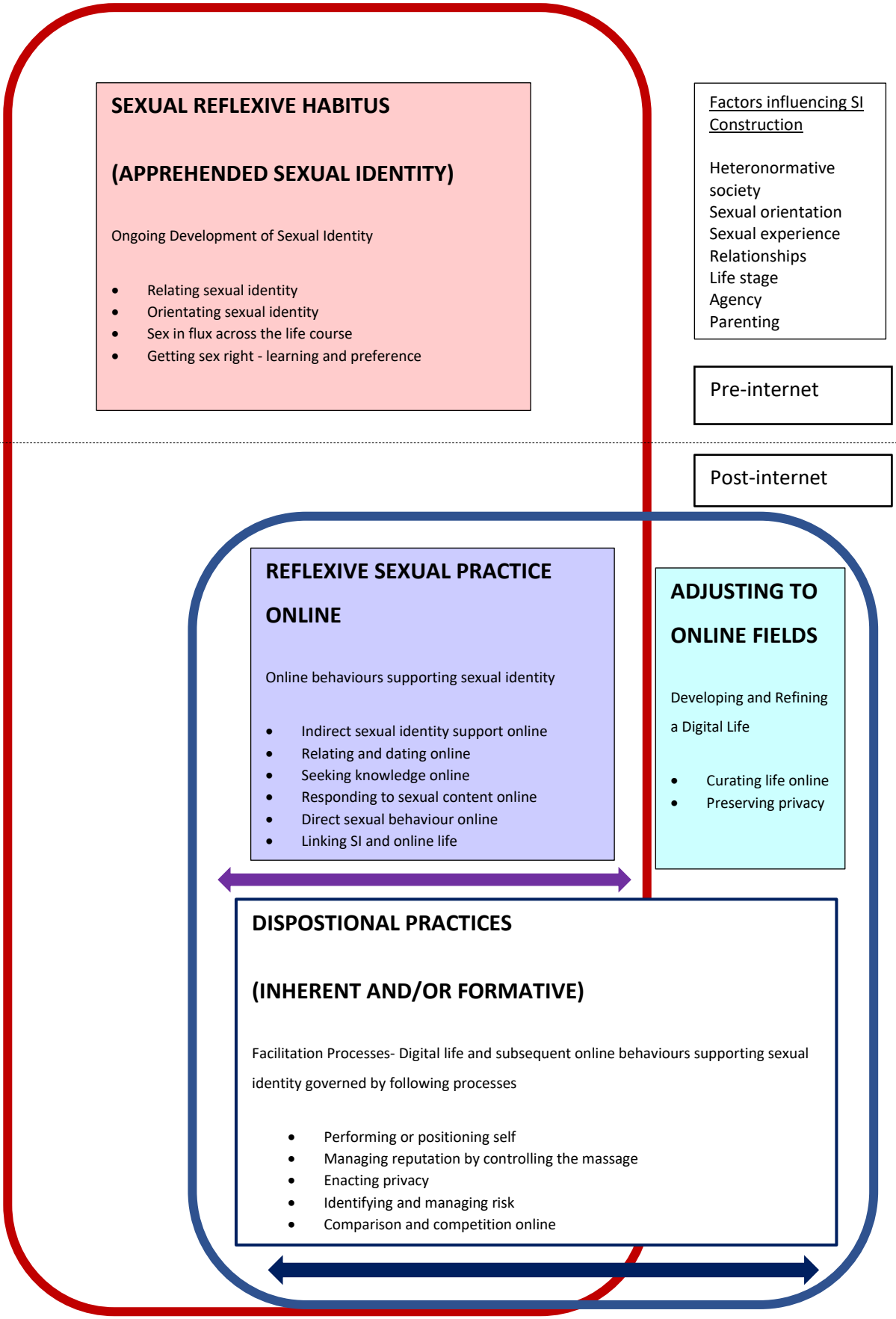

Figure 4 Theoretically Positioned Grounded Theory

8.2 Reflecting on the study

In the course of conducting the study 19 women took time out of their own lives to contribute the data which constructed the findings described above. They described positive experiences in their relationships, intimate details of their sexual choices, their worries and sadly some terrible traumatic events that caused lasting emotional pain. That these women were prepared to share such important aspects of their life with me, in most cases in one meeting, was a testament to the ways in which women continue to support women in their endeavours. We do not live in atomised culture devoid of feeling for others, we live in complex shifting community still capable of seeing the need of others as connected to our own, the actions of the women who engaged with me show that.

Speaking with Lynne about the circumstance of her teenage life and rape was a deeply moving experience. Lynne is not the first woman I have spoken with regarding sexual violence or abuse, and sadly she is unlikely to be the last, but I felt extremely unnerved with guilt afterwards. In every other context in which I had encountered women disclosing events of this nature I had had an ongoing supportive or friendship relationship which meant I could continue to be there for the woman involved. I still struggle to come to terms with fact that Lynne was prepared to use such an awful event in her life to contribute to the study. This experience then brought back memories of all the women I have sat with in similar circumstances, their diversity and number still shock me. That this is the case is something I hold onto. I am not blasé, I am not looking the other way, I do still have the capacity to care and I very much hope this is study is the beginning of many others that I can continue to find important lived experiences to contribute to the academy.

