Exploring the Lived Experience of Female Users of Online Sexual Activities in the UK

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Abstract

The Internet has long been considered a platform that provides easy access to sexual content, while also offering anonymity and affordability. In spite of its increased prevalence, an insufficient number of studies have focused on the experiences of females who participate in online sexual activity. It may be necessary for therapists to support females who present with concerns regarding cybersex usage; however, research indicates clinical practitioners do not consider themselves suitably prepared to work effectively with such clients, due to insufficient training and a general lack of empirical research in the literature. Thus, it appears there is a need for further research in this field to offer insight and guidance for clinicians.

This qualitative research aimed to explore how females within the United Kingdom experience their online sexual lives, and the positive and negative feelings that such experiences engender. The phenomenological epistemology and relativist ontology underpinning this research focused on comprehending the participants' subjective lived experiences; this emphasis appears to be in line with the philosophical basis of counselling psychology. Four female participants, all older than 18 years old, who had been online in the previous three months to engage in online sexual activity, took part in online, semi-structured interviews. Interview transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which generated three master themes: 1) an enticing space; 2) paradoxical attitudes; and 3) the painful ramifications. Each theme contained a number of sub-themes. Novel insights with regard to the interplay between how women make meaning and their responses emphasise the multifaced and complicated experience of participants with respect to online sexual activity.

The study findings are reviewed with respect to the broader literature. Various consequences for practice are considered, including that clinicians should be encouraged to diverge from a pathological model to one that promotes the well-being of women and validates their emotions and experiences. It is expected that giving insight into the lived experiences of women who participate in online sexual activity could enable practitioners to empathise with and show more understanding of them when they are seeking support.

The study limitations along with avenues for further research are discussed.

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Abbreviations

APA	American Psychiatric Association
BPS	British Psychological Society
CoP	Counselling Psychology
DSM-V	Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition
ISST-Test	Internet Sex Screening Test
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
OSA	Online Sexual Activities
TA	Thematic Analysis
UK	United Kingdom
WHO	World Health Organization

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Study Overview

Over the last two decades, the rapid development of Internet technology has meant a sharp rise in online sexual content (Dhuffar & Griffiths, 2015). The Internet thus constitutes a highly accessible tool utilised by many for a broad variety of recreational pursuits, including online sexual activity (OSA) (Wéry & Billieux, 2016), more commonly known as cybersex (Döring, 2009). The Internet arguably enables users to explore their sexuality freely, and potentially counter to or outside of more restrictive sexual norms (Griffiths, 2012). However, recent research in the area of OSA has predominantly focused on men, often overlooking the experiences of women. Moreover, studies including women in their exploration of OSA have often adopted a pathological view of OSA (e.g., Beutel et al., 2017), whereas in recent years, a sex-positivity approach has become increasingly popular in various circles, including counselling psychology (CoP), focusing on female sexuality as a source of wellness (Burnes et al., 2017; Popovic, 2006). In addition, studies including or focusing on women and OSA are often quantitative in nature, exploring, for instance, the types of OSA accessed and the devices used in different age brackets, often in a specific population (e.g., Hispanic populations (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2021; Giménez-García et al., 2020), or Germany (Beutel et al., 2017)), or amongst university students (Giménez-García et al., 2020). Even in the limited qualitative studies available (e.g., Courtice et al., 2021, who conducted Thematic Analysis on open-ended survey responses), OSA use amongst British females was not explored. An in-depth exploration of female experience using such tools as interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is also yet to be conducted. Thus, there appears to be a distinct gap in the literature base, which this study set out to address to enable British women's experiences of OSA to be investigated.

1.2. Personal Context

After completing my bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology, I decided to explore sexuality; thus, I applied for a master's programme specifically focusing on this topic in 2017. Two of the lecturers on the programme are authors referenced in the literature review of this thesis, such is their expert status on this topic. However, after graduation, I chose not to pursue a career as a sex therapist, as I prefer to practise more holistically, covering a greater range of client presentations. Although the doctorate in CoP satisfied

my requirements with regard to teaching, practice, research, and reflexivity, a subject that was not included in the curriculum was the alignment of female sexuality with sex-positivity. On one occasion, when I was on a secondary care setting placement in my first year, a female who had been given a referral to me as a result of obsessive-compulsive disorder spoke honestly about how she used the Internet to achieve sexual gratification. This experience made me realise that I had not given due consideration to the reality that women use the Internet for sexual reasons. This piqued my interest, and I began to explore the literature on this topic. I observed that few researchers had focused on female participants/users of OSA in the context of the United Kingdom (UK). I believe that concentrating on female users is a reflection of the desire to understand women in relation to this aspect of the Internet, and a desire to understand people forms one of the many reasons why I initially became interested in CoP.

1.3. Positioning as a Researcher

This section discusses the research methodologies that are frequently used in CoP, and subsequently, how my ontology, epistemology and research paradigm are positioned in this context. I personally associate with the humanistic values that underpin therapeutic CoP practices, with the experience of the individual remaining central (BPS, 2017). Analogous to the theoretical underpinnings of CoP, my personal position diverges from positivism because I am convinced that experience is influenced by subjectivity. This is particularly apparent with regard to CoP practice, and it is my belief that all individuals experience therapy in different ways according to the moment; therefore, numerous ontological 'realities' exist and are constantly changing or being negotiated, debated and interpreted at any given time (Ponterotto, 2005; Zahavi, 2019). Thus, I associate with a relativist ontology and phenomenological epistemology.

Based on this stance, I appreciate all research in this domain and do not assume that a specific methodology or epistemology has superiority or exposes a greater amount of 'truth' than others. Thus, I value and incorporate a wide range of research that draws on various epistemologies and ontologies that are consistently epistemologically coherent, in the sense that claims are in accordance with the aims of the study. In my role as a scientist-practitioner, I recognise the benefit of research, as it both informs my personal practice and furthers the development of the field. It also usefully focuses on the specific requirements of my clients, as well as the key actors participating in a specific project.

1.4. Adopting the Sex-Positivity Approach in Research

Sex positivity embraces the idea that an individual might explore their sexuality without judgment or shame and challenges the approach that has been historically adopted by research on sexuality in the area of CoP and psychology more generally (Burnes et al., 2017). Arguably, female sexuality has generally been disregarded, belittled, or pathologised in Western societies (Schneider, 2000; Ferree, 2003). Moving research to a framework that is more sex-positive necessitates a shift from using established but false protocols to assess the comparative healthiness of sexual activities (Popovic, 2006) to recognising sexual diversity as a factor that defines what it means to be human. Therefore, rather than considering sexuality as being associated with dysfunction, addiction, or a source of problems, the present research views sexuality as a source of curiosity, respect, wellness, and inclusivity. Adopting such an approach is aligned with my desire to remain a curious, non-judgemental and open researcher and CoP practitioner.

1.5. Counselling Psychology Context and Rationale

This topic and the adoption of a sex-positivity approach have specific relevance to and intersects with CoP in a variety of ways (Burnes et al., 2017). Firstly, CoP is committed to championing the subjective experience and meanings of specific clients without assuming that objectively discoverable truth exists. Secondly, the field is committed to developing insight, as well as increasing clients' capacity for choice. Thirdly, counselling psychologists are strongly committed to advocating for marginalised groups (Douglas et al., 2016). Hence, research on sex-positivity may assist with helping professionals to action fundamental values of CoP, such as social justice, wellness, and resilience (Burnes et al., 2017). Because CoP is committed to ensuring that individuals are valued for who they are, alongside confronting discrimination, an investigation into the ways in which females explore their sexuality and engage in OSA in the twenty-first century has strong relevance to CoP practice.

Nevertheless, research indicates that sexuality is a vital component of the process of counselling that is largely neglected by mental health practitioners (Reissing & Di Giulio, 2010). Practitioners may also, as members of society, have internalised negative ideas and stereotypes regarding female sexuality and sexual practice. Yet sex-positivity, as argued by Burnes et al. (2017, p. 471), 'is particularly aligned with CoP values because it conceptualises sex and sexuality as part of healthy development, enhancing client wellness and resilience throughout the lifespan'. Moreover, these authors call for practitioners to become leaders in adopting and promoting sex-positivity frameworks in

their work. Therefore, adopting a sex-positivity stance in this research would not only help me as a CoP practitioner to internalise sex-positivity values, but, based on the findings, could prompt other professionals to do the same. This could generate a paradigm shift in attitudes towards sexuality – especially female sexuality – through their work with clients (Ponzetti, 2015) in which 'all types of relational and sexual connectedness are considered valuable, as long as there is honest communication, safety, and consent among the parties involved' (Richards & Barker, 2013; cited in Burnes et al., 2017, p. 476). This can help alleviate any sense of shame and/or distress in individuals and assist them in perceiving their sexuality as a source of potential strength (Burnes et al., 2012).

Whilst the approach of the present study is fundamentally idiographic and phenomenological, transferable conclusions may be inferred regarding the experiences of females who go online for sexual pleasure and gratification (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Consequently, the outcomes may be therapeutically beneficial when working with females who report experiences analogous to those presented in the current research. To enhance the support provided to such women, it is critical that one begins to understand how females make meaning of sexual practices in relation to cyberspace, especially given the lack of research regarding sex-positivity and female sexuality explored via OSA. Although the size of the sample used in qualitative research limits the volume of data, largely preventing the outcomes being generalised to the broader population, the data may be sufficiently rich to facilitate the expansion of the body of knowledge, as well as to advance pertinent research and practice (Harper & Thompson, 2011).

1.6. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis begins with a critical review of the literature, involving a more extensive investigation of the primary ideas and concepts that underpin the thesis, through which the work that focuses on females' experience of OSA is assessed and discussed. This chapter (Chapter Two) culminates in the research question for the present study. The methodology is described in Chapter Three. My personal epistemological stance, as well as the reasons for selecting Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA), are then explained. Subsequently, the design quality and ethical considerations are reviewed. Lastly, the framework of the research in addition to the processes of collecting and analysing the data are presented. The data are then analysed in Chapter Four, before being discussed with respect to current literature in Chapter Five. Chapter Five also describes the research implications and pertinence of the findings to CoP. Finally, it discusses the research limitations and presents opportunities for further study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter commences by examining how key concepts are defined and then proceeds with a discussion of the notion of sexuality from a historical perspective, outlining its role as a social construct that has been influencing people's cognition, attitudes, and behaviour. Subsequently, an alternative to sex-negativity is considered by presenting sex- positivity, following which the relatively new phenomenon of experiencing sexual life via the Internet is discussed. The positive and negative consequences of OSA are then reviewed, followed by a particular consideration of studies focusing on OSA usage among women. The chapter concludes by considering the relevance of OSA research to CoP, identifying the gap in the literature, and setting out the research question examined in this qualitative research.

2.1 Research Method

The creation of this comprehensive literature review relied on an extensive exploration of scientific articles accessible on the Internet. The research spanned the timeframe from 2019 to 2023, encompassing a thorough examination of various online platforms. Notable electronic databases, including EBSCO, EThOS British Library, Google Scholar, ProQuest, PsycINFO, PubMed, ScienceDirect, Springer, and the UEL Library, were systematically combed through to gather a diverse array of scholarly resources.

To facilitate this search, a carefully crafted set of keywords was employed in search engines, enabling a targeted exploration of the subject matter. These keywords encompassed a broad spectrum of topics related to OSA, such as online sexual activities, cybersex, OSA, sexuality, online sexuality, online sexual behaviour, online sexual activity among women, the history of sexuality, counselling psychology, sex-positivity, and sex-negativity. This methodical approach ensured the inclusion of relevant and varied perspectives within the literature review, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the subject across different dimensions and disciplines.

2.2. Definitions

2.2.1. Sex-positivity

The sex-positivity approach assumes that a wide range of sexual activities and desires are intrinsically healthy, as well as being significant elements of human advancement, interaction, and well-being; as a result, Burnes et al. (2017) advocate the incorporation of a sex-positive approach within the work of CoPs. From a sex-positivity viewpoint, while

one individual could decide not to have an active sexual life, a different person could decide to participate in regular and varied sexual activities (Glickman, 2000). Thus, a sex-positivity approach encompasses a range of sexually expressive activities and stances, including sexual behaviour, orientation, identities, gender expression, and numerous significant aspects of human diversity (Fahs, 2014). On this basis, sex-positivity is in accordance with the stance adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010). This organisation claims that under the framework of sex-positivity, eroticism, orientation and sexual intimacy are perceived to be factors that enhance the communication skills, personalities, and overall lives of individuals. Moreover, individuals who adopt a sex-positivity approach have been found to be open, eager to communicate, and accepting of differences in terms of sexuality and sexual practices (Williams et al., 2013).

2.2.2. Sex-negativity

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), sex-negativity is a 'negative attitude or stance towards any sexual behaviour other than procreative marital coitus' (APA, n.d., para. S). In societies that are sex-negative, sexual asceticism is encouraged, while sex is predominantly portrayed as posing significant risks, being troublesome or potentially adversarial (Williams et al., 2013). Additionally, sex-negativity denotes an attitude that considers sex to be intrinsically indecent, risky, pathological, or aberrant (Horowitz & Spicer, 2013). Specific types of sex are perceived to be conventional and are therefore allowable under the constraints of heterosexual procreative monogamy (Kearney, 2019). Thus, sex-negativity is connected with prejudicial attitudes regarding different types of sexual behaviour, including ageism, homophobia, racism, and sexism (Glickman, 2000).

2.2.3. Online Sexual Activities

OSA are defined as activities, materials and behaviour that utilise the Internet and are sexual in nature (Döring, 2009, 2012; Grov et al., 2014). Alternative words to describe the phenomenon include cybering and cybersex (Döring, 2009). Cooper et al. (2004a) and Wéry and Billieux (2017) proposed using the term cybersex to define the practice of using the Internet for sexual purposes. However, Daneback et al. (2005) suggested that cybersex was a specific OSA subcategory, involving the participation of two or multiple individuals in online discussions about sex to achieve sexual gratification. Thus, OSA definitions are arguably broader than cybersex, generally incorporating all types of internet usage related to sexuality (Cooper, 2002). To ensure that the concept is clear, and given the multiple possible meanings of cybersex, the term OSA is adopted in the present study.

2.3. Sexuality

2.3.1. History and Background

Prior to the development of medicine, Western societal views regarding what was natural and normal in relation to sexuality were largely influenced by Christianity and cultural scripts derived from religious traditions (Potts, 2002). Moreover, theology surrounding sexual nature was based on the biological need to perpetuate existence through sexual reproduction because it was about lineage, heritage, and inheritance, especially for landowners (Poczai & Santiago-Blay, 2022). Under this framework, males possessed an instinctive sexual desire and actively engaged in sex, whereas females were either portrayed as being asexual, passive, and pure, or dichotomously as posing a threat through sexual allure and dominance (Potts, 2002). Starting in the 1800s, the ubiquity of hysteria led to female sexuality being utilised as a diagnosis of the condition (Olding & Moore, 2019). This 'demonological-scientific' approach resulted in women whose desires were not aligned with Victorian ideals being institutionalised (Tasca et al., 2012, p. 110). However, over the course of the twentieth century, the medical validity of this term was called into question, although the disapproval and control of female sexuality remained (Olding & Moore, 2019). Consequently, the frequently misconstrued and misunderstood nature of mental disorder, particularly in women, has engendered both a scientific and moral bias, yet has been described as a form of prejudice that is largely unscientific (Angermeyer et al., 2011). Western paradigms have comprehended sexuality on the basis of either religious or evolutionary theory, where cisgender, heterosexual partners that partake in sex for reproductive purposes are considered to be the norm, while other people are humiliated, suppressed, asexualised, or hypersexualised (Burnes, 2017).

The term sexuality now evokes a wide range of disparate meanings. It has been construed as: an innate element of personality that underpins mental health and maturity (Johnson, 2007); a powerful and 'natural' drive (Tiefer, 2010, p. 31); and encompassing different formulations of 'normal' and 'abnormal' sexualities (Tiefer, 2010, p. 7). Based on established differences in the level of pleasure that women and men derive from sex (Guggino & Ponzetti, 2002), other scholars associate sexuality largely with (hetero) sexual intercourse (Bancroft, 2009), which appears to indicate a male bias. Moreover, the concept of the 'body beautiful', through which the physical body is viewed as an external marker of sexuality, has instituted a standard of physical perfection for women that is seen as desirable (Travis et al., 2000, p. 239).

The problems linked to attempting to define sexuality largely emerge because it is a social construct (Seidman, 2010), and thus, as proposed by Foucault (1978), it is grounded in the cultural/social context in which it is comprehended, which undergoes a continual process of change (Foucault, 1978). Expanding on the ideas of Foucault along with those of Weeks (1985), numerous researchers have chosen to adopt this social constructionist view of sexuality, interpreting it as being socially, culturally, and historically constructed (Hawkes, 1996; Horrocks, 1997). At the core of these considerations are matters relating to power (Foucault, 1978), identity, and self-perception (Giddens, 1992).

2.3.2. Moving from a Sex-negativity Culture to a Sex-positivity Approach

Numerous researchers argue that the sexuality of women continues to be overly medicalised (Cacchioni & Tiefer, 2012; Tiefer, 2010). Medicalisation refers to the process whereby a personal experience or social situation is transformed, particularly those that are considered aberrant or contravene societal norms, into a medical issue that needs to be treated by specialists in the field of medicine (Conrad & Schneider, 1980). The key areas on which medicalisation focuses are sexual behaviour and genital function. An abnormal degree of focus on sex, on the experience of orgasm, or on genital response patterns, have been categorised as being 'dysfunctions', leading to the development of a plethora of expert assessments and treatments (Tiefer, 2010, p. 245).

Numerous researchers have historically demonstrated that the medicalisation of the lives of females has been detrimental for those involved (Tiefer, 2010). Arguably, scientific research itself has been influenced by the medicalisation of female sexuality, which may contribute to ongoing stigmatisation and social injustice surrounding women and sex (Tiefer, 2010). For instance, a review of the literature reveals that the number of studies focusing on sexual pathology significantly exceeds that of healthy sexuality, supporting the idea that sexual dysfunction has historically formed the main focus of research (Miller & Byers, 2008). Social conventions and historical ideas/beliefs permeate how people discuss and respond to sex (Mollen et al., 2020), which may explain why research has focused on pathologising non-normative sexuality. Sex-negativity may therefore be reinforced by the language surrounding sex (Glickman, 2000).