Studying sexual identity was a quite a natural choice for me, though I did have my difficulties when the interviews began. Given my one to one experience in social care and discussion of sexual matters in classroom and training environments I had thought these discussions would happen reasonably organically. I was wrong. I found myself quite embarrassed by first interviews and it took some time to re-orientate my vocabulary about sex to the interview context. I was surprised by just how different an experience this form of interviewing was. Balancing warmth with attention to detail and active listening is no easy task and I would challenge any positivist who says qualitative work lacks rigour on this basis, let alone the lengthy and detailed picking apart of the data gathered in the process.

The technical aspects of returning to study have been a challenge to me and remain so but pushing myself within this context though arduous has been incredibly fulfilling. Working within the University of Hull I have found a welcoming community of scholars and staff alike

who encouraged me to truly occupy my place and grow within it. The community within in Hull has given me the confidence to reach out to other academics across the UK and internationally where I have seen overlap with my work and theirs, this has been a real joy. In one of those conversations with a colleague outside the University I spoke about what the process of challenging my thinking and previously held opinions had meant to me. Through this conversation I realised the importance I associate with the criticality I have developed and the fact I am in fact at the beginning of a process not the end. I by no means am a fully developed researcher but I know that this is work I wish to continue.

In investigating online life, I have challenged my own preconceptions of social media and developed my own practices online which I have used to sustain me during necessary periods of isolating myself to finish work on this study. This has been a two-way street and where I have gained a great deal from the experiences and contact with other researcher's I have made commensurate efforts to reach out to others I see are struggling or who have information issues online. Engaging online in this way, whilst writing, has developed my perspectives and provided me a better understanding of how online community can be used positively and that pitfalls can be navigated.

During the course of this research serious controversy has emerged within the field of feminism and transgender rights and I feel that it is only fitting to reiterate my stance on this as I close the study. The people I interviewed were women, I asked for no other qualification other than that they said they were women. I have no interest in what genetic makeup a person has and I support Butler's (2019) recent reiteration of her conception of gender as being a socialised construct and no more. Women can and should support women, cis or trans, enforcing exclusion of a minority of women deemed to be lesser by some quarters fundamentally undermines the social justice principles which underpin feminist practice.

8.3 The study's contribution to knowledge

I conducted this study because the literature I reviewed lacked specificity within key elements of its terminology which served to undermine the capacity to communicate what it is to be sexual. The failure to adequately communicate sexually has ramifications from the personal relationship to the professional and educational context and adds to the means by which structural heteronormativity is perpetuated. This work is important therefore and not a superficial call to police language. It is a quest for clarity which has arisen from my direct experience of teaching others about these principles.

Working in sexual health I attempted to bridge gaps in confidence staff had due to the lack of a shared vernacular of sexual life. In this study I have sought and determined clarity around sexual identity and also argued for the importance to do so, and this is my first contribution to the knowledge of the academy. There is no such thing as a typical lesbian or heterosexual woman so why should sexuality and sexual identity be almost routinely used to denote orientation particularly given the term orientation exists.

In delineating the difference between sexuality, the totality of a woman's sexual selfhood, and sexual identity, an individual's specific understanding of their own sexual self, I have brought to the fore the model of a conscious, reflexive manner of sexual being which can serve to oppose the pervasive notion of heteronormative sexual passivity. This is the real significance in the work, where women do not see their capacity, they do not see their way to change. In establishing the concept of reflexive sexual habitus and revealing ways in which online worlds can be shown to be both constructive, and commensurately destructive, within sexual identity I have illustrated the operation of agency within a sexual context and recognised the importance of this deliberation within women's lives.

The research has made the following key contribution to the academy;

1. This is the first study to engage empirically with adult women to explore their concepts of sexual identity in relation to their online lives. In doing so it provides clear, distinct, empirically derived terminology with regard to sexuality, sexual identity and reflexive sexual habitus and situates them in relation to the digital turn they experienced in their lives.
2. In delineating the elements of terminology previously stated a grounded theory can show the processes by which sexual identity can be informed and/or produced by interaction with the internet. The study has outlined the temporal nature of sexual identity, that women have developed complex online lives and that the intersection of the two can support, inform and indeed produce sexual identity.
3. The definition and distinction of the terminology explored in the research provides specificity which develops understanding and provides theoretical support with which to frame further study in this area.