However, despite the sex-negativity scripts that arguably continue to dominate twenty-first century society (Masters et al., 2013), studies demonstrate that there is a strong correlation between sex and happiness. For instance, researchers have established the positive improvement in wellness (Laumann et al., 2006) and life satisfaction (Muise et al., 2016; Stephenson & Meston, 2015) that occurs through sex. Laumann et al. (2006)

reported that the importance of sex, satisfaction with sexual functioning and emotional and physical gratification are all strong predictors of happiness. In a similar vein, Stephenson and Meston (2015) found that cross-sectionally and over time, sexual well-being predicts satisfaction with life. Data indicate that if healthy sexuality is not represented in suitably diverse ways, groups exposed to marginalisation could continue to be stigmatised (Mollen et al., 2020). The WHO (2010) called for the consideration of the multiple aspects of sexuality, including sexual functioning, sexual orientation, and relationships, as well as facets that are generally ignored, such as body perception, gender identity, and reproductive health and practices.

Sexuality affects people throughout their lives and is strongly linked to factors pertaining to diversity because individuals whose identities are marginalised are frequently the subject of sexual stigmatisation (Hall & Graham, 2014). Therefore, adopting a sex-positive approach is highly suitable for counselling psychologists studying lifespan development, well-being, and health, how people interact with their environment, as well as multiculturalism and social justice (Cruz et al., 2017).

2.4. The Internet and Sexual Activities

The Internet can be perceived as a means of accessing an abundance of sexual content and material (Dhuffar & Griffiths, 2015). It constitutes a highly accessible tool utilised by many individuals for a broad variety of recreational pursuits, including OSA (Wéry & Billieux, 2016). Statista published data revealing that 4% of all websites around the world contain pornographic content (Wise, 2023). Approximately 13% of all search prompts performed on a global basis are associated with porn or sex. The devices utilised most include desktop computers, tablets, and smartphones (Wise, 2023). Around 83% of users who visit pornographic sites utilise their smartphones for accessing explicit material, with a 3% increase in the prevalence of using phones to view porn between 2020 and 2021. However, in the same time period, there was a decrease in the utilisation of tablets and desktops to access porn as 20% of all searches associated with this form of activity originated from mobile devices (Wise, 2023).

The Internet allows users to freely explore their sexuality without being constrained by oppressive sexual norms (Griffiths, 2012). Cooper et al. (2004a) focused on the idiosyncrasies of the Internet that render it an attractive platform for sexual practices. They contended that the primary reasons why online sex practices have become popular include accessibility, affordability, and anonymity, which they called the ‘Triple A Engine’ (Cooper et al., 2004a, p. 131). The Internet, therefore, has led to a transformation

regarding the way information is accessed and provides unparalleled levels of sexual opportunities (Durkin & Bryant, 1995), especially with the development of mobile phone technology. This enables individuals to access OSA from the comfort of their own home, on the go, at any time or location (Karapetsas & Fotis, 2013). It is also affordable: pornographic content can generally be accessed without charge; sex products can be purchased at reduced costs; and by taking part in chat forums, users are able to engage with people prior to meeting in person (Cooper et al., 2004a). Anonymity is established as users are able to access sex materials in private and remote ways (Cooper et al., 2004a). A fuller discussion of the benefits of accessing sexual content on the Internet is provided in section 2.3.2.

2.4.1. Types of Online Sexual Activities

There are various reasons underpinning OSA usage, with different researchers suggesting distinct classifications of use. Shaughnessy et al. (2017) differentiated between non-arousal (seeking information about sexual health), lone arousal (browsing pornographic material), and arousal with a partner (sharing messages of a sexually explicit nature). Delmonico and Miller (2003) stated that OSA is something that is performed in isolation by people who prefer not to interact with others, with some research suggesting that the OSA researched most frequently is a lone activity – browsing pornography (Willoughby et al., 2018). However, social participation is a different OSA category performed by individuals who desire to interact with others in online environments such as by engaging in chats of a sexual nature. Sexting is also included in this category, which is a practice commonly performed by females today (Trub et al., 2021). Other researchers have indicated that OSA has a broad definition; Cooper et al. (2004b) suggested that it incorporates education, entertainment, searching for information, buying sexual material, and trying to discover new sexual partners in either online or offline environments. Thus, the OSA taxonomy encompasses a wide range of activities related to sexuality and has been supported by subsequent empirical research (Wéry & Billieux, 2016). Consequently, OSA as a term is useful in attempting to characterise the broad range of sexual practices accessible online (Barrada et al., 2019). Arguably, focusing on OSA in its entirety enables a more holistic study of the plethora of sexual activities and experiences that the Internet affords women, aligned with a relativist perspective. Moreover, focusing on separate, restricted categories of OSA usage may be reductionist, and might not afford a full examination or expression of the human lived experience regarding OSA if it is based on predetermined category systems (Courtice et al., 2021). Notably, there is a distinct lack

of research in this area adopting a more qualitative methodology such as IPA, which could give a broader and fuller insight into the range of OSA experiences and uses.

2.4.2. Online Sexual Activities as Positive or Beneficial

To obtain an understanding of the sexual expression of women that is more balanced and comprehensive, it is critical not to disregard positive consequences (Courtice et al., 2021). In the majority of situations, OSA usage is not problematic; users engage in it for recreational purposes (Albright, 2008; Ballester-Arnal et al., 2014) and can acquire positive outcomes from OSA usage, such as participating in new sexual experiences (Döring, 2009) and encountering potential partners and expanding social networks (Whitty, 2008). Other researchers have alluded to other positive consequences of OSA, including the ability to explore one's sexuality and expand one's sexual boundaries, validate one's identity, enhance one's body perspective, communicate more effectively, fulfil sexual desires and enhance sexual gratification alone and with a partner (Daneback et al., 2013; Döring, 2009; Grov et al., 2011).

However, a greater number of studies have been conducted on problematic rather than positive engagement in OSA and are arguably biased towards comprehending the negative consequences. As Daneback et al. (2005, p. 322) asserted, 'Cybersex can either be part of problematic behaviour or of a strategy to enhance one's sexuality and it is within the purview of clinicians to guide it away from the former and towards the latter.' This may especially pertain to women and OSA, given the taboo surrounding female sexuality more generally, as explored previously.

2.4.3. Online Sexual Activities as Risky or Problematic

Whilst there is research demonstrating the positive benefits of OSA (e.g., better sexual communication between partners; Grov et al., 2011), there is a wealth of research dedicated to exploring and explaining the disadvantages of OSA for well-being (Cooper et al., 2004b; Wéry et al., 2018). For example, Grov et al. (2008) interviewed 111 gay and bisexual men in New York City regarding the role the Internet played in sexual compulsivity. They found that for many participants, the Internet facilitated and encouraged compulsive and problematic sexual thoughts and behaviour and made them less discriminating about partners. Other research has found that increased use of OSA in high-school students in Indonesia was a significant risk factor for increased risky sexual behaviour in real life – especially for males (Ibrahim et al., 2021).

According to Ferree (2003, p. 390), 'for some people, web connections prompt almost instant addiction, much like the highly addictive nature of cocaine'. The hypothesis that addiction to cybersex is related to gratification appears to have validity in the context of female users (Laier et al., 2014). It is asserted that craving leads to dysfunctional OSA usage, which is associated with various issues, including: symptoms of depression and anxiety; problems with relationships and intimacy (Corley & Hook, 2012; Morgan, 2011); traumatic childhood experiences (Kor et al., 2013; Schwartz & Southern, 2000); financial and professional issues (Schneider, 2000); reduced sexual satisfaction (Stack et al., 2004); diminished interest in sex in offline environments (Albright, 2008); engaging in sexual practices with increased risk (Peter & Valkenburg, 2008); and feelings of guilt and shame (McBride et al., 2007). Dysfunctional OSA usage has been associated with a plethora of psychiatric conditions, as well as negative outcomes and impairments in everyday functioning (Banerjee & Rao, 2021; Carnes, 2001; Grov et al., 2008; Mihajilov & Vejmelka, 2017). Additionally, OSA usage could have detrimental outcomes such as sexual harassment and online stalking, cheating, or risky sex with respect to online dating, and abusive behaviour surrounding sexting/nude images, manifested through practices such as blackmail, cyberbullying, and revenge porn (Van Ouytsel et al., 2015).

2.3.3.1. Prevalence of Dysfunctional Online Sexual Activities

The prevalence of addiction to OSA is estimated to range from 3% to 16.8% in the general population (Cooper et al., 2002; Seegers, 2003). Such significant variances in the rates of prevalence stem from the use of different diagnostic criteria and/or distinct screening tools, which commonly occurs in epidemiological research on conditions for which diagnostic criteria have thus far not been clarified or acknowledged (de Alarcón et al., 2019). Nevertheless, in the population at large, the prevalence of sexual addiction (online/offline) ranges from 3-6% (Freimuth et al., 2008; Kuzma & Black, 2008). This may differ from statistics pertaining purely to problematic Internet use for OSA. The rates do seem to be increasing over the years. For example, whilst Cooper et al. (2000) determined that it was only possible to classify 1% of the participants in their study as cybersex compulsive, Cooper (2002) later found the rate of problematic Internet usage and self-reported anxiety concerning OSA to be 9.6%. This compares with 1% of pathological users identified among university students using the Internet Sex Screening Test (ISST-Test; Delmonico & Miller, 2003).

More recent studies appear to demonstrate a more rapid increase in levels of problematic OSA, especially among males. Ballester-Arnal et al. (2016), for instance, studied 322

Spanish adolescents (13-17-years-old) and found that 8.6% of boys were at risk of problematic use of OSA, compared with 2.2% of girls. In another study conducted in the United States on university students, Giordano and Cashwell (2017) applied the Sexual Addiction Screening Test Revised Scale (SAST-R; Carnes et al., 2010) and found that the frequency of problematic OSA usage was 10.3%. These figures do indicate that OSA addiction may be on the rise; yet given males are more likely to be at risk of, and demonstrate, problematic OSA, it is possible that males become the focus for greater research and intervention. This could overlook any negative/problematic experiences and subsequent interventions for women engaging in OSA.

Whilst scientists acknowledge and accept that OSA usage has the potential to be dysfunctional and linked with symptoms of addiction, there is no agreement as to how OSA addiction should be conceptualised (Kor et al., 2013). This is predominantly a result of the fact that the disorder has not been defined and classified according to valid empirical data (Wéry & Billieux, 2017). Hence, making a comparison between the findings of the limited number of studies on the topic is challenging given differences in terms of theory and methodology (Wéry & Billieux, 2017; Griffiths, 2012; Karila et al., 2014). This suggests that research should be performed utilising similar screening instruments and should consider and differentiate between the different kinds of online practices undertaken by individuals. The conceptual and theoretical framework that characterises the problematic OSA construct, in addition to the lack of explicit epidemiological data on the condition, could explain why the diagnostic criteria have not been included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Indeed, the APA reached the conclusion that insufficient empirical data was available to justify the inclusion of OSA as a new psychiatric disorder (Kafka, 2010). However, it should be noted that although the 5th edition did not include the disorder, Section 3 of the manual does refer to problematic Internet use in terms of online gaming (Internet Gaming Disorder), noting that further investigations into this disorder are required (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Offline compulsive sexual behaviour is included in the most recent version of the International Classification of Diseases (11th ed.; ICD-11; World Health Organisation, 2019). According to the classification of the WHO, impulse control disorder is a disorder similar to kleptomania or pyromania. These factors add to the discussions surrounding ‘sexual addiction’ in general and ‘cybersex addiction’ in particular (Voros, 2009), indicating that it may soon have a place within current diagnostic assessment tools, such as the DSM.

2.3.3.2. The Counselling Psychology Approach to Pathologising Terminology

Part of the difficulty surrounding the lack of official labels and subsequent diagnostic criteria for those that may pathologically engage in OSA, and the discourse focusing on suffering from a disorder or being addicted to OSA, may stem from debates surrounding the need for and usefulness of labels in the first place. Rather than respond to pathology and diagnostic labels, counselling psychologists may concentrate on understanding a client's experience and enabling and fostering well-being (Cooper, 2009). Sexual pathologies are defined according to space (culture) and time, meaning the definitions regarding what constitutes excessive, dysfunctional, pathological or healthy sexuality differ and/or change (Foucault, 1978). An issue that is considered to be problematic at a particular time could be regarded in a different manner in a subsequent era (e.g., transgenderism). Woolfe et al. (2016) contend that a questioning position is maintained by counselling psychologists regarding the medical model, as they prefer a value base that is more humanistic. Moreover, multiple therapeutic communities have criticised the stigmatisation induced when using labels such as OSA addict and sexual addict, which can potentially pathologise behaviour that is typical, ordinary, or even healthy (Hall, 2011).

2.5. Women and Online Sexual Activities

Studies focusing specifically on women and OSA are scant, yet some do exist. These studies are primarily quantitative in nature, with a few using mixed methods, indicating a real lack of qualitative studies researching lived experience. Yet they still indicate a range of benefits of OSA for women, although motivations for accessing OSA via the Internet change across the lifespan (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2021; Beutel et al., 2017). The following section critically reviews recent studies on women and OSA from a wider perspective than merely addictive or problematic usage.

Ballester-Arnal et al. (2021) investigated the drivers of OSA engagement, as well as problematic and excessive participation in OSA, among a large sample of participants. The recruitment of participants was performed online in four Hispanic countries. A total of 8,040 participants were included in the study sample, divided into five different age categories (although in the first and last categories (early adolescence and adolescents and the elderly), the number of participants totalled less than 500 (n = 373 and n = 466, respectively). The other three categories included more than 2,000 participants (18-26; 26-40; 41-60 age groups)). Males constituted the vast majority of participants in all groups except for the first group (44.5% males). Yet as stated by Ballester-Arnal et al. (2021), the

results were not affected by these gender differences, as all statistical analyses were conducted separately for males and females.

The research was divided into four different studies conducted across a three-year period. To perform their research, they employed three strategies: 1) self-reports on participants' OSA (e.g., average time spent accessing sites, devices used, and so on); 2) self-reports on perceived problematic participation in OSA; and 2) questions surrounding participants' sexual behaviour in offline environments (e.g., frequency of intercourse and sexual behaviours); and finally 3) the ISST-test (Delmonico & Miller, 2003); the Spanish version of the Internet Sex Screening Test (ISST), which 'evaluates the degree to which online sexual behaviour is excessive, problematic, and associated with significant distress and impairment' (p. 4). All analyses were performed with SPSS software, G*POWER software, and FACTOR software for detecting effect magnitude.

Their results indicate a strong prevalence of OSA throughout all age groups, including individuals in the 60+ age group. Individuals in the younger age groups used both computers and mobile technology for accessing OSA, whereas older individuals predominantly used computers. It appears that the rapid increase in new technologies is transforming the manner in which females access and engage in sexual interactions online, albeit mainly among younger people. This distinctive trend has significant consequences because the ability to access sex online has become easier as a result of mobile device usage, which could facilitate a greater prevalence of OSA. This research was the first to demonstrate the extent to which a particular OSA is prevalent throughout all age groups/life stages.

The findings indicated that, while over 80% of females in each the categories adolescence, young, and middle adulthood went online for sexual reasons, the proportion of older adults engaging in OSA was lower at 63% and decreased significantly to 34.6% among the elderly. With regard to the predilection for distinct kinds of OSA, it was found that the popularity of 'solitary-arousal OSA' (e.g., masturbation) was very high among all age categories, although young females preferred non-arousal sexual activities (e.g., sexual education). Individuals tended to use the Internet more for searching for sexual partners in young and middle adulthood, although this declined later in life. The practice of engaging in sexual practices online using a webcam became more prevalent from early adolescence into adulthood, and subsequently gradually declined with older age.

This study also aimed to explore the different motivations for OSA engagement, and found that these were, in part, dependant on age. In males, the primary motivations were to manage and enhance mood and/or avoid expressing emotions (although this latter motivation was significantly less prevalent in elderly respondents). For younger and middle-aged adult females however, OSA was most employed as a visual aid to stimulate arousal during masturbation, whereas elderly females were more likely to engage in OSA to learn about sex or as a distraction. The third and fourth aims of the study involved comparing the participants based on distinct indicators of excessive and problematic OSA usage. The ISST-Test (Delmonico & Miller, 2003) revealed the presence of small to moderate differences in age group in this respect; for females, most problematic OSA use on the ISST-Test was identified in the adolescence and early adulthood group, which tallied with the self-perceived severity perceptions from the participants themselves: 58% of the female adolescent age group had concerns about their OSA use, 11% thought that it was excessive, while 2.9% believed that OSA disrupted their lives.

A positivist stance was adopted when conducting this research in which standardised measurement instruments were employed for the purpose of measuring motivators and prevalence of OSA. Thus, it offers an informative overview across all life stages. Although the study outcomes were engaging and offered new insights, the research was undertaken with Hispanic participants, which may not correspond with the experience of females in Britain, and it sheds little light on the qualitative lived experiences of women.

Another study that examined Hispanic populations was conducted by Giménez-García et al. (2020). These researchers investigated the sexual experiences of 310 young Argentinian, Mexican, and Spanish women using the Internet. All participants were university students residing in urban locations. Using the ISST-Test (Delmonico & Miller, 2003), which included 25 items comprising questions with true/false answers that examined sexual behaviour on the Internet, they found that participants predominantly used the Internet to find information on sex, engage in chats of a sexual nature and masturbate to online content. Interestingly, there were differences regarding culture. For example, Mexican participants has statistically significantly less offline sexual experience, engaging in intercourse less frequently, were less likely to be in a relationship and more likely to be bisexual (14.3% of Mexican participants identified as bisexual compared to 4.5% and 1.8% of Spanish and Argentinian participants, respectively) than participants from Spain and Argentina, yet Mexican participants engaged in more OSA than those from Spain and Argentina.

Whilst many participants from all countries indicated that they had engaged in practices such as attempting to conceal their online sexual behaviour, sexualising their username and going online for sexual exploration purposes, there were cultural differences within this. Mexican participants were more likely than Spanish or Argentinian participants to state they hid their OSA and that no one knew they used their computer for sexual purposes. Nearly one third of Mexican participants, and over one fifth of Spanish participants, stated they had a sexualised username or nickname, compared to only 6% of Argentinian participants. Furthermore, the women from Mexico reported a (statistically) greater prevalence of risk-taking, including encountering illegal content, engaging in more risky online behaviour and meeting face-to-face with someone they met online, compared to Spanish participants. Thus, there appear to be cultural differences in the experiences of females engaging in OSA; yet very few participants reported that they believed Internet sex interfered with their lives, and no participants perceived themselves to be an Internet sex addict.