4. The work has consolidated the Decoteau's (2016) concept of reflexive habitus and extended it within the study of sexual behaviour. It recognised the internet as a site of practice and source of information to provide the means to reveal and or address doxic heterodoxy in relation to women's sexual lives, in the form of agentic sexual decision making based on online information, interaction and behaviour.
5. The study has reiterated the applicability of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1977) within the digital realm. It illustrated the dispositional processes arising from interacting with the various digital fields the women occupied and demonstrated the utility of the concepts of doxa and habitus within the exploration of digital life.
6. The study has determined the value of recognising sexual identity as means to develop and/ or illustrate agentic sexual practices. This was demonstrated by revealing the questioning process required to produce reflexive sexual habitus, which in turn informs sexual identity. In this regard the study develops understanding of a social model to define sexuality in the widest sense as individual and not merely a default of societal enforcement of a biological essentialist model.
7. The study demonstrated empirically that knowledge of sexual identity can be limited in women over 35, often as a result of heteronormative processes which inhibit questioning the 'natural order' of sexual relations. Prompting women to think and to question who they are sexually then is the first step developing agentic sexual behaviour and thus encouraging sexual wellbeing.
8. The study demonstrated women's capacity to engage critically and reactively online and that digital skill and agency within this realm is too complex to routinely map to age.
9. Furthermore, given the foundational nature of the work, concerning itself with both definition and dispositional practice, the knowledge gained from the study can be considered future proofed against changes to web function or architecture. Primarily the need to question, seek information and practice / form dispositions in relation to online means are highly likely to remain cogent through time. A woman's need to question her sexual identity will be remain open to using the internet, as one a many means to do so, if the internet remains available and open. That said challenges to net neutrality may offer a threat to the advances gained by women in this last decade and cannot be taken for granted. Digital inequality already means may women already lack the recourse to online forms of support in this area of their lives through lack of access. If political or economic conditions change for the worse digital inequality could increase in populations without political will to plan otherwise.

8.4 Charmaz' tests

In this section I will review the study and its findings. Charmaz (2014: 337/8) laid out the following four main criteria for evaluating grounded theory studies; credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. In this section I will address the criteria in turn, answering the relevant questions Charmaz set in relation to each.

8.4.1 Credibility

8.4.1.1 Has your research achieved intimate familiarity with the setting or topic?

Yes, I believe it has in following manner. The women presented a wide range of experiences in relation to their sexual identities and online lives, every woman interviewed is represented in the findings and each interview generated new codes right through to the last interview. The frank manner of the discussion has been illustrated in the findings which show that women did not appear to be editing themselves in terms talking about their sexual behaviour. This is perhaps redolent of the fact that women had had little opportunity to talk about their sexual lives in this manner elsewhere, a factor noted in the data in relation to talking to partners about sex, and not talking to peers.

8.4.1.2 Are the data sufficient to merit your claims. Consider the range, number, and depth of the observation contained in the data.

Yes. By way of indication the final data document for the study which collated all the coding and categories from the interviews ran to 144 pages and contained over 44000 words in itself. In the process of refining the grounded theory and developing the categories a wide range of coding which, though rich in detail and ripe for additional analysis after this study, was also removed as it wasn't less relevant to the categories emerging. The result was a data set which offered a rich understanding of sexual identity and online life. The experiences the women shared did indeed bring depth to the analysis and when writing up the findings most of the points made could be represented by a continuum of responses from the data in most instances rather being specific to individual's in the main. In this respect I reduced the numbers of examples I used in some cases in the findings chapter in order to keep my word count within the parameters required.

8.4.1.3 Have you made systematic comparisons in between observations and categories?

Yes, and these have been outlined in the method section. I employed constant comparison analysis from the beginning evaluating between interviews not just the data which had emerged but continually returning to the categories to assess their fit with each other and data. This resulted a in wide range of sub and higher categorises as outlined in detail in the findings chapter.

8.4.1.4 Do the categories cover a wide range of empirical observations?

Yes they do, to the extent that three core categories were developed from the data which coalesced to produce a strong grounded theory and subsequent social theory-based response to the data.

8.4.1.5 Are there strong links between the gathered data and your argument and analysis?

Yes, and I have continued to use specific lived examples throughout my analysis and social theoretical framing for the purpose of maintaining this principle.

8.4.1.6 Has your research provided enough evidence for your claims to allow the reader to form an an independent assessment and agree with your claims?

Yes, I believe the data makes a strong case within the grounded theory to view sexual identity in broader terms than purely orientation which goes on to be further developed in terms of social theoretical relevance.

8.4.2 Originality

8.4.2.1 Are your categories fresh? Do they offer new insight?

I believe the categories represent the data well and find new ways of representing sexual identity. In doing so the categories reveal both the temporal nature and the breadth of components which can contribute to the construction, and also the potential inhibition, of sexual identity giving empirical evidence for mechanisms often spoke of in purely theoretical terms.

8.4.2.2 Does your analysis provide new conceptual rendering of the data?

Yes it does at noted in the answer above sexual identity can be conceptualised not just in terms of its components as mentioned but also in terms of its significance, in that, the action of attending to sexual identity reflexively over time can be the theoretically realised as reflexive sexual habitus.

8.4.2.3 What is the social and theoretical significance of this work?

From the social perspective in highlighting the persistence of heteronormativity in women of this age we can recognise the need to push against these assumptions and in so doing encourage all women to ask questions, and therefore adopt a reflexive approach to their sexual lives. In enabling a process to understand the concept of sexual identity it could offer women the means to recognise there are measures they can take to effect change in their sexual lives with online mechanism being shown in this study by means of example. Put simply this research could introduce women to the concept of reflexively attending to their sexual lives. From a theoretical perspective the notion of sexual reflexive habitus contributes to understanding of the nature of agency in relation to sexual matters by extending existing

understanding of scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) in terms of providing additional understanding to the temporal and ever changing nature of sexual identity as a social learning process. It also strengthens the understanding of agency in relation to online interaction and refutes arbitrary ideas of online skills being related to age.