In general, using the Internet for sexual reasons was reported to facilitate an enhancement in the sexual lives of the participants, and the most significant predictors for OSA were not being heterosexual and greater offline use of pornographic materials (54% of the variance). The researchers discuss the online opportunities and the anonymity offered as means of conveniently accessing sex-related information, encountering individuals with a similar mindset, and engaging in sexual experiences with no constraints. This appears to have increased relevance given the context of Catholic and Hispanic social/cultural customs, which consider sexuality to be taboo (Giménez-García et al., 2020). Thus, the findings imply that the Internet can simultaneously meet various sexual needs and enhance life quality. From the authors' perspective, the Internet could constitute an environment in which the sexual health and identity of many females can be improved. The authors recommended that greater OSAs are required to meet needs, as well as to counteract the detrimental effect of cultural taboos on the sexuality of women. Yet although the outcomes (and authors' conclusions) were intriguing, caution should be exercised, as regression assumptions were not conducted as part of the methodology; thus, they could be spurious or inaccurate. It should also be noted that the average age of the participants was 20.7 years; therefore, the findings are only relevant to OSA among young people. Furthermore, this study was quantitative in nature, like that of Ballester-Arnal et al. (2021), thus warranting further investigation of the lived experience of these females.

Another quantitative study, conducted by Beutel et al. (2017), investigated the prevalence and motivators of OSA among a sample of 2,522 14-to-97-year-olds in Germany (56.9% female). They also aimed to associate online sex use with anxious versus avoidant partner attachment patterns and personality type using the Big Five inventory (BFI-10). They found that females generally concentrated more on being verbally stimulated and expressed a preference for engaging in sex online as a form of mutual sharing rather than accessing sexually implicit images, which meant that they often engaged in chats of a sexual nature. They did find an intriguing relationship between excessive online sexual behaviour and anxious partner attachment. The web offers limitless opportunities to live out multiple different fantasies in a digital environment, become sexually aroused and experience gratification (e.g., through masturbation). This could be especially appealing to people with insecure attachment, particularly in situations where they experience difficulties with committing to real-world relationships as a result of concerns surrounding rejection or reduced self-esteem. For people with anxious attachment who are living with a partner, OSA usage could offer a compensatory function and enhance self-esteem within a self-governed environment in which they become sexual aroused virtually. This may exist in parallel with a real-life relationship that could instead trigger anxiety about dependence, loss, or rejection. There was a lack of clarity, however, as to why there is only a marginal relationship between avoidant attachment and OSA usage.

Additionally, the results indicated that an increase in OSA usage was related to extraversion, whereas consciousness and agreeableness caused it to decrease and there was no relationship with neuroticism. One might hypothesise that distinct personality traits could make individuals more predisposed to distinct types of Internet usage. Furthermore, given that extraversion is linked to risk-taking (Watson et al., 2019), a useful parallel could be made with the increased risk-taking behaviour of Mexican participants in Giménez-García et al.'s (2020) study. These individuals were also more likely to engage in OSA. This increased OSA and risk-taking behaviour could be due to greater extraversion in some cultures, although more research is required to establish the link between personality traits and OSA.

This study usefully explored a wide age range and involved numerous participants across the lifespan. However, it was limited by the fact it was culture-specific, and arguably contained a sex-negative approach; its second aim was to 'associate online-sex use with anxious vs. avoidant partner attachment patterns'. In this sense – with a lack of focus on

OSA and secure attachment – Beutel et al.'s (2017) quantitative study could be said to take an inherently pathological view of OSA.

One study that did adopt a qualitative approach to focus on the lived experience of OSA was that of Courtice et al. (2021). This study involved a large sample comprising young adults (n = 1,090, where 582 identified as female) to investigate the perceived consequences of OSA (in Canada, Germany, Sweden, and the USA). The researchers conducted inductive thematic analysis to scrutinise responses to open-ended questions pertaining to OSA outcomes. The findings revealed 22 negative and 23 positive outcome codes, where seven higher-order bi-polar themes captured a combination of negative and positive outcome codes: zero outcomes, relationship outcomes, sexual experience, emotional outcomes, knowledge, personal outcomes, and security. The findings indicate that individuals perceive OSA outcomes to be characterised by nuance and involving several dimensions, as they were capable of discerning both negative and positive consequences of their OSA usage. Furthermore, the results indicate that the proportion of individuals likely to report positive rather than negative outcomes from their OSA is higher. The researchers propose that it is not only necessary to recognise positive outcomes, but also to use them to enhance methods of reducing harm when dealing with problematic OSA.

This study is novel in that it provides a comprehensive insight into the complex and subjective world of OSA. However, whilst it provides a cross-cultural, qualitative approach, it does not focus on the experiences of a wide demographic in terms of age. Focusing on younger adults may mean the findings do not reflect the experiences of older women that engage in OSA. The authors proposed that, given the positive outcomes identified, further studies should be rooted within a sex-positivity framework (Williams et al., 2013), such that experiences of OSA are not inherently problematised. Additionally, they proposed that those practising in the field should adopt a multidimensional approach when working, such that negative/positive, interpersonal/personal, as well as sexual/non-sexual outcomes of OSA are included (Courtice et al., 2021).

However, Courtice et al.'s (2021) study is limited to a degree. Indeed, all participants were young adults and the sample largely comprised students in higher education; thus, the results are not necessarily applicable to the experiences of females from different demographic groups. The research was further limited by the relative conciseness of the answers the respondents provided in writing online, thus causing their descriptions to be

insufficiently nuanced. This may mean the full 'lived experience' of the participants in this study was not captured.

A review of the aforementioned studies highlights that existing research has predominantly adopted a positivist stance towards the OSA experience, largely using quantitative methodologies. Although such findings provide important insights and knowledge, they do not facilitate an understanding of the subjective experience of those participating.

2.6. Relevance to Counselling Psychology

Over the preceding 40 years, there has been a dramatic transformation in the sexual lives of women (Tiefer, 2010), and the use of the Internet for sexual purposes has increased in popularity (Döring, 2012). Yet despite sex being a fundamental human activity, practitioners are not always comfortable with addressing sexual matters in a therapeutic context (Hanzlik & Gaubatz, 2012; Ng, 2007). Reissing and Di Giulio (2010) administered a survey to 188 psychologists in Canada, the findings of which indicated that 60% of respondents either ignored or only partially addressed their client's sexual health during therapy. Such unease could be related to pervasive sexual attitudes and the values of both psychologists and society at large (Ford & Hendrick, 2003; Reissing & Di Giulio, 2010). Counselling psychologists could be reluctant to engage in discussions on such matters for moral, ethical, or personal reasons (Cruz et al., 2017). Practitioners must address their personal attitudes towards the sexual behaviour of women in order to work with them more effectively (Reissing & Di Giulio, 2010), acknowledging that sexuality is a fundamental element of human identity through which well-being is enhanced (Bancroft, 2009).

Engaging in discussions on sex purely from a medical or pathological viewpoint can potentially reinforce a sex-negativity approach (Glickman, 2000). Therefore, the championing of sex-positivity by counselling psychologists opens up a useful avenue through which to enhance personal and professional development, increase diversity competence (Burnes et al., 2017) and produce a more comprehensive perspective of sexuality, celebrating a range of sexual identities, practices, and expressions (Williams et al., 2013).

2.7. Aims and Research Question

Whilst studies offer information on the diverse motives and practices with respect to OSA usage among women, it appears that the process by which data are collected – specifically conducting surveys online and analysing previously published textual information –

constrain the extent to which their lived experiences can be understood. OSA studies have largely adopted a positivist epistemology and realist ontology, preferring to concentrate on prevalence and symptoms. Studies using quantitative methodology have a limited scope in terms of accessing the complicated and nuanced OSA experience that is present outside the limits of questionnaires and surveys, which are frequently influenced by researchers' prior knowledge and assumptions.

Furthermore, the majority of studies have incorporated either only a single or limited number of OSA types, predominantly pornography (Volk et al., 2019; Maas & Dewey, 2018) or sexting (Maes & Vandenbsck, 2022; Ruvalcaba et al., 2021). Despite the different nature of these forms of OSA, there is an increased likelihood that individuals who partake in a particular kind of OSA will also participate in other kinds (Courtice et al., 2021). Therefore, OSA experiences should be viewed in their entirety. Based on the available literature base, it becomes clear that the lived experiences of women regarding the broad variety of OSA are not fully understood.

Additionally, the majority of samples in previous studies on OSA usage have included young people and adolescents (Efrati & Gola, 2018), men (Wéry & Billieux, 2016), or compared females with males; consequently, there is limited data regarding the expression of this phenomenon purely from the perspective of women. To the best of the author's understanding, qualitative studies have not thus far been conducted on the lived experience of OSA among women in the UK.

Finally, studies on OSA from a sex-positive approach in relation to CoP are still developing and are not sufficiently advanced to offer empirical evidence for practitioners to inform their clinical practice. The phenomenon of OSA has pertinence to the mental health profession, given findings that healthy sexuality contributes to greater psychological well-being. Thus, mental health practitioners have a responsibility to comprehensively understand OSA to enable women to be effectively championed and supported (Cruz et al., 2017).

It is expected that the adoption of an inductive approach and the usage of qualitative research techniques in the present study will further the understanding of the multidimensional OSA experience among women. Thus, by adopting a qualitative approach, the present research addresses this gap in the knowledge base through an in-depth examination of the OSA experience from the female perspective. The research question for this study is therefore: How do women experience their sexual lives online?

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1. Overview

This chapter details why hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen as the research paradigm for this study, with IPA as the research methodology selected over other potential qualitative approaches. Firstly, a description of the criteria for quality assessment and ethical factors taken into consideration is presented. As part of the research design framework, the process of forming the sample, recruiting participants, criteria for inclusion, as well as data collection and analysis are then outlined. My own reflections on the IPA study research process are also presented to ensure that it is transparent and cohesive.

3.2. Research Paradigm

Defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994) as a view of the world or a fundamental set of beliefs that shape a particular study, a research paradigm determines the methodology that is selected. Underpinning a paradigm are a set of presuppositions relating to the relationship between the 'would-be-knower' (the researcher) and the 'knower' (the participants), the means by which knowledge is acquired (methodology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and the essence of reality (ontology) (Ponterotto, 2005, p131). Even though qualitative methods have been employed more often in CoP than in other areas of psychology (Morrow & Smith, 2000), the discipline as a whole has long been characterised by quantitative studies embedded in positivist and post-positivist paradigms (Camic et al., 2003; McLead, 2011). Kasket and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) elucidate the difficulties CoP has experienced in dealing with the perceived need to generate scientific evidence that accords with what is accepted and deemed valid within conventional scientific psychology, and eschewing general claims deemed indicative of an absolute truth in favour of comprehending subjective lived experiences. Inevitably, striving to negotiate these disparate paradigms creates tensions for counselling psychologists (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2008).

Within the literature on CoP, there are four major paradigms: positivist, post-positivist, interpretive/constructionist, and postmodern (Morrow & Lee Smith, 2000). Although the contrasts and similarities between them may be better elucidated by viewing them as existing on a spectrum, such categorisation provides a useful basis on which to explain the nature of each paradigm (Morrow, 2007). Firstly, by striving to identify regular patterns in the social world and causal relationships between its component parts (Krauss,

2005), the positivist paradigm draws upon a hypothetico-deductive method that seeks to explain and predict (Cacioppo et al., 2004; McGrath & Johnson, 2003). It is predicated on the assumption that there are elements in the world that exist independently of the opinions and knowledge of both researchers and participants (Willig, 2012). It thus posits the existence of a unitary external reality that constitutes the truth about the world (Ponterotto, 2005). Those adopting the post-positivism paradigm accept these assumptions but add that any attempt to capture and measure this reality will be imperfect (Ponterotto, 2005). Both positivists and post-positivists view their approach as satisfying the need to generate objective scientific evidence. By contrast, research and practice in the field of CoP is premised on philosophical assumptions grounded in phenomenology and humanism, which are at odds with a positivist stance (Morrow & Smith, 2000). A paradigm diametrically opposed to that of positivism is social constructionism, which focuses on lived experiences, yet views such experiences as essentially socially and historically constructed, and mediated through relations of power (Ponterotto, 2005).

The epistemological position I adopt is phenomenology, which is situated midway between the social constructionist and positivist paradigms. I reject the claimed existence of a unitary objective reality and the existence of phenomena separate from the opinions and knowledge people hold about them (including the positivist stance and realist ontological position). My belief is that occurrences can be experienced in a multiplicity of ways, such that an almost limitless number of realities or worlds exist, aligned with a relativist ontology.

This stance forms the basis for the current research and aligns with the phenomenological underpinnings of CoP, which adopts a subjective and relational approach, concerned with the way in which people process, understand and create meaning out of the multiple realities they inhabit (Cooper, 2009). Thus, although all female participants have experienced OSA, they will have constructed meaning from these in a myriad of ways, emphasising the utility of generating knowledge regarding their subjective experiences.

However, there are variations within the phenomenological approach that can also generate conflicts. For instance, descriptive phenomenology aims to capture experiences exactly as they are manifested; it adds nothing and takes nothing away (Giorgi, 1997). By contrast, interpretative phenomenology (Willig, 2012) strives to comprehend what a particular experience might mean by moving beyond each narrative to consider how it is associated with the wider contexts in which it is situated, be these theoretical, psychological, or social (Larkin et al., 2006). In this respect, I concur with Van Manen's

(2016) view that no description can be presented without some form of interpretation. In addition, and this probably derives from my training in CoP, I believe it is important to view people as contextually situated, rather than as sole individuals. Consequently, I feel that an interpretative phenomenological stance was more appropriate for my research as it provides a deeper insight into people's experiences that transcends mere description. It also aligns with my own philosophical stance, as well as that of CoP, which views individuals as entrenched in networks of relations and wider societal contexts, and places great value on subjectivity and inter-subjectivity (Cooper, 2009).

3.3. Comparing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with Other Qualitative Research Methodologies

IPA was deemed to be more suitable for conducting the present study than various other qualitative options, including Thematic Analysis, Discourse Analysis, and Grounded Theory.

3.3.1. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis compared with Thematic Analysis

The focus of Thematic Analysis (TA) is on the identification of themes and behavioural patterns. This enables the in-depth organisation, description, and reflexivity of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The main difference with IPA is the idiographic, meaning-making focus and the phenomenological theoretical underpinning – as opposed to the coding across cases that happens in TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021); hence, the choice of IPA in this research.

3.3.2. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis compared with Grounded Theory

The argument has been made that Grounded Theory is more suitable for constructing theory, as well as social processes that account for phenomena, as opposed to a psychological research approach aimed at furthering the comprehension of personal experiences (Willig, 2012). Furthermore, it intends to accomplish 'saturation' (a condition whereby new themes do not emerge and the resultant theory is capable of accounting for recognised occurrences of a phenomenon) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, cited in Willig, 2012, p. 37). Due to my interest in distinguishing and comparing women's lived experiences and, as noted above, recognising that from an epistemological and ontological perspective experiences do contain a certain level of nuance, I chose not to reach saturation.

3.3.3. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Compared with Discourse Analysis

Additionally, Discourse Analysis was eliminated as a viable technique because it concentrates on the effect of language in constructing reality. In general, the purpose of Discourse Analysis, Discursive Psychology (Willig, 2012) and Narrative Analysis (Willig, 2012) is to comprehend the way in which language is used by people for the construction and positioning of their identities and activities. Conversely, the aim of IPA is to provide an in-depth description of individuals' lived experiences, as well as the meanings they attach to them (Smith et al., 2009).

3.3.4. Methodological Framework: Choosing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is concerned with examining the way in which people interpret their personal and social lives and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). In terms of its theoretical basis, IPA concentrates on three core domains: idiographic, phenomenology, and hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, in exploring women's subjective experiences, there are two levels on which the current study adheres to an idiographic stance: firstly, through a concern with the experiences of a unique individual, thus generating analytical depth; and secondly, by striving to understand how experiential phenomena such as processes, events or relationships are made sense of by people from within the contexts in which they are situated (Smith et al., 2009). In so doing, the study complies with Coopers' (2009) fifth and sixth principles of CoP: 'an appreciation of the client as a unique being' and 'an understanding of the client as a socially and relationally-embedded being' (p. 120).

The origins of phenomenology can be traced back to the work of Husserl (1931), who highlighted the value and importance of focusing on experience. Heidegger (1962) then extended this approach, contending that people can only be understood in terms of the contexts in which they exist. This denoted a shift away from the descriptive approach of Husserl to one concerned with understanding and interpreting the complex nature of experience. This can only be achieved by focusing on life as a process people undertake and by unravelling the multiple and unique meanings they ascribe to the elements of their world with which they are intimately entwined. This formed the basis of the subsequent development of IPA and its aim of understanding the subjective experiences of people, which are both historically and contextually situated (Smith et al., 2009). This aligns well with my personal philosophical stance and the research questions of the current study,

which are concerned with understanding the subjective experiences and processes by which women construct meaning from the way they live their sexual lives on the Internet.

However, an awareness that subjective experiences are unique and highly variable does not imply they are immune from the influences brought to bear by the preconceptions of both participants and researchers. Whilst acknowledging the importance of robust strategies in capturing experiences as completely and accurately as we can, I believe that attention must be paid to the process of co-construction that occurs between the researcher and their participants. My view perhaps reflects Heidegger's claim that interpretation is an intrinsic element of description, and thus places an emphasis on hermeneutics. Consequently, IPA concedes that the life-worlds of research participants cannot be accessed directly and that when researchers are engaged in exploring these worlds, this will inevitably involve attending to the influence exerted by the interaction between the researcher and participant, as well as the researcher's own world view (Willig, 2012). Thus, the process of interpretation involves a two-stage or double hermeneutic, where participants are striving to understand their world while researchers are striving to understand the participants engaged in this process (Smith & Osborn, 2008). It is this hermeneutic process that allows the researcher to deepen their analysis, by seeking to understand experiences in terms of the theoretical, historical, and social contexts in which they are situated.