8.4.2.4 How does your grounded theory challenge extend, or refine current ideas concepts and practices?

Yes, it challenges researchers to view sexuality and sexual identity as distinct concepts and in doing so draws attention not only to the principle of reflexive sexual habitus but also to the value of this concept. Engaging reflexive sexual habitus within life enables agency, allows for the potential to act, and in so doing could have profound consequences for the lives of those engaging in this practice.

8.4.3 Resonance

8.4.3.1 Do the categories portray the fullness of the studied experience?

In the main yes, but with some limitations due to the scale of the study, the fact no women of colour were represented and no woman disclosed being transgender. The results represent well the experience of white cis-gendered women over the age of thirty five. Given the conceptualising noted above the study has broadened the scope for defining sexual identity without removing the importance that orientation has within the positioning of the sexual self. Not only have the essential elements been described within the coding but attention has also been paid to their importance within the life course all of which was identified and then coded in the analysis to provide an understanding of the temporal differences within the concept of sexual identity associated to life stage. Within elements of online life both generative and moderating principles were recognised and coded in the analysis in terms of visual presentation and privacy practices for example.

8.4.3.2 Have you revealed both liminal and unstable taken for granted meanings?

Yes, central to whole nature of the study was to provide more specific framing for elements of sexual life that too often get mischaracterised even within the academy. Sexual identity, sexuality and sexual orientation are all distinct terms which should be used with care as they represent key elements of everyone's existence. That sexual identity was so vaguely understood denotes the need for its fuller description and for this to be relayed to women. If this does not happen these sexual definitions exist at edges of a lot of women's experiences preventing reflexivity from happening and undermining agency. The taken for granted nature of a default heterosexual sexual orientation has been comprehensively rendered and theoretically contextualised through the description of its doxic nature with reference to

Bourdieu (1992) and the negative implication this has for inculcating an unquestioning approach to sexual life.

8.4.3.3 Have you drawn links between larger collectivities or institutions and individual lives, when the data so indicate?

Yes, the role of Facebook was explored in relation to how the women presented themselves, negotiated privacy and family life online as examples. Facebook given its size and ubiquity can arguably be described as an institution in the online sense. Also, the study has described and explored the ways in which women's sexual identity has been impacted by wider social structural positioning in the form of default sexuality within a patriarchal essentialist social order historically. The remnant effects of this social order were still represented by the women interviewed in their difficulty to remove themselves from a heteronormative framing of sexuality.

8.4.3.4 Does your grounded theory make sense to your participants or people who share their circumstances? Does your analysis offer them deeper insights about their lives and worlds?

Yes, I have discussed the grounded theory with participants, and they could see the benefit to the model formed and where that it related to their experiences. Within the interview themselves a number of the women expressed how the conversation of the interview itself had opened up the notion of sexual identity and said there were changes they wished to make having taken part in the research.

8.4.4 Usefulness

8.4.4.1 Does your analysis offer interpretations that people can us in their everyday worlds?

Yes, put most simply asking women to think about the substance of sexual identity clarifies it as a concept, demonstrates that assessing it is necessary, that realising it is possible and importantly that discovering its nature is valuable. The work establishes an understanding that the of the process of questioning sexual life encourages the formation of sexual identity which in turn leads to the ongoing development of a reflexive sexual habitus capable of maintaining sexual wellbeing. The study also revealed specific examples women may benefit from in practical terms in terms of how to use online means to address sexual concerns.

8.4.4.2 Do your analytic categories suggest any generic processes?

Yes, the interaction of the three core categories reveal a structure capable of supporting agentic sexual decision making which demonstrate the possibility to effect change within sexual life. It should be said that this model also demonstrated that not all fields one experiences online are positive in this regard and online field do have the capacity to reinforce hegemonic structural positions, for example the pressure to conform on Facebook.

8.4.4.3 If so, have you examined these generic processes for tacit implications?

Yes, it reveals the internet can a have a role in the construction of sexual identity through specific action with a sexual purpose such as finding sexual information or through dispositional improvement based on non-sexual experiences online, such as presenting a positive version of oneself online which corrects self-perceived flaws. Undertaking these acts develop and/or promote reflexive behaviour necessary for reflexive sexual habitus and also serve to improve or develop the dispositions which will underpin these actions.

8.4.4.4 Can the analysis spark further research in other substantive areas?

Yes, within the thesis it was found that many of the women struggled to communicate sexual need or approach difficulties within their sexual relationships, this requires further exploration.

8.4.4.5 How does your work contribute knowledge? How does it contribute to making a better world?

This was discussed in more detail in section 8.3, however principally the research has improved understanding within the study of sex by refining terminology and in the process of doing this re-contextualised agency within a Bourdieuian frame by revealing the nuanced manner in which adult women successfully negotiate their online lives. In addressing these two principles the study provides women with the perspective that they can and should have recourse to seek the sexual lives they wish and deserve.

8.5 Limitations and implications for further research

The study sample identified as white with the exception of one participant who defined herself as Mediterranean. All the women interviewed were of Western European origin, and all but one French woman was born in the U.K. As already stated in section 5.5.1 there was an absence of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women and also of women who specifically identified themselves as transgender in the study. The findings therefore need to be viewed in in context as being derived from a white and apparently cis-gendered perspective. This context prompts the following questions.

- With the examples of exclusionary elements highlighted by a number of the women regarding sexual orientation, class and youth in online life, are BAME women finding the space within digital fields to make use of the dispositional and reflexive elements found in this study? How does race intersect with sexual identity for BAME women online? In a similar vein how are transgender women negotiating the hostility towards their identities in terms of sexual identity in the digital era? These are extremely important elements without which no theorising of sexuality and sexual identity is complete.
- Where women become aware of the concepts specified within the study what impact does this have on their sexual and online lives? Does awareness of the reflexive potential of digital fields effect change? Can the concepts be used to self-assess in an online context for example? How might this be realised?
- Given a number of the women linked sexual agency with age, do young women concur with sentiment? If so, what do young women feel they need to operationalise sexual agency earlier in their sexual lives. Work of this nature would benefit RSE planning and delivery in terms of building a framework to support agentic sexual behaviour. Knowledge in this area could also support clinicians in contraception and sexual health service provision.
- What needs to happen to enable women to talk to their partners about their sexual lives and more specifically their sexual problems? Research of this nature could be used to inform practice within clinical settings such as cardiac care, and diabetes management where sexual problems are a common concern. Importantly however research into communication within sexual relationships, linked to building this capacity in relationships could enable multi-generational responses to sexual health.

8.6 Conclusion

The work completed in this study can be seen to offer many opportunities for future research to provide deeper understanding of the concepts of sexual identity and of the reflexive sexual habitus supporting its formation. The research was instigated to respond to need I saw around me through my work and from an academic perspective. I had been frustrated by the shallow portrayal of sexuality within contemporary British culture and to some extent within the academy. As social media became hardwired into social life, I saw people struggle to maintain their sense of self or privacy online. At the same time for all the highly sexualised content people were apparently exposed to, I found in my professional role that knowledge of sexual matters did not appear to have been accrued commensurately.

This study has provided a framework through which women can begin to view what they actually want from their sexual lives; whether they have considered this in the past or are questioning this aspect of their lives for the first time. The sexual is the social and it must be communicated as such, if not we lose the capacity to question and ability to model behaviour which can contribute positively to sexual identity. That the internet has afforded women to see what once was hidden from them is only part of the equation. Social media has provided a framework through which women have seen the means to edit and thus control their how they viewed by their peers. This control coupled with the means to create and improve dispositional elements of social life through lessons learned in disparate digital fields illustrates the complexity of the interaction between the sexual and the digital in women lives. The internet has been shown empirically to have the potential to enable women to make changes in their sexual lives, and in this way to edit how their sexual identity moves forward in a reflexive sexual habitus more beneficial to their sexual wellbeing over time.

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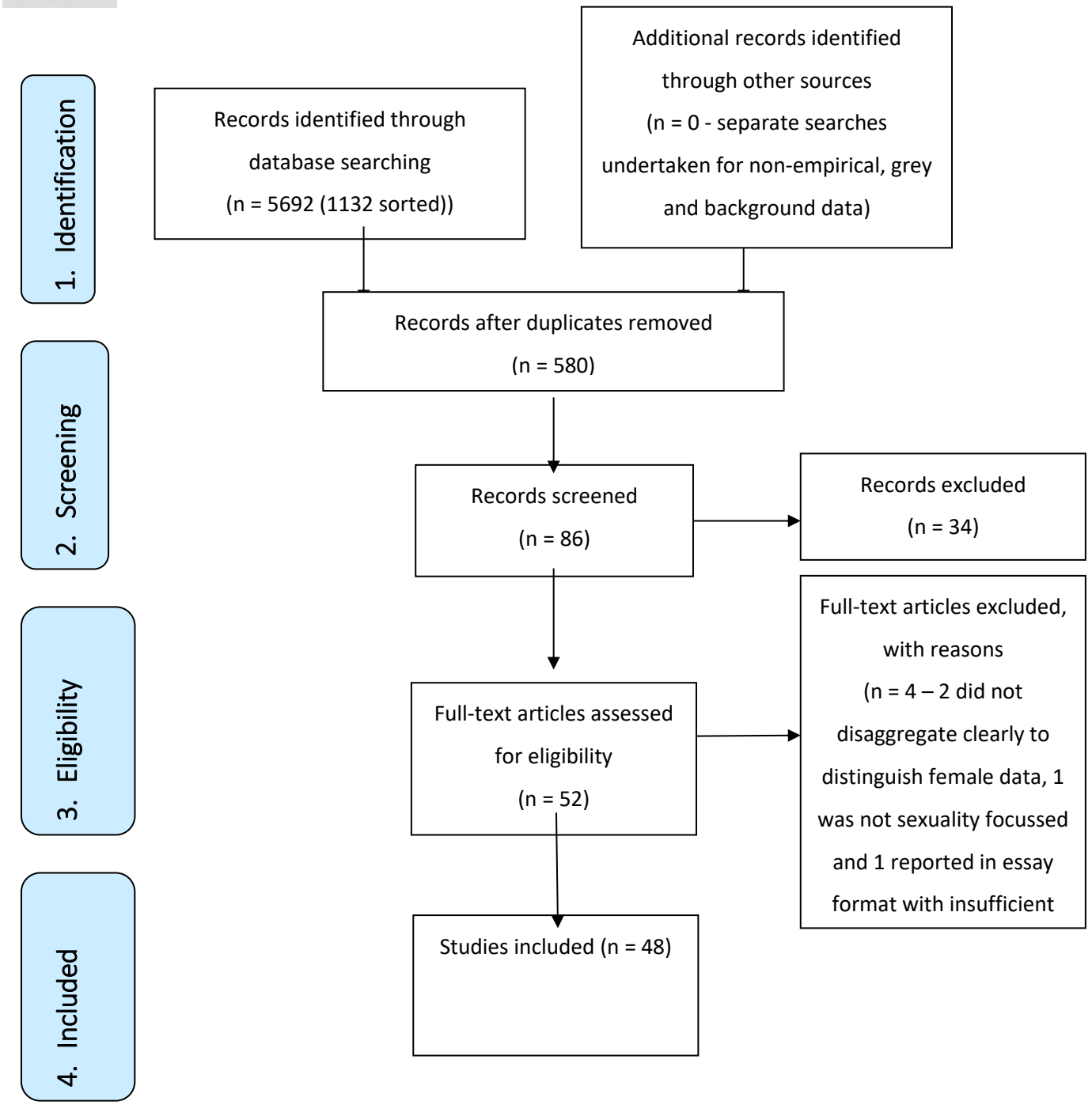
Appendix 1 - Prisma Flow Diagram

PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram



Appendix 2 - Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule Draft

The following demographic details will not be held alongside your contact details but will be used within the analysis of the interview.

Age:

Employment:

Relationship status:

Self-classification of ethnicity:

Self-classification of sexual orientation:

These questions form the main part of the data gathering for my PhD programme. The questions are flexible and not designed to give yes no answers rather they aim to find out your experiences from your perspective in your own words.

Feel free any time to stop or ask any clarifying questions or if you would like a break at any time please let me know.

1. **When did you first begin using the internet and for what purpose?**

Prompts

- When did you first start using the internet at home?
- When did the internet become an established regular part of your life?
- What devices have you used to access the internet?
- What devices do you mainly use now?

2. **How would you describe your online life now?**

Prompts

- Please describe how you currently use the Internet and its value in your life
- How regularly do you go online
- What do you do online
- What sites do regularly use online
- What if any social media platforms do you use
- How many hours do you think you spend online in a day and week

3. **How would you describe yourself as a sexual person?**

Prompts

- What does the term sexual identity mean to you?
- How would you define your sexual preferences? I.e. in the main what do you want/ or not want from your sexual experiences.
- Are your preferences fixed or do they change according to situation or partner?
- How comfortable are you communicating your sexual preferences?
- How do you talk to your friends about this subject?

4. **Can you describe when you first became aware of your sexual development in adolescence?**

Prompts

- How did this make you feel?
- What sources of information about sexual interaction did you have?
- Who did you talk to about this aspect of your life?

5. **Have you ever used the internet for sexual purpose? For example viewing imagery, information about sex, meeting partners?**

Prompts

- Can you describe this activity?
- How regularly do you do this?
- How does your online activity involve other people?
- Has anything about your sexual life or outlook changed as a result of what you've done online, if so can you describe this?
- Is there anything you are curious about that you haven't yet explored? Does anything hold you back from doing so?

6. **If you haven't used the internet for sexual purposes can you say why?**

Prompts

- Is there anything you are curious about that you haven't yet explored? Does anything hold you back from doing so?

7. **What relationship do you see between your online life and your sexual identity?**

Prompts

- How has this evolved over time?
- How has your sexual confidence been affected by your time online?
- How positive has the online environment been for you?
- What would you change about the online environment in order to make it as positive a place to support sexual identity?

8. **Finally having discussed what we have do have any other thoughts about the topic that have come up as we've spoken today?**

Thank you for talking with me today your experiences are a really valuable contribution and I really appreciate your time and input