A notable feature of Husserl's work is his belief that researchers should strive to avoid influencing the processes of data collection and analysis by setting aside their own beliefs and assumptions. I do not believe this is possible and consider a more feasible stance to be one in which such 'bracketing' can only be achieved in part when, as Heidegger argues, the aim is to examine the relationship between our interpretations and the preconceptions that may influence them. Successfully achieving the latter underscores the importance of adopting a reflexive approach throughout this study (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

3.4. Quality in the Research Design

Yardley (2017) suggested various principles that promote high-quality research, specifically: context sensitivity, being committed, and being rigorous, transparent, and coherent, as well as impact and significance. A brief discussion of the aforementioned principles is presented below in the context of the present research.

3.4.1. Context Sensitivity

Two approaches were adopted for demonstrating context sensitivity; firstly, knowledge of the extant literature in terms of both the subject matter being investigated and the methodology being utilised (Yardley, 2017). This has consistently been demonstrated during the review of the literature, as well as the methodology. Secondly, IPA's idiographic origins stress the significance of the research remaining sensitive to all participants as individuals and to regard their experiences as being distinctive. This has been achieved by being reflexive and transparent throughout the research process, including recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and interpreting the subsequent analysis.

3.4.2. Commitment and Rigour

According to Yardley (2017), commitment and rigour constitutes another key principle of effective qualitative research. She contended that it is possible to demonstrate commitment and rigour through the implementation of an appropriate analytic process in a sample that incorporates a suitable spectrum of perspectives pertinent to the topic under investigation. It should also offer adequate depth such that novel insights can be presented. In the current research, the analytic process suggested by Smith et al. (2009) was adopted, in which it was suggested that the core aspect of IPA is its idiographic characteristic, which allows and encourages every person's lived experience to be addressed as a distinctive entity. The current research deals with this dimension by engaging with all participants and interviews individually, and by conducting meticulous analysis of every transcript for the purpose of capturing every participant's experience.

3.4.3. Transparency and Coherence

High-quality research should also be coherent and transparent (Yardley, 2017). Being transparent denotes the extent to which each stage of the research is clearly described when preparing the study write-up (Smith et al., 2009). In the present study, the methodology and analysis are described in detail, with additional information provided in the appendices. The study's coherence is revealed by the extent to which the research aims are consistent with the principles that underpin IPA, such that the study's hermeneutic and phenomenological aspects are evident in the write-up.

3.4.4. Impact and Importance

As suggested by Yardley (2017), the final element and a critical aspect of any quality research study is impact and importance. She asserted: 'all research…generate knowledge that is useful – whether in terms of practical utility, generating hypotheses, or even

changing how we think about the world' (p. 296). This includes the significance of the implications of the research for those practising in the field, policymakers, or the community as a whole. An in-depth discussion of the impact and importance of the present study is presented in the discussion.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Before I embarked on the process of recruitment, I sought ethical approval for the research from UEL's two ethics committees. UEL approved the study on 28 September 2021. (Appendix I).

3.5.1. Informed Consent

Prior to conducting the interviews, informed written consent (Appendix III) was acquired from the interviewees as required by BPS (2021).

3.5.2. Deception

Once the participants had indicated that they were willing to take part, I detailed the aims of the research and issued them with an invite to participate in the interview. Before the interview took place, I gave each participant a detailed information sheet (Appendix II), which we then discussed during our online meeting. Thus, I ensured that the interviewees had complete awareness of the study's purpose and nature, as well as how their data would be used.

3.5.3. Debriefing

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the powerful emotions it was likely to evoke, the potential arose for some participants to become upset during their interview. Sensible measures were therefore implemented to ensure that possible harm was minimised (BPS, 2021). In the event of the interviewees experiencing difficulties, distress, or discomfort during the process, they were advised that support could be obtained from the resources listed in the participant debrief letter (Appendix IV). Furthermore, after the interviews, the researcher conversed with participants for approximately 10 minutes to determine their feelings during and after the interview process, the aim of which was to assess their levels of distress at that time, given the sensitivity of the topic. All participants reported that they did not experience any adverse effects as a result of the interviews.

3.5.4. Withdrawal from the Study

Due to the sensitive characteristics of the topic under discussion, there was a possibility that interviews on personal experiences could elicit complex emotions and feelings that interviewees had previously not had the opportunity to share. When commencing the

interviews, each participant was assured that their well-being was of critical importance and were advised that they had the freedom to withdraw whenever they chose (BPS, 2021). I also stressed the fact that they were not obliged to respond to specific questions. I endeavoured to ensure that optimal sensitivity was applied when conducting the interviews and exploited the knowledge I gained from previous experiences of working with distressed clients to achieve this. Hence, I carefully monitored the participants to evaluate whether they were distressed and, if appropriate, questioned whether they wanted to pause or terminate the interview. Participants were informed that withdrawal from the interviews was possible up to three weeks after the date on which the interview had been completed.

3.5.5. Confidentiality

Careful handling of the data was critical, specifically participant information. I followed the guidelines of UEL regarding the protection of data, as well as data protection regulations issued by the UK Government (Data Protection Act, 2018). While the data collection process was not anonymous, when transcribing the data, pseudonyms were employed. Transcripts were saved in a password-protected file and audio recordings were then deleted. The consent forms containing information that may identify the interviewees were stored in a different location to the transcripts.

3.6. Research Design

3.6.1. Sampling

The four participants recruited in the study identified as female and reported using the Internet for sexual reasons. Although formal guidelines on the size of the sample in IPA research are not available, Smith et al. (2009) proposed that when conducting doctoral research, a sample of between four and ten interviewees is satisfactory. To satisfy the idiographic position of IPA, the size of the sample remained limited (Smith et al., 2009). While this has often been regarded as a shortcoming, it does in fact constitute an advantage, as it facilitates the process of generating in-depth data on participants' unique experiences (Bartholomew et al., 2021). This is suitable because quality is emphasised over quantity, and concentrating on a small number of participants allows the complicated essence of human phenomena to be effectively captured. Furthermore, the data collection and preparation process are required to be thorough, and subsequently analysing the individual cases necessitates extensive reflection and discussion, which can be a lengthy process. Hence, recruiting a significant number of participants to conduct interviews both lacks practicality and is undesirable from a theoretical perspective (Smith et al., 2009).

3.6.2. Recruitment Procedure

The participant recruitment process was implemented in the UK through websites whose content was identified as being sexual in nature. Contact was made with the administrators of these websites through email to obtain their approval to promote the study on their platform. This involved posting electronic flyers (see Appendix V), including information regarding the study, the criteria for inclusion, and contact details for the researcher and director of studies (Appendix V) for prospective participants. They were subsequently requested to send an email to the researcher informing them that they satisfied the criteria for inclusion and gave their consent to participate.

3.6.3. Inclusion Criteria

The aim of the study was to recruit participants who identified as females and had used OSA during the preceding three-month period, the purpose of which was to ensure that the participants could still vividly recall their experience. The recruitment and sampling process concentrated on female adults older than 18 years old who were fluent in English and residents of the UK. These criteria ensured the homogeneity of the sample.

3.6.4. Introduction to Participants

To ensure that participants' identities were not revealed, they were assigned pseudonyms prior to the interviews. When the interviews started, the participants were asked questions in order to obtain demographic data (Table 1), as well as information regarding OSA activities in which they had recently engaged.

Table 1: ***Personal Profiles of the Participants***

Name	Age	Sexual Orientation	In Romantic Relationship	Used OSA < 3 months
Noemie	53	Heterosexual	Yes	Yes
Laura	37	Heterosexual	No	Yes
Kate	51	Lesbian	No	Yes
Anais	23	Heterosexual	Yes	Yes

3.7. Data Collection

According to the guidelines developed by Smith et al. (2009) for conducting phenomenological studies, four interviewees who had recently accessed the Internet for sexual reasons participated in semi-structured interviews. Open-ended and non-directive interview questions were asked (Appendix VI) with a particular focus on discussions pertaining to the OSA experience. This facilitated the process of maintaining idiographic commitment, while also prioritising the subjective experiences of individual participants,

which is a critical aspect of CoP (Kasket, 2012). The design of the questions was intended to promote reflection in the participants in terms of how they constructed meaning out of their OSA engagement. Their opinions regarding negative and positive feelings towards their experiences and how they addressed them were obtained, which was intended to ensure alignment with the sex-positivity approach. All interviewees were advised that there were no correct or incorrect responses.

Each participant only participated in one semi-structured interview (Jamshed, 2014). To optimise the time available for interviews, the interview questions facilitated the beneficial goal of thoroughly exploring the participants' experiences and ensuring that the interviews remained focused on the intended strategy (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). To enhance the process of capturing data from the interviews, it was decided that they would be recorded (Jamshed, 2014). According to recommendations made as a result of the restrictions imposed due to COVID-19, Microsoft Teams was used to make online recordings (BPS, 2020). With regard to problems that emerge when conducting interviews through Microsoft Teams, Berg (2004) contended that both semi-structured and face-to-face interviews predominantly have the same characteristics. Despite the fact that certain scholars argue that face-to-face interviews allow the rapport between interviewers and interviewees to be enhanced (Davies et al., 2020), others contend that evidence to support this theory is limited (Bryman, 2015). Furthermore, as Microsoft Teams allowed the participants to remain anonymous, it may have encouraged them to discuss issues that were highly personal and sensitive (Lyons, 2014).

Prior to attending the interviews, the participants were given an information sheet with details on the interview protocol (Appendix VI), which informed them that all data would remain confidential and that they had the freedom to withdraw their consent or terminate the interview at any point during the process. Informed consent (Appendix III) was obtained from the participants prior to starting the interviews. Interview durations ranged from 41 to 64 minutes. After the interviews had been completed, participants were debriefed verbally and they were also given a debriefing letter (Appendix IV). Transcriptions of the recorded interviews were made and I ensured that all information that could be used to identify the participants was removed and names were substituted with pseudonyms.

3.8. Data Analysis

To achieve the aims of this research study and in accordance with the selected methodology, the data were analysed using IPA. The six stages of IPA analysis proposed

by Smith et al. (2009) formed the basis of the analysis process. As stated by Smith et al. (2009), according to the extant IPA literature, there is no single approach that can be used to analyse data as part of an IPA approach; nevertheless, they proposed an analytic process that is capable of maintaining both analytic rigour and flexibility. Moreover, they suggested that researchers extend beyond the stipulated stages creatively, emphasising the significance of the role of the researcher in the co-creation of an understanding of the phenomenon in question during the entire research process.

In the preliminary phase of the analysis, verbatim transcripts of the interviews were made. While listening to recordings represented the second point of contact with the data after the initial interviews had been conducted, it constituted the first point at which the researcher immersed themselves in the data as part of the process of analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Microsoft Word was used for typing the transcripts, which permitted flexible margins on both sides of the text. The right margin was reserved for written comments, while the left margin was allocated for themes that emerged (Appendix VIII). Afterwards, the researcher read and re-read each of the transcripts separately, such that the individual participants became the focus of the analysis. Furthermore, written notes allowed preliminary thoughts and observations of the data to be recorded. At this point in the process, notes were aligned with and based on the original transcript. They were categorised into three groups as described by Smith et al. (2009): descriptive comments that reflected the subjective experience of the participant; linguistic comments relating to the language utilised by the participant when describing their experience; and conceptual comments relating to the context of the experience described by the participant.

The subsequent analytical stage included the identification and assignment of labels to themes that emerged – the labels and themes denoted the fundamental quality conveyed by the text. As stated by Smith et al. (2009), in this phase, the researcher moves away from concentrating on the original text and the focus becomes the provisional notes. In spite of this change in focus, Smith et al. (2009) proposed that as a consequence of the researcher's immersion in the lived experience of the participant, the resulting analysis will reflect the phenomenon as seen through their eyes. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2009) contended that specifically because of this shift in focus, the ultimate outcome from the analysis will be co-created by the participant and the analyst, emphasising the interpretative phenomenology of IPA.

Throughout the subsequent phases of analysis, the focus changed from the provisional notes and transcripts to the themes that emerged (Smith et al., 2009). The objective in this

phase of the research was to progress the analysis from generating open and tentative comments to understanding the transcript as a whole (Smith et al., 2009). The analysis of the individual interviews produced a preliminary draft of hierarchical group of emergent themes. During the process of creating clusters, themes were connected with each other via abstractions, such that themes with similarities were grouped into clusters to generate a provisional super-ordinate theme and then sub-themes were clustered via subsumption and polarisation. Once the separate interview themes had been clustered, the researcher examined whether patterns existed across the participants. Through the use of post-it notes, themes were subsequently combined to produce higher order themes to facilitate reflection on the participants' narratives. Because different themes were interconnected, it was often difficult to ascertain whether their differences were sufficient to allow them to remain separate or if their overlapping aspects suggested that they should be collapsed. Appendix IX presents a diagrammatic representation of the process of drafting and re-drafting the themes. Seven versions are presented in chronological sequence, ranging from the oldest, version 1, to the newest, version 7. I found that this process was iterative, as themes that emerged were re-visited until a grouped structure satisfactorily represented the data. Despite the fact that the analysis was in close alignment to the IPA procedures of Smith et al. (2009), the superordinate and subordinate themes that emerged allowed the phenomenon of OSA to be subjectively interpreted according to a specific participant group. The emergent themes generated by the analysis involved a double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2007) in that I was striving to understand the women being interviewed, while they were simultaneously trying to understand their experience of OSA. Thus, although my analysis of the subjective answers that participants gave was based on the verbatim transcripts, the realisation of these occurred through each individual woman's 'experientially-informed lens' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 36).

3.9. Reflexivity

This section details my attempt to maintain a reflexive approach as I attempted to make sense of, and bracket, my own preconceptions in any interpretations I made (Finlay & Gough, 2003). It also details some of the challenges I faced throughout this research project and how I attempted to deal with them.

While reflecting on my ontological and epistemological stance as a researcher working in the discipline of CoP, I spent time thinking about my identity as a practitioner in this field. Although I initially found it hard to ascertain the relevance of research paradigms, coming to understand my epistemological stance as a phenomenological researcher made me

aware that this reflected my approach as a practitioner concerned with understanding the subjective experiences of my clients. Having identified the similarities, I also pinpointed areas of divergence. For instance, as a practitioner, my aim is to facilitate clients in understanding their experiences and who they are as people, so that they can initiate change, whereas as a researcher I am seeking to develop my own understanding of their experiences by accruing relevant information. I was mindful of this throughout each stage of the methodological process.

It is important to emphasise the challenges I experienced when obtaining the approval of the administrators of the websites, as the majority refused to allow me to advertise for participation in my study without giving a reason. Finally, two administrators provided approval to post advertising. At that time, I contemplated whether that would be sufficient to recruit participants. The ethics committee applied a strict rule that permission had to be obtained before adverts could be posted; thus, random advertising through social media platforms was not possible. I made the decision to evaluate how many prospective participants expressed an interest. Although five individuals initially expressed an interest in participating, one subsequently chose to withdraw prior to providing consent, which left me feeling disappointed and frustrated. The recruitment process was a stressful experience and this caused me to consider multiple times whether the research topic was suitable. However, it was ultimately clear that four participants were sufficient for the research to proceed. Furthermore, my original intention was to conduct a pilot interview to determine whether the interview schedule required amendments or revisions; however, as a result of challenges with recruitment, this plan was abandoned. As a replacement for the interview pilot, I submitted the interview questions as part of an oral presentation that I gave on my research at UEL. The feedback I received was that positive and negative questions should be alternated; therefore, I made changes accordingly.

To ensure that I maintained a reflexive position during the data collection process, I kept a research journal (Appendix VII). This allowed me to record provisional reflections, thoughts and feelings that could be revisited during the research process to verify that they were ‘bracketed off’ (Husserl, 1931). However, whilst this was not consistently achievable, it permitted me to contemplate what they inferred regarding my stance, as well as the manner in which they potentially affected how the research was conducted. For example, I maintained flexibility with regard to the application of the interview schedule, and the specific questions that were asked maintained the interview flow and allowed the participants to lead the interview. Due to the significantly interactive nature

of conducting research interviews, I believed it was critical that I reflected on my role as the interviewer and how I might influence the interviewees. On some occasions, I found it challenging to balance the friction between my role as a trained practitioner and that of a researcher, particularly when I wanted to openly empathise with a participant. In a number of cases, I had to make the effort to refrain from verbalising my thoughts regarding their experiences, as I wanted to avoid influencing what they expressed. For example, I often had the urge to state, 'it sounds like that was a lonely experience for you'; however, I needed to focus instead on my role as an information gatherer. I initially felt that employing Microsoft Teams would make the process of constructing and developing a rapport difficult, which would limit the volume of data I could obtain regarding the participants' subjective experiences. However, it ultimately became apparent that the narratives produced were detailed, possibly to a greater extent than could have been achieved through face-to-face interviews. This may have also been a result of the fact that as the participants were accustomed to utilising the Internet for communication purposes, the online interview process seemed relatively comfortable for them. Therefore, the willingness of the participants to reveal their experiences and their frankness was satisfying to observe. For example, for one of the participants, I wrote in the post-interview notes: 'It felt like we have known each other such as you would not share such intimate details if you did not know or fully trust the person, yet she was able to talk at ease.' I considered that the interview process constituted the first time that certain participants had the opportunity to discuss their experiences; hence, the relatively disjointed narratives reflect their first efforts to process their experiences and emotions.

When conducting the analysis, the clusters in which the themes were grouped were revised multiple times (Appendix X). The themes were continually revised during write-up, which ensured their relevance, as well as the fact that they were not repeated. Due to the linkages between multiple themes, I frequently found it challenging to determine whether they were sufficiently different to stay separate or whether the areas in which they overlapped indicated that they should be collapsed. For instance, although I provisionally established a theme called 'The Emotions on Cybersex Space', there was considerable overlap with other themes, including 'Paradoxical Attitudes' and the 'Painful Downsides'; therefore, the decision was made to merge these themes. Additionally, while there was a certain amount of overlap between other themes, it was considered that they were sufficiently different to stay separate, which included the sub-themes 'The Adventure from Passivity to Interactivity' and 'Imagination behind the

Screen'.

Another significant challenge involved giving the themes an appropriate title. For example, after a theme was written, it sometimes became clear that the content was not precisely captured by the title; therefore, this triggered the start of a new process of deriving a more suitable theme name to capture the same meaning. Additionally, I felt it important that the themes captured a sense of participants' experiences instead of being overly descriptive. The difficulty of this endeavour particularly surprised me. In numerous instances, I was not satisfied with how the themes were clustered or named, which caused me to feel distress. I wanted to do my best for my participants, and for myself. As I continually redrafted the themes, I would reach a point where the theme seemed to be appropriate, which created a sense of relief, and I was satisfied that the content was accurately captured by the theme. Throughout the process, I received invaluable guidance from my supervisor, without whom I may have abandoned this process altogether.

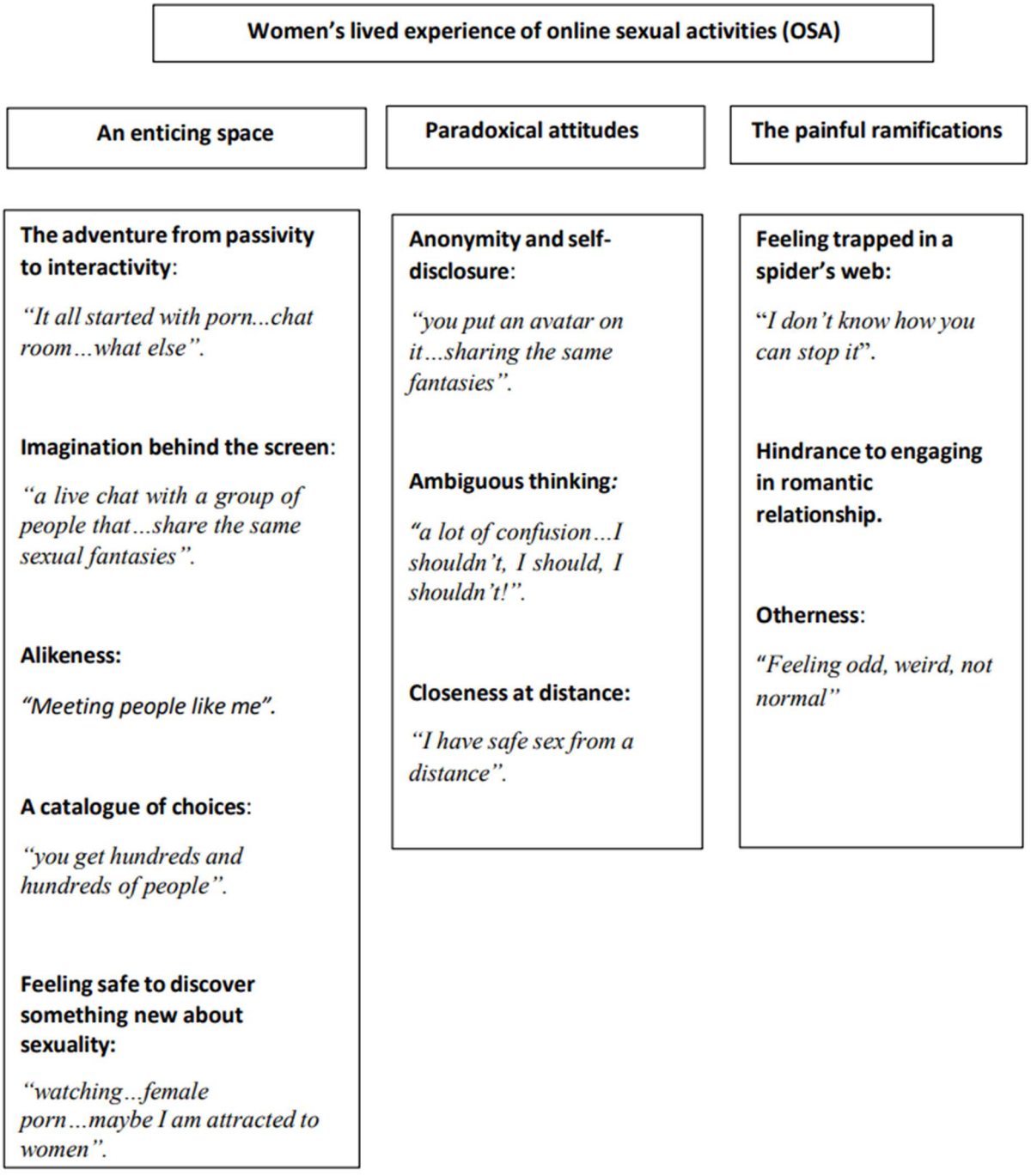
3.10. Conclusion

In this qualitative research, an epistemological approach of hermeneutic phenomenology was adopted, which is positioned midway between the polarised realist and relativist ontological stances. While I ensured that the entire process was transparent, purposive homogenous sampling was used in this IPA research to recruit participants for semi-structured interviews who satisfied the criteria for inclusion. The stages described by Smith et al. (2009) were followed when analysing the transcripts from the interviews, such that they were read and re-read, and that comments were noted, emergent themes were developed, and cross-case analysis was conducted. The next chapter presents the analysis, while Chapter Five discusses its implications and limitations.

Chapter Four: Analysis

In this chapter, the various themes determined after phenomenologically analysing the four semi-structured interviews are examined, thus enabling the exploration of the lived experiences of females who use/access the Internet for sexual purposes. This resulted in the identification of 11 subordinate themes which were subsequently grouped into clusters, forming three master themes (as shown in Figure 1).

Figure 1: Master Themes and Subthemes



4.1. Introduction to the Themes

The three master themes I identified enable participants' encounters with online experiences to be interpreted accordingly. Even though all participants shared aspects of the master themes, it was necessary to explore and to hear their voices to capture the wide variety of participant experiences within these themes. Consequently, the ways in which they differ and diverge was also considered during the analysis.

The first master theme, An Enticing Space, highlights the major features responsible for the seductiveness of cybersex experienced by all participants. Their initial discovery often started with pornography, which led them to exciting, interactive sexual activities with virtual partners. They opened up about imagination, interactivity, and availability. They described a space where they were accepted and were even able to discover something new about their own sexuality.

The second master theme, The Paradoxical Attitudes, explores how the participants tended to hold paradoxical attitudes towards and thoughts about OSA. They described a cyberspace where they can be themselves. However, while the cyberspace seemed to facilitate self-disclosure, they tended to be cautious, choosing to adopt a fictitious identity. The participants thus engendered a dichotomous attitude towards OSA, in which they found themselves divided into two selves. Lastly, the participants described their experience of closeness at a distance.

The third master theme, The Painful Ramifications, explores the painful downsides of OSA that contribute to the feeling of being trapped in a spider's web, namely, the inability to disconnect from OSA. Additionally, their use of OSA appeared to prevent them finding romantic relationships. The participants also described being isolated from society as a result of their OSA experience; thus, the sense of acceptance online was juxtaposed with participants' offline sense of isolation.

4.2. Master Theme One - An Enticing Space

The participants described the attractiveness of their cybersex experiences, taking place on an enticing platform that encouraged them to return again and again. They explained how the discovery of and participation in cybersex had been an exciting journey in which they found freedom, imagination, attractiveness, partners, and sexuality. This was captured through the following sub-themes: (1) The adventure from passivity to interactivity, (2) Imagination behind the screen, (3) Alikeness, (4) A catalogue of choices, and (5) Feeling thrilled to discover something new about sexuality.

4.2.1. Subordinate Theme - "*It all started with porn...chat room…what else*": The Adventure from Passivity to Interactivity

The four participants described how their OSA journey first began with pornography, taking a role as a passive viewer before progressing to more interactive activities such as sexting or webcamming. As illustrated in the quote from Kate, the cybersex space offered the opportunity to transition from solitary passive imaginary reality (masturbation for instance) to interactive virtual reality:

'In the beginning a while back now, there was the fantasy just looking at porn on certain TV channels at late nights. That was before the Internet…With the websites you have access from mobile phone you can do sexting when you are on the move…Well, my favourite is group chatroom' (Kate, pp. 115-118).

Kate's account of her initial discovery of pornography on television and then moving towards chatrooms gives the sense of a progression from passivity to participation, a journey that has been facilitated over time by the development of new, emerging technological platforms and devices. The connection provided by technology gave Kate the opportunity to interact in a virtual space with other virtual partners. Kate's emphasis on 'favourite' suggested that she had tried various platforms/spaces for OSA, as she was clear about her preferences. This journey could arguably therefore be seen as one of self-discovery about one's own likes and dislikes in terms of sexual satisfaction and enjoyment. What once was a 'fantasy' in and of itself, looking at pornography on late night TV channels, has now potentially become less appealing than the 24-hour, on-the-go access via personal devices such as mobile phones. These technological developments are thus matched with self-development, generating an adventure over time both externally (technology-wise) and introspectively (with a better understanding of the self).

Laura also described her experience of venturing into the world of cybersex, with the subsequent avenues down which it could take a user:

'I guess the most popular or the one which comes in mind straight away is porn sites. Those sites can lead to other sites which are more engaging meaning you are less passive in a way I mean you just don't watch you participate or interact. I guess it's just some sort of entertainment. But the ones I like are the one in which I chat with sexwebcam in a live adult video chat room' (Laura, pp. 2-13).

Like Kate, Laura explained how her experience started by watching pornography before progressing to more interactive sexual sites such as chat rooms. Her language and tone throughout the above quote seemed to indicate a sense of excitement, and her description of these activities as 'entertainment' also suggested a pleasant, engaging pastime or leisure activity. The term 'engaging' indicated a sense of immersion, being 'engaged' with

something, perhaps a form of OSA that was even more time-consuming than passively watching pornography, as it holds one's attention, rather than something that, being passive, can easily be switched off. Indeed, she pointed out that she herself was not only an observer, but takes an active role in OSA via chatting on sexwebcam. This is reinforced by her use of the phrase 'chat with', not chat 'to' – the 'with' indicating a mutual conversation where the user feels like an equally important participant within the interaction. Thus, even though the online space is virtual by nature, the chats that Kate and Laura engage in are real, occurring with real people, 'live'. Something about the word 'live' evoked the sense that Laura feels alive interacting with others in this way, again suggesting a potential reason as to why she may return again and again to this OSA.

Unlike Kate and Laura, whose first discovery started with pornography, Anais searched for sexual content before immersing herself into interactive sexual exchanges using chat rooms, webcams, and different social media platforms. Anais seeks interaction with potential partners by sending nude pictures, thereby providing her with a sense of exhilaration. Anais later explained that sending nudes boosts her confidence. It seems that this activity is empowering for her because it creates a space in which she feels safe to express her sexuality.

'Hmm any types or maybe like chat room hmm yeah webcam things hmm what else hmm (thinking) maybe like social media hmm may be also like a way hmm may be also like a formal online sexual activities hmm… I guess you could name like snapchat where you can share images hmm that was very big when I was growing up hmm that was easy because it meant you could send images… It was so exciting and fun…Hmm it probably started with Internet access from home… So I think I would have been like 13, 14 when I probably got a router at home and I was able to come across these sites, like I probably knew these things existed beforehand but to be able to access and all the sexual contents online I could only once we had a router at home. How exciting and hmm fun' (Anais, pp. 16-26/59/66-69).

In the above extract, Anais takes us on a journey of her own discovery of OSA, from when she first had the Internet installed at home as a teenager, to the use of mobile phones to use the application Snapchat. She begins with images others created, which she accessed, to text she shared mutually with others via chatrooms, and finally to images she herself created and sent. This is indicative of an adventure, a journey of empowerment, just as she herself was 'growing up'. Perhaps not only was she biologically advancing as an adolescent, but this physical development was being matched by developments and advances, both sexually and cognitively, in terms of her awareness and understanding of these OSA spaces. Furthermore, the participation grew, due to technological

advancements that made this ‘easy’, and because she was learning what she personally found ‘exciting and fun’. Thus, this enticing journey of self-discovery, in part because Anais herself was an active player within this space, seemed to parallel the longer, ongoing development throughout her teenage years.

Similar to the other participants, Noemie began her OSA journey through watching pornography. Here, she recalled her first experience of this:

‘In the very beginning I think most things started off with porn. porn videos. I think there is different levels I would say There are different things depending on what you are trying to achieve with it. It’s very versatile, porn is very versatile’ (Noemie, pp. 21-24).

She appeared to be quite comfortable with talking about sex and sounded thrilled when she described pornography as being ‘versatile’, something that could fulfil different purposes and meet different needs. This indicated that she found pornography to be an adaptable resource for different ‘levels’. This carries the insinuation that there may be a hierarchy of such – perhaps echoing the different kinds/types of intercourse that pornographic videos depict (hard/soft/different categories and so on). Moreover, for Noemie, there may be different goals with pornography, although it is not clear what these are; if one goal of pursuing pornography could involve achieving pleasure, what might the other goals be? In some way, it felt as though Noemie side-stepped stating these potential goals, perhaps because she felt discussing these different ‘levels’ of pornography was somehow taboo (arguably niche interests such as violence, non-consensual sex, underage sex, bestiality, incest, and so on remain firmly taboo). However, despite not giving details at this stage, Noemie, like the other participants, indicated through her reference to the versatility of pornography, that pornography represents an adventure into a varied, colourful world, which could lead to multiple further potential avenues.

In summary, pornography seemed to invite most participants to engage in further exploration of the opportunities available on the Internet. Over time, they appeared to become more confident and excited about engaging with virtual partners. They gave the sense that the excitement attached to these discoveries was a powerful feeling that triggered the desire to explore OSA further, leading to the transition from passivity to activity. This could indicate that one’s excitement surrounding a particular type of pornographic video or OSA is not sustained; perhaps participants consumed certain, more mainstream OSAs such as pornographic videos, yet via a process of habituation, their excitement levels waned. Or perhaps participants became more daring; initially, seeing without being seen was sufficient, yet over time they desired (and were given the opportunity) to participate, becoming bolder in their pursuit of pleasure. They may have

then sought a different activity, avenue, or 'level' of OSA, one that not only enabled them to be an active participant, which gave them subsequent pleasure, but may also have allowed them to be 'seen' themselves. This could be an empowering experience for all participants, with new, different, and bolder OSA providing new stimuli in their online adventure.

4.2.2. Subordinate Theme – Imagination Behind the Screen

The participants explained that the excitement created by the imaginative reality is further intensified by knowing what their virtual partner(s) is/are thinking. According to the participants, sharing sexual fantasies with online partners further intensified the sexual excitement. Kate gave a sense of what it is like to share fantasies online:

'When we chat on forum this is where you describe your position, what you like to do and there are certain people who actually one particular woman said what she like doing with me. She said I get very excited when we describe our fantasies. There was another woman she responded to all my fantasies. Hmm that was a week ago. She was actually responding to all my fantasies, how she would like to do it and that I got so excited that I can't explain it to you' (Kate, pp. 165-171).

Kate described how mentally visualising sexual scenes generated sexual arousal. It appears that, in this context, the fantasy consists of imagining rather than actually seeing her cybermate; similarly, she described herself as she wants to be seen. She seems to imply that the words they exchange work to construct their imaginations, 'seeing' one another in their mind's eye. Kate particularly likes to engage in sexual relationships with other women. In the above extract, the sense of excitement that the cyberspace provides her is also palpable. The repetition of the words 'fantasies' and 'excited' seems to reflect the intensity of her online experiences. Although the relationships involve an imaginative mind, the relational interaction is not imaginary. Indeed, although the space is virtual, the women Kate meets are real, and they are real written exchanges. Yet intriguingly, whilst words were the primary medium by which these relationships and actions were constructed (mentally), Kate admits she cannot find the words to 'explain' her experience, the feeling it generated within her; that it was beyond words, perhaps – almost too exciting to describe – when another woman 'responded' to Kate's fantasies. The impression is that Kate is surprised and ecstatic that her own fantasies have been met, perhaps because she had not had this experience before (online or offline) and words failed her, in this moment, to convey the magnitude of this to me. This indicates an imaginative adventure, with new experiences unfolding on the journey that are simultaneously constructed by words, yet remain intangible and indescribable, because they are so deeply personal and inextricable

with one's sense of validation. Someone else 'saw' Kate's imaginary fantasies, something not real, and in responding to them, this other woman made them real for Kate in that moment.

Laura's account is even more specific as she refers to 'live striptease', which seemed to be a distinct fantasy:

'On top of my head I think live sex on cam sites for instances. You get different type of live stuffs. Some of cam sites offer live striptease but the problem is to find good ones with men who are willing to do it because most the striptease are done by women. Not sure why but (silent) It's kind of fun because you can bring the experience of a dance club on your screen while you are in your living room or in your bedroom or anywhere basically. I guess it's just some sort of entertainment. But the ones I like are the one in which I chat with sexwebcam in a live adult video chat room' (Laura, pp. 5-13).

Laura appears to find OSAs such as stripteases fun and recreational when she refers to it as a 'sort of entertainment'; this may be due to the fantasy element, especially given the 'teasing' nature of a striptease. Her discussion of the challenges in finding 'good ones' insinuated that she has spent time trying this OSA, and has potentially been disappointed with the results, although the benefits it offers include its portability and ease (accessing it anywhere, such as at home) and perhaps the security element – there is safety behind a screen, compared with a dance club. Yet whilst the striptease element seemed to be a focus here, Laura's enjoyment rested more with the chat rooms, like Kate.

Noemie's account is similar to Laura's:

'I often for example put the radio on or have porn on I am not watching or listening to it but when I want a break I just have a quick look euh you know even just out of satisfaction ... it's kind of zooming out zooming in that kind of thing. It is quite fun to be connected to live web cam. That's quite fun to be connected to the world and it's more fun to be connected with a naked girl than a dressed girl. (laughing) yeah that's fun (laughing)' (Noemie, pp. 71-74/221-223).

It is apparent that Noemie enjoys watching live shows as she repeated the word 'fun' three times. In this context, fun seems to indicate enjoyment and amusement, as well as something that should not be taken too seriously. This appears to be reinforced when she mentioned 'zooming out, zooming in'. It appears that she lives her fantasies on and off. If she zooms in, the fantasies of the moment are brought into sharp focus, but she has the ability to zoom out as a means of moving in the opposite direction. Noemie laughed with joy at the end of her quote, which seems to reinforce the idea that she finds it a pleasurable activity.

Anais expressed her fantasies as a teenager by sending risqué photographs of herself to boys she liked, something she admittedly no longer does:

'I had like sent images through Snapchat like I would one or two. Hmm I was like 16, 17 maybe but that was kind very short lived, and I wouldn't say I would class them as nude images…were sent as sexual activities sort of things. It was sent to boys I was attracted to at the time' (Anais pp. 121-125).