Author & Date	Design	Aims	Sample Type & Size	Data Collection	Ethics	Tests & Analysis	Summary of Findings	Discussion	Themes
Albright, J.M. (2008)	Quantitive. secondary investigation of online survey data from Elle / MSNBC.com Cybersex survey	To explore differences between people relating to the use of the internet for sexual purposes and the consequent impact of this activity in personal and relationship terms	15246 total, 11387 men, 3859 women. Adult sample Women mean age 35.15 (90% straight, 8% bisexual, 2% gay – self identified) Men mean age 39.16 (93% straight, 3% bisexual, 3% gay – self identified)	Secondary data analysis from the online results to establish the relationship between sex, sexual identity and relationship status to sexual activity online	Not discussed	Chi square analysis and binary logical regression using an Forward:LR procedure resulting in chi square statisitics and odds ratios using sex, sexual identity and marital status as predictor variables, p <0.05 significant.	75% 0f men and 41% of women in the sample had viewed porn. Men and gay men/lesbians were more likely to access porn or engage in other sex-seeking behaviours than heterosexual people or women. Women report more negative consequences e.g. poor body image, body criticism from partners, pressure to re-enact porn, and less actual sex. Men reported criticising partners' bodies more and less interest in actual sex. Married and divorced people were more likely than single people to seek a serious relationship online. Only 2% of porn users could be classified as compulsive (> 11 hours use a week)	This study aimed to look at a broader population than previous research. Compulsive use of the internet for sexual purposes was equal across men and women but was more likely in those who were single and LGBT than heterosexual. Married people were five times more likely to be looking for a serious relationship on dating sites than singles and were more likely to go on dates as a result of joining a site it was postulated that this was as a result of potentially looking for a mate replacement before ending a relationship.	Sexual identity Pornography Fidelity Sexual behaviour online Online dating

Appendix 3 - Literature Analysis Matrix Sample

Appendix 4 - Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF Hull

CONSENT FORM

Title of the study: 'Women online; what has the internet meant for adult women's sexual identities?'

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Sheena MacRae, a Postgraduate student researcher from the University of Hull, UK. I understand that the project is designed to explore the relationship between online life and women's sense of their sexual identity. I will be one of approximately 20 people being interviewed for this research.

Instructions

Please tick each box when you agree with the statement attached to it Tick box

1. I have understood the information given to me about the research project and I have been given a copy of the information sheet to keep. ☐
2. The purpose of research has been explained to me and I have had opportunity to ask questions. The procedures involved in the research have been explained to me and I understand them. ☐
3. I have been made aware and understand that if I speak of actions, or intended
   actions, of a criminal nature that these do not fall under the bounds of confidentiality as laid out here. I understand these would need to be reported by the researcher to any relevant authorities. ☐
4. I understand that my involvement in this study, particularly the information collected will be anonymised and kept confidential. It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the research project has been completed. ☐
5. I understand that the research forms part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Health Studies and the findings may result in publication. ☐
6. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up until seven days after interview without giving reason and without my legal rights being affected. ☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study ☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 5 – Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF Hull

INFORMATION SHEET

Title of the study: 'Women online; what has the internet meant for adult women's sexual identities?'

You are invited to take part in the above named study. Before you decide if you want to take part it is important to understand why the research is being done and what will it involve.

Please take time to read the following information carefully. If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information please contact me or my supervisors, our details are at the end of this form.

Take time to decide whether or not to take part and thank you for your consideration.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of the women who have lived through their adolescence offline and now are adults within a digitally connected world. The study aims to explore what relationship if any exists between what a woman does online and how she views her own sexual identity. For the purpose of this study the researcher uses the term sexual identity to describe how a women might view herself as a sexual being and could be said to include the following

- Sexual preferences / likes and dislikes
- Confidence in communicating sexual preferences
- Perception of the importance of sex within a woman's life
- Concepts of normality and where a woman feels her behaviour and preferences fit within her own concept
- Sexual orientation

Why I have been chosen?

You have been chosen to take part because you are a woman within the age group of 35-45 and have indicated that you spend time online.

Do I have to take part?

There is no obligation to participate. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you wish to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you do decide to participate you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be interviewed by Sheena MacRae (researcher) to share your experience. For this I will ask for your permission to audiotape the interview, which will last for between 60 to 90 minutes

What do I have to do?

If you decide to participate you will attend for the interview at a convenient time arranged for you, to take place in the Department of Health and Social Care, within the grounds of the University of Hull

What is being discussed?

You will be invited to share your experience regarding the topics of the study namely your online life and sexual identity. The interview will be completed in a flexible manner to suit your particular responses. The conversation will be recorded for analysis but it will not be made available to anybody except Sheena MacRae (researcher) and her supervisors. The recordings will be destroyed as soon as transcription and analysis is finished. You will be given the opportunity to see and approve the transcribed interview if you wish to confirm this represents what you said at interview.

What will I be asked?

To give you an idea of the nature of the study the following are sample questions taken from the initial interview schedule.

1. *How would you describe yourself as a sexual person?*

2. *Have you ever used the internet for sexual purpose? For example viewing imagery, information about sex, meeting partners?*

Please note the nature of this research means the questions are subject to change but the questions above do give a good indication of the discussion likely to be entered into in the interview.

What are possible disadvantages and risk of taking part in the study?

As the study aims to achieve a better understanding of the experiences women online as regards their sexual lives it is not expected that any participants will be disadvantaged by taking part. It is recognised however that the subject matter of the study is intimate and participants should remember that they can stop the interview at any point should they feel the need to do so.