The fact these photographs were not, in Anais' opinion, 'nudes', suggests that they were evocative of sexual activity, without being overt – thus, fuelling the imagination of the viewer. Perhaps the excitement lies in the entire process that occurs prior to actually sending the photographs. Anais may have prepared herself, taken the pictures, and selected the one(s) she wished to send before sending them. Each step may have contributed to the increase in her state of sexual arousal. Knowing that a boy she is attracted to was going to receive a risqué picture of herself potentially has some provocative elements, subsequently provoking sexual excitement, as well as providing an outlet for creativity – how to indicate sexual activity, arousal, and desire without actually sending a nude photograph? It may be that leaving more to the imagination not only generates increased sexual arousal (for the sender and the receiver), but also provides an element of safety 'behind the screen', given that sending a nude photograph of herself may leave Anais vulnerable to abuse in future.

In summary, for all participants, cyberspace offers an area in which they can live out their sexual fantasies and let their (and their virtual partners') imaginations run free. The accounts reveal different types of fantasies and the ways in which they may be expressed and fulfilled. They all share an openness in terms of their attitude towards fantasies. It could be that the participants live out their fantasies and desires online because they are unable to fulfil them in the real world.

4.2.3. Subordinate Theme – '*Meeting someone like me*': Alikeness

It appears that the interactive nature of cybersex has made meeting other people a psychological as well as a social reality. This cybersex community offers a sense of belonging, acceptance, and normality because members share similar interests, as illustrated in the following quote by Kate:

'*You either join a group of people chatting together or you can have individual chat…you have a section where you have individual chats with one person and that person over time you feel like you're related to that person, so you keep on chatting with the same person and that's one thing I enjoy' (Kate, pp. 16/19-21).*

Kate describes strong underlying feelings related to attachment when saying 'you feel like you are related to that person', which evokes images of kin, of a deep and unconditional tie. Perhaps this is the intense level of acceptance and familiarity she feels she develops

with virtual partners she chats to individually over time, which leads to further repeated interactions with the same individual, again strengthening the bond between them. The narrative indicated that there is a 'narrowing down' of potential virtual partners, a selection process that begins within a group before moving on to individual chats, and then repeated interactions. Strikingly, in the extract, there is little indication of the sexual nature of the 'chats' – it appears more as though a friendship, kinship even, is being developed, slowly, which could build trust and understanding through 'relatability' and like-mindedness. It suggests a special relationship which transcends the physical and sexual – something that Kate enjoys, thus perhaps fulfilling a specific need she has in a way that the offline world does/cannot for her, right now.

For Laura, finding someone like her is important, and like Kate, she wants to relate to someone at 'a certain level' – indicative of friendship, first and foremost. She seeks genuine encounters with other people, even if the relationship largely only has one purpose. Laura does not want to have access to 'professional' performers, and she is not searching for people in the sex industry. Rather, she is interested in finding a sexual partner with similar interests or 'someone who wants the same thing':

'You get the professional webcammer or the webcam performers who use social networking like Twitter or Snapchat to keep in touch if you want but those ones are no not free. Because it's their job you got to pay to have them in your chat room. No what I like is meeting someone like me like a male version and flirt only. Someone who wants the same thing without paying. I think it is more genuine because we are the same and that it's exciting hmm hmm I guess a professional act, says things or do things to please. But if I meet someone like me meaning not professional, we kind of get to know each other to a certain level we chat stuffs like how we end up on the site or discuss other sites anything and then we flirt.' (Laura, pp. 20-29)

Here, Laura twice used the word 'no' with respect to chargeable services asked for by professionals. Finding a sexual partner who is not a professional is more beneficial in the sense that it is similar to an offline relationship. It seems that with a non-professional partner, a level of authenticity can be reached because there is no pretence, or saying things simply to please. It appears as though they can achieve a higher level of intimacy and communication. With a professional, it is likely that the interaction will be artificial, giving the illusion of a real encounter; rather, Laura uses OSA not simply to achieve sexual pleasure, but to incorporate the seduction and flirting between herself and a man similar to her. Indeed, this for Laura is where the excitement comes from, chatting first about similar interests (different sites) before beginning to flirt and potentially moving on to OSA. Her description could indicate a desire for romance, for someone to want her, as

well as to want: a mutual experience between equals, alike in their quest for pleasure and company. For Anais, this alikeness appeared to be somewhat of a relief, someone to understand her and her likes/dislikes better:

'I could have those conversations with people and be comfortable and be more open and it was at that early stage where you work out to find out who you are. It is all sort of confusion and hmm you are also worried that the things you do are shameful' (Anais, pp. 196-200).

Anais suggests she felt confused and ashamed about her sexual desires and online activities – about her sexual identity, in finding out who she was – until she found an open space where she could communicate her thoughts and interests. It seems that cyberspace made it possible for her to alleviate any guilt attached to her sexuality by being able to discuss it with no taboo. This gives the impression that the online space is one where no social norms or judgements apply, providing a sense of acceptance that was comforting for Anais. This likeness, kinship perhaps, with others that shared her interests or at least accepted them could have been identity-affirming for Anais; her earlier experiences, characterised by worry and anxiety, surrounding who she was and specifically the rejection (by others) of who she was may have meant she found relief in later finding people that not only accepted her, but understood and even shared her likes/dislikes. This sense of comfort online, in stark contrast to the sense of disapproval and lack of acceptance in the offline world, is likely to entice Anais to return again and again to engaging in OSA.

To summarise, three of the participants perceive cyberspace to be a place to interact with others and establish ties and relationships based on, but simultaneously going beyond, sexuality and sexual fantasies. They appeared to find a sense of belonging in this space where they can be themselves without being ashamed of who they really are. It is instructive to notice that online communication may be built between the same individuals over time; it is not always engendered by fleeting connections. Thus, despite being in a virtual space, the participants can find individuals with similar values to interact and engage with, which seems to create bonds and connections that may be lacking in the offline world. The stark contrast between an enticing alikeness between online users and the potential social isolation they may experience in the offline world is something that is explored in more depth in the last theme.

4.2.4. Subordinate Theme – '*You get hundreds and hundreds of people*': A Catalogue of Choice

This theme encapsulated participants' assertions that the online space enables them to self-select any number of partners, which seemed to be met with glee. For instance, Noemie laughed as she told me she had seen 'thousands' of virtual partners 'in the last year'. Thus, one of the primary attractions of the online world was that they could find people with similar interests with a single click:

'*You get hundreds and hundreds of people talking…sometimes when you are in a chat room there are two or three hundred people talking together. I mean you have a sign if you are a female or a male…. you choose your group depending on what you are looking for…. Different nationalities have different fantasies. This is the reason why there are different websites' (Kate, pp. 59-62/69/77).*

Kate here is almost describing a catalogue from which she can search and select the group, gender and individuals that match her preferences. It seems far more straightforward than the equivalent process for finding a sexual partner in the offline world, which is significantly more complicated to achieve. The attraction, perhaps, to this online space, is that individual characteristics, desires and preferences are instantly identifiable by 'signs', 'groups', or 'websites'; thus, in one chat room, set up for a particular group, gender and purpose means that users such as Kate have a plethora of choice from people all sharing similar fantasies/desires/interests. This renders her search for ideal partners far easier and quicker than the more chaotic offline world, in which it is infinitely more difficult to instantly assess whether someone she encounters is into/looking for the same thing as her. This ease of identification of potential partners means the sifting and sorting has already been done; these individuals have been pre-screened, perhaps, for suitability, meaning that the ease and speed of finding someone to engage with ensures Kate keeps returning to this online space.

The somewhat consumerist aspect of this catalogue of choice is further echoed by Laura, who indicated that she likes to 'browse around' and 'shop' to find someone she fancies:

'The way I just meet up a guy I mean it's random you just go to certain sites where you can browse around, or shop and they do the same thing and sort of have hmm sort of have sex chat and you and then something kind of click something like "oh" this guy seems cool and he is good looking we kind of engage in an erotic chat' (Laura, pp. 143-147).

The physical appearance of potential partners seems to be an important criterion for Laura, as illustrated by her use of the phrase 'he is good looking'. She sounded joyful and comfortable as she explained the process. Unlike Kate, Laura seems to search only for a

single partner at any given time, rather than joining a group with multiple partners. Laura gives the impression that she has countless potential candidates from a plethora of sites, which means she has no particular 'strategy' for finding someone. Rather, it is a bit random – if the people in one chat room do not match her preferences, and she finds no one to 'click' with, she moves on to the next one. It would appear that this attitude towards browsing for partners ensures that she does not remain alone. She does not have to be disappointed or experience negative emotions because it seems that she can find someone new whenever she wants, constantly moving on to find someone she is happy to have erotic conversations with.

In summary, cyberspace seems to offer a wide range of easily identifiable potential partners or people with similar interests. Depending on what they are seeking, whether it is individual or group chats, the choices for users are endless, which means that these women can quickly move on to a different site, to someone else, if they are not satisfied with the selection offered by the first site to which they navigate. The consumerist, 'shop style' talk was prominent, which could indicate the material nature of the interactions – they are there to serve a purpose, generally sexual in nature. Yet not all participants were wholly satisfied with a superficial interaction, desiring a deeper connection with the same person/people over time, as explored in the previous subordinate theme. In general, however, the catalogue of options ensured that people who could meet or shared participants' likes and dislikes were more easily identifiable than in the offline world, allowing participants to make connections and experience sexual activity more frequently, safely, and with ease. Notably, however, participants were sometimes surprised by what they enjoyed, as explored in the next subordinate theme.

4.2.5. Subordinate Theme – *'watching…female porn… am I attracted to women?'*: A Safe Space to Discover Something New about Sexuality

Three participants described that having a virtual space of their own allows them to explore their sexuality. Cyberspace has enabled them to discover something new about their own sexuality and identity. This is exemplified by Kate in the following extract:

'With me it is more of elderly women with nice body shapes and everything nice anyone over 50 is my personal preference and euh body shape perfect euh perfectly shape vagina and good size boobs that my personal preferences. Features are important to me and euh that what I discovered online' (Kate, pp. 155-160).

Kate seemed to make many new discoveries online, especially pertaining to her own personal preferences. She is specific with regards to the kind of body shape and body parts she likes; she also seems to desire 'perfection', repeating this twice, as something that is

important to her. She admits that her priorities, the things that arouse her perhaps, have been a learning curve. Her excitement was also palpable when she was talking. It appears that her attraction to mature women is something she discovered through OSA and perhaps she would not have discovered this in the offline world, where clothes consistently hide the body in a way that they do not in the online world of cybersex. Laura also discovered surprising desires online; in the following account, she describes herself (a heterosexual) becoming sexually aroused when watching homosexual porn online:

'I stopped I watched I looked at it. It was actually euh sexual performance between two women I suppose I could say euh lesbians who were having sex euh and very very quickly to my surprise I got aroused and got that intense heat inside me even thought I have always been heterosexual hmm and I can't can't describe what the feeling was like almost intense but beautiful I loved it…And hmm so I left it there but it questioned me on my sexuality I questioned if I sort of was lesbian or "what it meant?' (Laura, pp. 68-75)

Whilst Laura did not specifically search for this lesbian pornographic movie, it appeared to leave her reeling; she was confident she knew her sexuality, yet in becoming quickly, intensely aroused, she discovered that it had evolved. Laura described engaging in self-reflection, and in wondering what it meant, she appears to be finding it difficult to align her enjoyment of the homosexual content with her own identity as a heterosexual. Her 'binary' classifications of sexuality had perhaps been shaken, challenged. She wondered if she had moved over to another group entirely, that of 'lesbian'. It is unclear if this generated an answer or whether it was too uncomfortable or unnerving to address or pursue, given that she states she 'left it there'. It is unclear whether she 'left' this lesbian exploration firmly within the online space or left the bigger questions and the challenge it presented to her sexuality in the past. Yet the choice available online, coupled with the ease of access, clearly demonstrates the ability of the cybersex space to present options that participants may not have previously considered or encountered. This particular option not only enabled Laura to learn something about her personal sexual preferences, but allowed her to contemplate the bigger picture – where it fit, or could fit, into her life, with its predetermined categories. Perhaps it even led her to question the usefulness of these neat, bounded categories in the first place: heterosexual versus homosexual, man or woman. Laura remained silent for a while in the interview after discussing the above, perhaps contemplating her sexual life as expressed in two distinct spaces, namely cyberspace and real space.

Similarly, Anais discovered something new about her own sexuality:

'I was watching was very much like I don't know I would say it wasn't typical porn hmm like…I guess you know like watching like female porn or like women on their own and hmm feeling like maybe I am attracted to women hmm…hmm the excitement hmm around like you know yeah discovering new things what is out there hmm looking back I wouldn't probably change about it because it was part of my development that was a big part of my life growing up and it was part of my sexual journey yeah I wouldn't change because it made me who I am. It has a lot of positive aspects' (Anais, pp. 95/98/257-262).

Similarly, to Laura, online sexual content also allowed Anais to discover homosexual pornography, and consequently, various interests that she would have had no knowledge of otherwise. It is striking that she compares this to 'typical porn', so for her it feels atypical, different, perhaps even elicit. Her enjoyment of this kind of 'new discovery' carries no regret for Anais; rather, it seems to have been integral in helping Anais to find her true self, the person she has become. Her sexual preferences online are therefore inextricably linked to her identity, her 'becoming', especially as she explored during her formative years. It seems that Anais is not only comfortable and confident in her sexual choices and attitudes but is perhaps grateful to these early experiences for what it subsequently taught her about herself.

In summary, it appears that cyberspace offers the opportunity to explore sexuality and sexual interests further. Although the participants thought they knew their sexuality, they subsequently found that their preferences, desires and fantasies could expand, thus indicating that sexuality is not something that is fixed and cannot always be neatly grouped into distinct categories. Instead, it seems that sexuality can be rediscovered at any time, and the online world plays an integral role in facilitating this; this means that participants are not only intrigued by the various possibilities presented by the online space, but potentially grateful to what these opportunities have taught and perhaps continue to teach them about themselves.

4.2.6. Master Theme One: Summary

This theme, and the subordinate themes underpinning it, encapsulated the seductiveness of the online world and the opportunities it presents for OSA. All participants expressed a sense of excitement while discovering and engaging in cybersex, and the journey it took them on, from their initial interest in pornography to engaging in interactive sexual activities. They proceeded to describe how cybersex offers them the opportunity to explore and live out their fantasies with a vast number of likeminded people, with whom they could also build deeper, more meaningful connections with over time. Cyberspace is also a space where individuals do not feel as judged as in the offline world for their sexual

interests and desires, which helps them to alleviate feelings of guilt and shame. It also appears that OSA enables participants to discover their sexuality in greater depth. All these features rendered cyberspace an exciting world that enticed them back again and again, encouraging further interactions with others and explorations of their own sexual identities.

4.3. Master Theme Two – Paradoxical Attitudes

Despite the excitement of experiencing OSA, many aspects of the participants' accounts seemed to indicate there were paradoxical attitudes attached to their experiences. This is explored through the following sub-themes: (1) Anonymity and self-disclosure; (2) Ambiguous thinking; and (3) Closeness at a distance.

4.3.1. Subordinate Theme – *'You can just make up a name and share your fantasies':* Anonymity and Self-Disclosure

Anonymity in cyberspace (e.g., the use of an avatar) could be compared to wearing a mask. The participants can imagine their cybermates in whatever way they wish. It seems that the paradox lies in the fact that they are searching for genuine sexual partners while simultaneously concealing their own identity. As shown below, two participants mentioned the paradox between remaining anonymous and disclosing themselves. For instance, Kate explained how she can be anyone she wants:

'It's not your face that you show, and you don't have to disclose your name either. You can just make up a name and you put an avatar on it' (Kate, pp. 63-65).

Kate explained that she can reinvent herself using a different persona. It seems that doing so implies the abnegation of her body. In this situation, her body with all its characteristics is superfluous, hidden by the avatar. The avatar represents her new (perhaps 'ideal') self (new face with a drawing, new name). It appears that in cyberspace, real people such as Kate have actual interactions with other real people, while simultaneously being able to shape or even create their own and other people's personalities. As such, it would seem that the use of an avatar facilitates the reinvention of the self. However, this gives the impression that she does not feel comfortable with revealing who she really is. It is possible that the underlying fear of her OSA being discovered is a potential source of embarrassment. There is a discrepancy between her desire for sexual freedom, which she searches for online, and her attitude towards actually owning her sexual freedom, unapologetically, given that she does not put her face and name to it. The source of this conflict may lie in the taboo that still surrounds female sexuality, as women are often socialised to be sexually restrained or hide their sexual desires/activities. Arguably,

however, the use of an avatar to 'hide' behind actually facilitates a greater degree of freedom and vulnerability for users, as exemplified by Laura:

'Hmm and it's nice because you don't feel lonely and here it is you, hmm, you talk whatever crap, we complement each other, we share what our fantasies are, what we like, euh, what is super nice is that we know why we are there we don't have to pretend or being scared of what the other is going to think, you know, after all you don't have to give your real identity' (Laura, pp. 153-157).

It seems that such online connections prevent Laura from feeling lonely; rather, the opposite occurs, where intimacy is cultivated precisely because she can use a false identity. This suggests there are two levels of trust issues; in the real world, people know who Laura really is (her identity) but do not know what she is really thinking – her external appearance is a veneer, a pretence, to shield her real thoughts and feelings for fear of judgement, perhaps. By contrast, in cyberspace this pretence and fear of judgement no longer applies, because her identity remains hidden. Perhaps anonymity is required because she does not fully trust the other person/people online, in the same way she might not trust others with her true feelings/thoughts/desires in the real world. Laura therefore both describes an exchange that creates an intimate bond between herself and others online and the desire to remain anonymous through the use of a mask. It seems that authenticity and falsification exist simultaneously.

To summarise, there is a distinct paradox of reality and idealism/fiction; things are not what they seem either online or offline, and yet this anonymity can, ironically, facilitate a feeling of freedom and desire to disclose true feelings and viewpoints. This paradoxical attitude gives a sense of a separate and distinct interior and exterior, a whirlwind of emotions that remain shackled inside, held back by a sense of shame, perhaps by fear of judgment by others in the face of what is considered fragile and vulnerable. Such fragility remains hidden under the disguise of an avatar. The inability to marry one's name and identity with one's true thoughts and desires may stem from the endless choices of potential partners one can find online, as discussed previously; anything other than protective anonymity could be considered risky to one's reputation, or feelings of acceptance.

4.3.2. Subordinate Theme – *'I shouldn't I should I shouldn't':* Ambiguous Thinking

Three participants appeared to hold this dichotomous attitude towards their OSA. They mentioned the desire to stay connected or to log on regularly but pretend that nothing had happened once they logged off. This seems like a split attitude, perhaps due to undesirable feelings such as shame.

Laura seemed to have a sexual purpose when watching pornography. She mentioned 'doing it very quickly', which probably referred to masturbation:

'I would always kind of doing it very quickly and then just switched off and then erased everything, so it was almost to forget that everything happened I suppose' (Laura, p. 110).

'Very quickly' appears to emphasise the urgency to end the solitary sexual act as soon as she reaches orgasm as if it is dirty or shameful. Her subsequent act of erasure is also telling, implying that by deleting the content, she is attempting to convince herself that it did not happen. Consequently, she does not have to deal with any negative feelings or fear that she may be 'caught' or found out, somehow. Her attempt to distance herself from the act and the sites that she had visited could indicate a sense of shame, not revelling in her sexual freedom as such, but a desire to achieve a goal, an outcome, from the encounter; it is timebound and she moves on quickly. Like Laura, Anais also expressed strong feelings of shame and confusion:

'I guess initially it was just curiosity like let's see what is out there but a lot a lot of shame so not really telling anyone about it and feeling like wrong and illegal somehow, hm, like someone is going to find out… because there is so much shame around it and a lot of confusion I would say. I was very much like I shouldn't I shouldn't I should I shouldn't' (Anais, pp. 78-82/96-98).

Anais hesitation surrounding looking at sexual content online suggests that her attitude is ambivalent. While one part of her wants to go online for sexual purposes, another part of herself 'feels' as though it is wrong, generating confusion. Strikingly, she indicates her sense of it being illegal, serving to highlight the depth of her feelings of guilt and shame. Her worry that someone may discover her actions and/or desires links to the previous subordinate theme, and rationalises the desire for anonymity. Her cognitive dissonance surrounding two mutually powerful pulls – to continue, or stop – sounds like a painful experience, as she is torn between two sides. The desire of wanting something in the moment and at the same time cognitively weighing up the potential consequences make the experience sound as though it is very much steeped in what other people would think or say. The fear of judgement, of people thinking ill of us, leads to a sense of shame; human beings do not wish to be ostracised from their social groups, becoming part of the 'outgroup' via misdemeanours. Again, however, the view that female sexual desire and activity is implicitly 'wrong' is culturally/socially imparted, leading many females such as those in this study to feel alienated and ashamed of their sexual curiosity and wants.

Noemie mentioned that she could have a different distraction to OSA, as though it might not be something acceptable.

'I suppose it is as it is about sex about people having group sex. It's a distraction. I should do gardening instead I guess (silent)' (Noemie, pp. 96-98).

She suggested that gardening could be an alternative to OSA, but did not sound convinced. Placing both activities on the same level as if they were equal is somewhat strange, yet she qualifies this as both providing a distraction of sorts, and both perhaps possessing the ability to enhance her well-being in different ways. Noemie sounded hesitant, which was highlighted by her silence. This gives the sense that she feels conflicted by her desire to go online for sexual purposes and the desire to stop her behaviour, a paradoxical, conflicting attitude, leaving Noemie at war with herself. Interesting to note, again, was this participant's use of 'should', which also belies a sense of 'right' and 'wrong'. Gardening would be 'right', acceptable, and respectable, in contrast to OSA, which is by default wrong, shameful, and therefore unacceptable. In summary, the participants expressed ambivalence and internal conflict between their desire to go online for sexual reasons, and the attached feeling that it was wrong somehow. It appears therefore that the use of OSA engenders a certain level of embarrassment and shame, and is something to be hidden and gotten over with quickly, instead of something to openly discuss and spend time enjoying.

4.3.3. Subordinate Theme – *'I have sex from a distance':* Closeness at a Distance

This sub-theme encompasses the strangeness of sharing intimate moments with someone who might be located on the other side of the world, and the strangeness of having sex without touching another self, another 'body'. Kate made a strong statement in this regard:

'The good aspect is that if you are a lonely person then you can find friends with who you fantasy online and with a safe distance. You can also do normal chats… I suppose I have safe sex from a distance' (Kate, pp. 272-274).

Cyberspace gives Kate the opportunity to combat any feelings of loneliness by engaging with friends who share similar interests. It appears that the geographical distance helps Kate to remain safe and in control. The four words 'friends', 'safe', 'sex', and 'distance' seem to describe cybersex from Kate's perspective. The interactional dimensions appear to have importance in this context. Kate discussed having friends and exchanging 'normal chats' in the same manner as people do offline. Nevertheless, Kate gives the impression that she is scared of becoming close to anyone. Although she mentioned having friends, they are not present in her real world. Friends seem like an illusion and her reference to

'normal chats' is vague. The other paradox is that she mentions having friends while looking for sexual pleasure. Calling them online friends versus online partners is unclear. It gives a sense that Kate is attempting to maintain an emotional distance, perhaps so that she does not have to experience deep feelings for online partners.

Laura enjoys the fact she can access cybersex space from the comfort of her own home; hence, the physical distance seems to be irrelevant in cyberspace. Laura described the process when she first meets a new partner:

'We normally use our keyboards to introduce ourselves and we see our pictures hmm euh the camera is off you only see the pictures but after texting you think "oh we get on" so then we meet in a chat room where we put our camera on, so we don't need to text anymore we talk to each other's. We chat and we see each other's from our respective bedrooms, hmm, it's not a relationship but you kind of get to know the person a little bit' (Laura, pp.148-153).

Initially, words and pictures replace real flirting. If both wish to go further, they switch on their cameras. In this way, intimacy is built up somewhat slowly – they do not meet as complete strangers and immediately engage in cybersex. The paradox lies in the fact that Laura described intimate closeness as sharing the same thoughts at a distance. It sounds like a romantic connection where they kind of touch each other while they are physically separated. It seems that physical separation causes the relationship to be detached, but at the same time the intense emotions 'when the orgasm is reached' sustain the closeness. It appears as though they make love in a mirror; she touches herself while he touches himself without being able to touch each other. Laura however is clear that this is 'not a relationship' – perhaps due to the distance? – but that it provides a level of mutual understanding, of people getting to know each other a little.

Although Noemie might be interacting online with other people from different locations for sexual purposes, it is notable that while they are in cyberspace, they are actually in the same virtual space:

'More recently it is live hmm and people doing web cam and they are quite of interesting because you can go all around the world anytime or day in Moscow or when it's dark in Brazil you know that kind of stuff… from the comfort of your living room' (Noemie, pp. 129-132).

Noemie's experience of 'live'; it is happening in real time, although it might not be 'real' in a sense that two people are present in one physical space. Rather, it is real within the virtual space, allowing boundaries of time and location to be overcome. This 'travel'

element sounds almost exotic, allowing Noemie to experience cultural, temporal, geographic, and individual differences without much effort.

Thus, whilst cybersex lacks the intimacy of touching another body, it does facilitate arousal and orgasm to be reached courtesy of another person's virtual presence, perhaps visually observing another's body and interests, and getting to know them (even a little). Using the Internet therefore involves the paradox of physical intimacy without actual proximity.

4.3.4. Master Theme Two: Summary

This master theme revealed a range of paradoxes embedded within OSA. Using the Internet for this purpose allows the face and the body to disappear because they can be hidden behind a fictitious identity or the use of an avatar. Cybersexuality thus facilitates the unequivocal disappearance of the body. On the screen, sex can be transformed into text or icons, with participants waiting for sensory combinations to stimulate the body of the other from a distance, without physically touching it. Ironically, participants expressed the need to be able to be themselves while interacting with potential partners, but did not appear to feel at ease with revealing their own identity, perhaps due to a lack of trust and/or associated feelings of shame and embarrassment attached to OSA. Paradoxically, the participants conducted their sexual explorations under different identities in an immaterial world. This contributed to their ambivalent feelings of OSA; they felt a distinct pull to explore online, yet simultaneously felt ashamed, wanting to distance themselves from or erase the cybersex world. Having (often anonymous) sex at a distance, however, gave participants the opportunity to alleviate loneliness and feel safe and in control, achieving pleasure with minimal effort.

4.4. Master Theme Three - The 'Painful' Downsides

Some of the participants described the negative effects of OSA on their lives. These effects are captured through three sub-themes: (1) Feeling trapped in a spider's web, (2) Hindrance to engaging in romantic relationships, and (3) Otherness.

4.4.1. Subordinate Theme – *'I don't know how I can stop it':* Feeling Trapped in a Spider's Web

The participants described finding it difficult to reduce their OSA use. Mobile phone technology offers the opportunity to remain logged on from any location, which consequently increases their problematic use of OSA. Two of them described the escalation they experienced as feeling the need to spend an increasing amount of time engaged in cybersex. Kate's quote provides an illustration of this:

'Once you get on the chat it can get on for hours for days. You don't want to be left out… You can even get notification. You can text and get reply to a couple of hours later. This is where the notifications come handy. You don't get left out and this way you can quickly get back in there. The beauty is that you don't have to go home or carry your pc to login. I can be in a park sitting on a bench and get access to the apps and carry on what you were doing at home. It is very convenient' (Kate, pp. 95-101).

Kate finds it 'convenient' that she can access cyberspace from anywhere and whenever she desires. The mobile phone seems to act as a replacement for a real presence. It appears that the technology is designed in such a way that cyberpeople can stay connected. Kate did not seem to consider the potential risk of dependency. She looked away from me and was uneasy when discussing this issue. However, it is evident that she seems to minimise any detrimental side effects of spending an excessive amount of time online, and instead focuses on the positive aspects of the technology. She does not seem to realise that she is constantly seeking ways of staying connected or reconnecting as soon as possible because she 'does not want to be left out'. The latter is a strong statement that seems to indicate a fear of being abandoned, of being irrelevant or overlooked. Beyond the need to be connected, Kate may be struggling with much deeper emotional feelings that she avoids with her OSA use.

Unlike Kate, Noemie expressed suffering and struggle. She is aware of her excessive use of OSA as she recognises that she wastes 'a lot of time' using OSA as an escape from real life or difficult tasks:

'I said to you it's an escape. When I should be getting on with something difficult and I don't then it is bad. I think it is the problem but I don't know how you can stop it... I think you can procrastinate for a long time. You waste a lot of time I have done it… it's just too easy to just actually to spend hours to do some crappy you know watching someone online doing stuff you know it's very easy but that could be the same with watching something else, anything, any activity so what is the point really' (Noemie, pp. 163-165/172-179).

Noemie compared her use of OSA with other activities such as smoking, watching television, or eating as if to indicate that she categorises them in the same way, as procrastinators. Too much of anything, she appears to be saying, including OSA, can be problematic – she expressed her difficulty in stopping, with an almost defeatist attitude, in a 'what is the point of trying to stop' manner. She gives a sense that if it was not OSA, she would be engaging in other potentially problematic behaviours, all of which serve as escapism, a distraction from her real life. This suggests she is trapped in her OSA use and has no idea how she can escape.

Thus, the compulsory use of OSA and the availability and pervasive nature of the technology in daily life could be categorised as a painful downside to engaging in cybersex. Two of the participants appeared to use OSA to excess, locked into cyberspace by technology and encouraged to 'escape' their lives and waste much of their time (and their lives) in this world. According to the participants' accounts, it appears that these experiences are accompanied by emotions and feelings such as the fear of abandonment, and craving connection all the time.

4.4.2. Subordinate Theme - Hindrance to Engaging in Romantic Relationship

The participants explained that living a sexual life online may reduce the need for actual romantic interactions. In that sense, cybersex seems to facilitate loneliness instead of countering it, as some participants noted. Kate's account is illustrated by her mention of a 'barrier' that cannot be 'passed':

'I haven't met anyone in real life since I am on chatroom, but I have friends otherwise. Some of my girlfriends met offline some of the women they chat with online. I find it much harder to cross that barrier… I do not find safe to meet someone I met online offline. It might not be the same thing. I might be really disappointed that the person isn't to my liking. To carry out those intimacies in someone else house or in my house isn't safe to me' (Kate, pp. 253-256/263-267).

The metaphor of a barrier conveys a powerful image of a door that does not open. Kate's account engendered a palpable sense of sadness, particularly when she explained that she has not met anyone physically since she has been chatting online. It seems that on the one hand, cybersex offers a playground to externalise her fantasies, but on the other hand it prevents her from meeting someone in real life. This seems to be reinforced by the false belief that she will not find someone with whom she could share her fantasies when she said, 'it might not be the same thing'. The sadness was also perceptible when Kate referred to friends who managed to meet women online offline. Kate gives the impression that she too would like to be brave enough to do this, to marry the real and the virtual. Kate's fear of meeting someone in real life is reflective of the reasons why she opts to use the Internet to engage in cybersex in the first place – it helps her to avoid her fear of physical intimacy, risk, and disappointment.

Conversely, Laura appeared to be quite confused and ambivalent about whether she wanted a real-world relationship or not, and the role that OSA played in preventing or facilitating that:

'I am at a different level where I am not looking for a relationship…hmm, I still want that because I don't have it at the moment I am single so I still want that but hmm I don't know when I am going to get it, you know, even though I tried numerous dating sites but right

now I put it on hold…The bad aspect would be to forget what it is to be in contact with another body hmm touching the skin hmm accepting that in a real-world thing are more complex and they are in the real world hmm when you take into consideration the other more (silent) because on the net you are on the illusion that you connect or you are in a sort of relationships but it's a game it's a game' (Laura, pp. 131-137/247-251).

Laura has actively looked for a relationship in the past, but that part of her life is 'on hold'; cybersex therefore could help her to fill the void left by being single. Despite her cybersex life, Laura mentioned that she is missing the activities that a real relationship offers, such as going to restaurants or the cinema. Laura sounded thoughtful and profound when she mentioned that cybersex is an illusion because the relationships are not real, perhaps because people meet for a purpose but do not know anything about each other except for their sexual fantasies. The complexity and seriousness of offline relationships may be more off-putting than the simple game played online; yet she owns that this complexity can lead to something more authentic and sincere, developing into 'something meaningful, deeper'. She sounded as though she was scared of having an offline relationship, perhaps constrained by psychological barriers given the undesirable complexity of another real, live person in her physical space. Hence, cybersex helps her to deal with the absence of an offline relationship, and part of the 'deal' is that it inherently allows people to be more selfish and self-centred. In offline relationships, Laura seemed to be saying, you give more of yourself, compromise more, in taking the other person into consideration more. Offline relationships therefore require vulnerability, opening you up to be hurt, or taken advantage of. Perhaps this is something that Laura does not want to (or feel ready to) engage in, thus she has put it 'on hold'. Laura does, however, seem switched on to the fact that in the long-term, cybersex might be detrimental to her real life; because she finds sexual pleasure online, she described herself as being passive in her search for a partner offline. It appears that the consequence of this is that she does not live a real relationship that could be nurtured and developed into something more meaningful than the use of OSA.

In summary, the participants expressed the desire to experience real relationships in the real world, yet, unable (or unwilling) to pursue this, they have pursued another, simpler form of intimacy instead: cybersex. Cybersex gives the illusion of a living relationship, but from a safe distance; consequently, the participants appear to find themselves trapped in a straitjacket.

4.4.3. Subordinate Theme - Otherness

The participants described the difficulties they experienced with opening up and sharing about their sexuality with those around them in real life as opposed to online life. It seems that an omertà operates in British culture such that sex is considered a taboo subject. It appears that they do not feel at ease with discussing their experiences due to the fear of being judged. There is a socially accepted norm that sex should not be discussed, which removes the possibility of obtaining support and leaves participants alone with their feelings of embarrassment, shame, and guilt. Contrary to the acceptance and understanding that participants found online, OSA seems to create a sense of isolation offline, because they do not feel confident talking about this in a real-world environment.

Kate appeared to be relatively sad as she explained that in the real world, she is unable to share her fantasies in the way that she can online:

'It's hard to share your fantasies you know with a real person… Because you are isolated you are not with the person physically it is easier to share fantasies… I found my fantasies to be slightly embarrassing in real life. I am just not comfortable talking about it' (Kate, pp. 104/106/251-252).

She mentioned that the physical distance and the screens make it easier for to her to live out her fantasies. Kate expressed the uncomfortable emotional state of the embarrassment that she experiences in real life when she tries to talk or open up to someone about her sexual fantasies. The embarrassment reflects the moral weight that society can exert on a person. The gaze of the 'other' is too difficult to receive. It seems like cyberspace offers a space in which Kate does not have to feel embarrassed. Nevertheless, the downside is that Kate seems to live in two separate worlds. It is as if she has to split herself in order to do this. Instead of being able to verbalise that she spends an excessive amount of time on OSA, as mentioned previously, she finds herself 'isolated' without receiving any support.

Another significant factor in participants' meaning making seems to derive from 'being a weirdo', as illustrated by Laura's quote:

'Hmm it happened that few times I felt a bit I don't know if I felt a bit guilty or if I felt a bit dirty. I questioned I questioned oh I know I thought "I am a weirdo" (deep breath) that's sort of things, or I felt that there is something wrong with me perhaps, but I think it's because of our Christianity heritage we are supposed to be a traditional relationship and when you do something outside the box it can be seen as something weird' (Laura, pp. 302-307).

Laura experienced guilt and had a moral view of herself when she mentioned that she 'felt a bit dirty'. Christianity has played a clear role in colouring sexuality, even today. Laura

explained the impact of religious heritage on her self-perception, describing the lack of acceptance of female sexual pleasure in society. This gives the impression that OSA gives space for this, but the downside it is that it creates feelings of shame and guilt. Feeling alienated within a mainstream society that does not tolerate discussions surrounding female sexual desire was a theme running throughout all interviews. Participants felt like the 'odd one out', made to feel as though they had a unique problem, and that society, shaped as it is, was blameless. Finding solace online thus only served to highlight the stark contrast with the lack of acceptance participants experienced in the real world. This was also echoed by Anais. She sounded regretful as she explained her perception that in the UK, sexuality is taboo, and consequently, women in particular may feel ashamed and unsafe in cyberspace attempting to access sexual content:

'I think if we were more open in this culture about sex it would be more regulated as opposed to really unsafe and shaming…We are really weird about sex in British culture and also very weird about women and sex and feeling and thinking of pleasure, it is still undermined the female pleasure and very little sex education at school about this sort of things I mean around sex and pleasure you know like masturbation it's all about very pragmatic hmm for example education about risk of having baby if you don't want baby and are not protected you get infos but nothing about pleasure or sex online. Yeah I think the curriculum is to blame' (Anais, pp. 173-183).