The study is intended to give women the opportunity to think about and discuss their sexual identity in a safe space, free from judgement. The researcher has a background in social care and has worked extensively around issues of sexual health and emotional wellbeing and will endeavour to enable participants to discuss their personal experiences in a way that is comfortable to them. A list of

supporting services will be made available to all participants, should matters arise which cause them concern, and the researcher will respond to any questions regarding participants responses after interviews take place and will remove participants data from the study after interview should this be requested.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Hopefully taking part in this research can be seen as an opportunity for you to assess your own sexual identity and from this point it might enable you to gain confidence in your sexual self or perhaps highlight issues you never thought of specifically before. Think of the interview as a way to air your views in way that you do not have to edit yourself. The more honest you are about feelings and experiences relating to the topics of online life and sexual identity the better for the research. Having taught sex and relationship education in schools and teaching adults around sexuality there are not many topics in relation to sexuality and relationships that the researcher has not worked with so please be as open as you can.

The main thing the study aims to do is develop theory which could be subsequently used in a therapeutic context with other women and as such it is hoped that you as a participant could see this as a secondary benefit to taking part by contributing to other women's lives in a positive manner. It is hoped this study will engage with women who will come to see themselves as the pioneers of the digital world that they are.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Information which is collected about you during the course of the study will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you and the data you will provide will be anonymised so that you will not be identified in any way. As with any confidentiality policy however there are limits with regard to disclosures with legal implications. If you inform the researcher of activity linked to a criminal offence you have committed or intend to commit the interview would cease and this information would be passed to relevant authorities. In no other instance however would this occur.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The anonymous results will be used as part of the fulfilment of my PhD study and conference presentations. It will also be used for publication so that a wider audience will be informed of the findings.

Who is organising the research?

The research is being conducted by Sheena MacRae a postgraduate student researcher towards a PhD at the University of Hull, in the Faculty of Health and Social Care within the Maternal, Reproductive, Relationships and Sexual Health Research group. Sheena has a background in sexual health promotion within the NHS, and has provided training to wide range of groups from young people to professionals around a range of topics relating to health, as well as client centred work in social care settings.

Who has reviewed the study?

The Ethics Committee within the Faculty of Health and Social Care of the University of Hull have reviewed and approved the study.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and your signed consent form to keep

Contact for further information

Sheena MacRae

Postgraduate Student Researcher

The Maternal, Reproductive and Sexual Health Research Development Group

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Appendix 6 – Supporting Agencies

WSI Study 2016

Supporting Agencies

If taking part in this in study has brought up issues that you would like to explore further the local health trust provides and emotional wellbeing services which organises counselling services to People in the Hull area: Details are available at:

http://www.humber.nhs.uk/services/emotionalwellbeingHull.htm

The service can be contacted as follows

Emotional Wellbeing Service

Humber NHS Trust

Wilberforce Health Centre

6-10 Story Street

Hull

HU1 3SA

TEL: 01482 344958

You can refer yourself to the service through Let's Talk

By phone on 01482 247 111

By texting TALK to 61825

By booking and appointment online by visiting www.letstalkhull.org.uk

In addition, the CASA suite (Care After Sexual Assault) offers support to victims of sexual assault and rape and can be contacted as follows:

By phone: 01482 305037 (Monday to Friday, 8.00am – 4.00pm, closed bank holidays)

Online http:www.casasuite.org.uk/contactus

If you do not live in Hull and are interested in counselling services, your GP should be able to refer you to services in your area. The following national agencies overleaf may also be of help to you

National Agencies

NHS Choices provides a range of information on mental health issues, treatment and support

http://www.nhsuk/pages/home.aspx

The Samaritans provide a listening service to anyone experiencing difficulties and struggling to cope with life

http://www.samaritans.org/ Tel: 116 123 (in the UK)

MIND provides a range of information relating to mental health and wellbeing

http://www.mind.org.uk

Appendix 7 – Ethics Approval

UNIVERSITY OF Hull

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Sheena MacRae
Faculty of Health and Social Care
University of Hull

Faculty of Health and Social Care
Research Ethics Committee

T 01482 464680
E J.Dyson@hull.ac.uk

REF 218

31 May 2016

Dear Sheena

RE: Sexuality 2.0? Women (Re) constructing sexual identity in the digital age

Thank you for your considered responses to the points raised by the Faculty of Health & Social Care Research Ethics Committee. I am happy to grant approval by chairs action as per terms of reference of the FHSC REC with the condition that:

- any materials yet to be seen are submitted for chairs consideration prior to being circulated.

I wish you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Judith Dyson
Chair, FHSC Research Ethics Committee

cc file

University of Hull
Hull Campus
Hull, HU6 7RX
Campus switchboard
01482 346311
www.hull.ac.uk

Appendix 8 – Materials Approval

UNIVERSITY OF Hull

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Sheena MacRae
Faculty of Health and Social Care
University of Hull

Faculty of Health and Social Care
Research Ethics Committee

T 01482 464680
E J.Dyson@hull.ac.uk

REF 218

31 May 2016

Dear Sheena

RE: Sexuality 2.0? Women (Re) constructing sexual identity in the digital age

With reference to my letter of 31 May 2016 I would like to thank you for letting me have sight of your web pages. I am happy with the content of them and confirm that you have met the condition of approval by Chair's action.

Please refer to the Research Ethics Committee web page for reporting requirements in the event of subsequent amendments to your study.

I wish you continued success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Judith Dyson
Chair, FHSC Research Ethics Committee

cc file

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