Here, Anais links cultural and societal shaming of female sexuality with a lack of accurate education on the topic. In this way, she suggests the taboo surrounding the topic begins in early life, with males and females having different experiences and perspectives on sexuality. Women's pleasure remains unspoken in lieu of the practical concerns such as avoiding pregnancy, and Anais wishes that British culture would evolve to allow more transparency, inclusivity, and openness regarding her experience of negative feelings. She considers this would prevent the unnecessary feelings of shame that she experienced.

Clearly, therefore, the participants felt marginalised by society at large for possessing female sexual desires and fantasies, and unable to discuss these outside the online environment. This isolation and sense of 'otherness' that have caused shame and confusion for participants since pre-puberty were somewhat abated in the cybersex world, which gave them a space to exercise this sexual freedom yet was simultaneously a cause for their ongoing feelings of shame and embarrassment.

4.4.4. Master Theme Three: Summary

This theme has explored the painful downsides associated with OSA use. The participants shared the difficulty of reducing the time spent online, for various reasons, which negatively impacts their lives. For many of them, the downside extends to their personal

life because OSA creates an invisible barrier between the online and offline worlds. As a result of using OSA, they find it difficult to engage in an offline relationship. They experience a feeling of loneliness due to the fact that they find themselves isolated. OSA seems to be a sexual practice that isolates people from UK society. They expressed shame and embarrassment because OSA is a taboo subject that is left unspoken.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In this chapter, the information presented in the preceding chapters is collated by discussing the analysis with respect to the extant literature. Further research is referenced, aside from the literature review, which reflects the supposition that 'new and unanticipated territory' will be revealed by the interviews and analysis (Smith et al., 2009, p. 113). The research implications and practical applications are also examined, specifically in the context of CoP, in addition to the reflexivity of the study, limitations, and areas of further study.

5.1. Understanding the Findings in Relation to Scientific Literature

One of the main themes generated from the interviews with participants was the idea of OSA and cybersex presented an enticing space in which to spend time and explore female sexuality. This included the journey from being passive recipients of sexually arousing content to actively participating in this content, the sparking of imagination, and the thrill of finding someone like them. For example, almost all participants suggested that one of the main attractions of OSA is its interactive nature. Whilst viewing pornography alone may have originally encouraged a majority of the participants to engage in OSA, this appeared to be a portal to other potential opportunities in the online environment. As time passed, their confidence in and excitement towards engagement with online partners increased, causing them to shift from being passive to active participants. It may be that the passive consumption of pornography became less exciting, supporting findings from Lalumiere and Quinsey (1996), who determined that repeatedly being exposed to an identical erotic slide (five times) caused female participants' genital response to diminish. It is unsurprising that habituation in the context of OSA from the perspective of women has received minimal attention in the literature.

Several researchers report that females are indeed habitual users of porn (Both et al., 2011; Dawson et al., 2013). The boldness of participants gradually increased; at first, observing while remaining hidden was enough, but as time progressed, they wished (and had the opportunity) to become participants themselves, thus becoming more adventurous in their desire for satisfaction. It is possible that they have subsequently explored new activities, directions, or 'degrees' of OSA, such that not only could they then actively participate, thus providing them further pleasure, but could also be observed themselves. This experience could provide each of the participants with a sense of empowerment, as new, distinct, and more daring OSAs further stimulate their adventure in the virtual world.

This outcome concurs with Beutel et al.'s (2017) conclusion that the Internet presents boundless opportunities to bring diverse fantasies to life within the virtual world, experience sexual arousal, and become gratified (e.g., by masturbating). It seems that as new technologies continue to be developed, the way in which women access and participate in virtual sexual interactions is being transformed. This specific phenomenon has important ramifications, as increased utilisation of mobile devices has increased the accessibility of online sexual content, which has the potential to make OSA more common (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2021). It also has important implications for future research, given that much research defines OSA as that which is performed in isolation by people who prefer not to interact with others (Delmonico & Miller, 2003) and tends to focus on lone activities such as browsing pornography (Willoughby et al., 2018) with social participation forming only a subcategory of this (Trub et al., 2021).

This interactivity also opened up a world wherein participants can make their sexual fantasies a reality, with limitless possibilities (supporting findings from Daneback et al., 2013; Döring, 2009; and Grov et al., 2011). Part of this included verbal stimulation and sharing with others, meaning they largely participated in online chats pertaining to sex, supporting Beutel et al.'s (2017) findings. This interaction was even more thrilling when participants deemed it to be with someone like them, meaning they could discuss their sexual fantasies with others they felt they could trust in an environment free from the taboos that exist in the real word, which concurs with Brown et al.'s (2005) findings. This social participation can, as Whitty (2008) found, expand social networks (some of the participants have met potential partners and made friendships online through OSA). Additionally, the participants stated that the Internet allows sex to be discussed in an environment free from the taboos that exist in the real world, which concurs with the findings of Brown et al. (2005) and also supports research that indicates engagement in OSA can enhance communication skills (Daneback et al., 2013; Döring, 2009; Grov et al., 2011). However, interaction in OSA is not something that is explored in detail by current literature, furthering Courtice et al.'s (2021) calls for a move beyond restrictive 'categories' of OSA.

Cyberworld can therefore provide an enticing platform in which to engage in OSA for multiple reasons, such as interactivity and sharing sexual fantasies with people like them. This enabled participants to engage in an exploration of their own sexuality, free from the constraints of repressive sexual conventions, echoing Giménez-García et al.'s (2020) assertion that the online environment has the potential to enhance the identity and sexual

well-being of women. The positive experiences referenced in the participants' accounts further the need to reframe OSA in many instances as healthy and beneficial, given the tendency of extant literature to predominantly concentrate on addiction and OSA pathology. The powerful positive experiences in this study enable a broader perspective to be gleaned of female OSA.

However, whilst there were many benefits of OSA, these were sometimes tempered with paradoxical attitudes of both the participants and others. For example, whilst participants referred to an online world in which they could be themselves, form personal relationships and reveal personal information about themselves, they were generally hesitant, preferring to assume a fabricated persona and remain anonymous. Therefore, the participants adopted a dichotomous attitude regarding OSA, whereby they were separated into two different selves, generating the feeling of being 'close' but from a distance. The peculiarity of mutual intimacy with strangers across the globe, as well as the unusual nature of engaging in sexual activities without physically contacting another person was a novel finding in the present study, as participants discussed the paradox of being physically intimate, but not close to the other person.

The findings surrounding the paradox of true/false selves contradict the literature. Prior studies have revealed that online users have the opportunity to be themselves, rather than portraying a false image when encountering other people or potentially engaging in sexual practices online (Locke, 2021). However, in the present study, participants alluded to the fact that concealing their identities meant they did not face judgement from others. It may be that they do not have complete confidence in other online users to reveal their real emotions/thoughts/desires. It is possible they have concealed their female sexual desires for so long, through socialisation, culture, and gendered norms surrounding sex and sexuality, that a degree of trust must be established before their identities are revealed. Thus, it appears that participants can be both genuine and false at the same time. This mirrors the dramaturgical theory proposed by Goffman (1959), in which theatre is employed as a metaphor to depict the behaviour of individuals within society. Individuals have an 'on stage self' that they present to the world and a 'backstage self' or a true self, that they hide from others. Interactions between people (actors on a stage) are guided by conventions, norms, and values.

Extending this further, perhaps the behaviour of females engaging in OSA is further restricted by gendered norms, as outlined by Butler (1990) in her gender performativity theory. This may partly explain why some of the participants in the present study were

embarrassed and ashamed (to a certain extent) of their OSA, discussing it as something that should be concealed and resolved rapidly, rather than a practice that can be freely discussed and enjoyed. These researchers found that participants tried to deal with their cognitive dissonance surrounding OSA by labelling it as a normal and advantageous practice, which generally reduced the tensions that resulted from engaging in such practices (Renfrow & Rollo, 2014). It is clear that participants in the present study had complex, paradoxical attitudes and feelings about OSA that they had to carefully navigate and manage.

One theory that helps explain why participants seemed to experience cognitive dissonance and a desire for anonymity during OSA, despite the desire to establish connections with other people, is uncertainty reduction theory (Corriero & Tong, 2015). This explains the restraint underlying interactions that initially occur when strangers meet and suggests that, even though the Internet facilitates new ways of interacting, it also makes interpersonal interactions more complex, thus increasing the anxiety people feel about revealing their real identities and deepest desires to others (Corriero & Tong, 2015).

Other drawbacks of cybersex in the present study included problematic, compulsive OSA usage. This is arguably compounded by the prevalence and penetration of technology in all areas of life, generating a feeling of being trapped with no escape, leading to a misuse of time, offline relationships, and even finances. It seems that such experiences engender feelings and emotions such as concerns about being abandoned and continually seeking connection. The theory that online sex addiction is associated with gratification seems to be valid with respect to female users (Laier et al., 2014).

Engaging in cybersex was also found to reduce, for some, the necessity for romantic relationships in the offline world. In this regard, online sex actually appeared to *engender* a sense of loneliness, rather than alleviating it. Although the participants mentioned that they wanted to have real-life relationships, they were unable (or not willing) to do so; therefore, they opted to seek a simpler type of intimacy instead, namely cybersex. Thus, this study revealed a novel finding, in that OSA, whilst presenting the *illusion* of being in an actual relationship from a safe distance, resulted in participants feeling trapped by the situation.

The main novel finding of this study, therefore, was that of paradox. On the one hand, OSA provided an enticing space through which women began the journey of being passive recipients of pornographic material to active participants in a world wherein sexual fantasies could be discussed and enacted; on the other hand, women preferred to remain

anonymous, shielded behind a persona, unsure of the motives of others, and often feeling 'trapped' by the all-pervasive reach of mobile technology that enables cybersex to be accessed anywhere at the click of a button. The dichotomous yet parallel nature of both freedom and constraint in the cybersex world was ever present; technology provides the ability for women to be their 'sexual' selves, but from the safety of distance. It means connection, whilst remaining physically alone. Ultimately, therefore, whilst different participants had unique views, the findings indicated a broad range of positive, welcome experiences stemming from OSA, as well as more concerning, detrimental effects – sometimes concurrently.

5.2. Relevance to Counselling Psychology

A comprehensive review of both the wider and CoP literature indicated that no previous studies have focused on the subjective experiences of women who live their sexual lives online within the UK. Therefore, the present research makes a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge pertaining to the CoP field. The outcomes generated by this research indicated that the participants make sense of their OSA usage in complicated, particular, and diverse ways, which facilitated the emergence of novel and richer insights into the topic of women and OSA. Hence, the findings are especially valuable for CoP theory, as they not only complement but also enhance the current knowledge in this field. Such understanding stresses the validity of and necessity to respect and comprehend how individuals make sense of their experiences on their own terms. This appears to be highly significant for CoP, a psychological field in which efforts to understand and find meaning are prioritised, while practitioners concentrate on engaging with subjective experience, beliefs, and values (Douglas et al., 2016). Lastly, the study insights can significantly contribute to the CoP field by identifying new research avenues (presented below).

The present research has emphasised the importance of counselling psychologists giving priority to the subjective experiences of women by comprehending that their ability to make meaning is an important mediator of such experiences. Furthermore, the present research has stressed the importance of counselling psychologists concentrating on enabling well-being (Cooper, 2009) by adopting a sex-positivity approach (Burnes et al., 2017; Cruz et al., 2017), rather than existing clinical recommendations that have generally concentrated on the treatment of pathology associated with female sexuality (Tiefer, 2010). Given the tendency of counselling psychologists to concentrate on comprehending people as socially embedded (Cooper, 2009), it is critical that counselling psychologists are cognisant of the potentially detrimental impact that invalidating/dismissive responses

can have on female clients attempting to explore their sexuality, either in an offline or online environment.

5.3. Implications for Practice

This research offers new knowledge and a richer understanding of women and OSA for agencies that are particularly focused on providing assistance to female clients with issues relating to OSA. The revelations within this study illuminate a nuanced and intricate landscape wherein women interpret their engagement with OSA. The multifaceted nature of these interpretations underscores the imperative for counselling psychologists, whether professionals or those in training, to adopt a collaborative approach in their interactions with clients. The primary objective should be a profound comprehension of the inner realms inhabited by these clients and an appreciation for how they construct their realities.

In navigating these interactions, counselling psychologists are urged to embody the principles of collaboration and understanding, aligning with the philosophical values of CoP as delineated by Douglas et al. (2016). This approach emphasises the recognition and reverence for the subjective experiences, emotions, and meanings of clients on their own terms. Regardless of professional qualifications, the process demands a genuine and empathetic exploration of the diverse ways in which women perceive and navigate their experiences of OSA. This inclusive and respectful engagement is pivotal not only in addressing immediate concerns, but also in fostering an environment conducive to holistic well-being and growth.

By emphasising the complexity, subjectivity, and diversity inherent in women's interpretations of OSA, this research encourages a paradigm shift in the way counselling psychologists approach their clients. It underscores the need to move beyond preconceived notions or standardised approaches, recognising that each client's journey is unique and intricately tied to their subjective experiences. In doing so, counselling psychologists align themselves with the evolving landscape of contemporary issues, ultimately contributing to the advancement of knowledge and the enrichment of therapeutic practices focused on female clients navigating the complexities of OSA.

In light of these revelations, it is recommended that psychologists resist the temptation to force-fit their clients' experiences into pre-existing theories or predefined meaning categories. Instead, there is a call to action to focus on elucidating, interpreting, and negotiating the intricacies of their clients' experiences while navigating the delicate balance between personal perceptions and established knowledge.

Furthermore, it is advisable for counselling psychologists to engage in a reflective examination of their own beliefs and attitudes regarding sexuality, as proposed by Cruz et al. (2017). This self-reflection is crucial for dispelling personal prejudices that might hinder a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing women's engagement with OSA, encompassing motivations that range from positive to negative and neutral. Importantly, the recommendation extends to the careful selection of language, emphasising the need to avoid terminology that could inadvertently contribute to the stigmatisation of individuals engaged in OSA. By embracing these recommendations, counselling psychologists can cultivate an environment that fosters a more inclusive and understanding approach to women's experiences with OSA. This not only advances the field of counselling psychology but also aligns with ethical considerations, promoting a client-centred and non-judgmental practice that is essential for addressing the complex and diverse nature of online sexual activities among women.

The unveiled findings illuminate a nuanced and multifaceted conflict inherent in the experiences of females involved in OSA. Within this realm, the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment stands juxtaposed against a rich tapestry of complex emotions, notably guilt, ambivalence, and shame. This intricate interplay of desires and emotional responses highlights the inherent complexity of women's engagement with OSA, transcending a simplistic understanding of these activities. In response to these revelations, there emerges a compelling argument for counselling psychologists to possess not only an awareness but also a comprehensive understanding of the intricate lived experiences of women navigating the landscape of OSA. This understanding extends beyond mere acknowledgment to a deeper recognition and respect for the individualised nature of these experiences, allowing women the agency to define and interpret their actions on their own terms.

The critical need for this comprehensive understanding is underscored by the emotional intricacies involved, where pleasure-seeking is entangled with feelings of guilt, ambivalence, and shame. By recognising and respecting these experiences on their own terms, counselling psychologists can establish a therapeutic space that promotes openness, trust, and non-judgment. This approach is vital for fostering a supportive environment wherein women feel empowered to explore, articulate, and reconcile the various dimensions of their engagement with OSA. Ultimately, this emphasises the nuanced nature of the conflict within women's experiences of OSA and underscores the pivotal role of counselling psychologists in approaching these complexities with empathy, sensitivity, and a commitment to understanding the lived realities of their clients.

Moreover, the research accentuates a crucial awareness of the societal dynamics that some females grapple with while engaging in OSA. It highlights the reality that these women may find themselves navigating societal expectations that prescribe conventional norms, specifically those dictating the passive nature of women's sexuality. In adhering to these prescribed conventions, women might perceive and internalise certain societal expectations that influence their behaviour within the realm of OSA. These societal norms are not merely abstract concepts but tangible constraints that can significantly impact the extent to which women feel comfortable disclosing their experiences within the counselling room. The prescribed conventions can act as subtle influences, shaping the narratives women choose to share, and potentially limiting the depth of their exploration into their subjective experiences with OSA. Consequently, the role of counselling psychologists becomes paramount in creating an environment that counters these constraints. It is imperative for psychologists to establish an open, non-judgmental space that fosters trust and encourages female clients to delve into the nuances of their subjective experiences and perceptions related to OSA. This involves actively challenging societal expectations that may limit the scope of discussions and ensuring that the counselling room becomes a sanctuary for authentic self-expression.

By acknowledging and addressing the impact of societal norms, counselling psychologists can contribute to dismantling barriers that hinder open dialogue. This approach empowers female clients to share their experiences without fear of judgment or stigma, ultimately allowing for a more comprehensive and authentic exploration of the complex interplay between societal expectations and individual experiences in the context of online sexual activities.

In applying these insights into their practical approach, counselling psychologists are impelled to undertake a conscientious consideration of the potential harm that may befall clients, whether directly or indirectly, as a consequence of substandard care. This acknowledgment underscores the ethical responsibility of psychologists to prioritise the well-being of their clients and guard against any adverse consequences that may arise from their therapeutic interventions. To address these concerns proactively, a sex-positive approach is recommended as a foundational framework for practice. This approach necessitates a heightened self-awareness among counselling psychologists regarding their own attitudes, beliefs, and values concerning sex and sexuality, aligning with the propositions of Cruz et al. (2017). By cultivating this heightened self-awareness, psychologists are better equipped to navigate the intricacies of discussions surrounding OSA with sensitivity and cultural competence.

Encouraging open and honest discussions within their personal therapy sessions is identified as a pivotal strategy within this sex-positive approach. This intentional dialogue serves as a platform for psychologists to explore their own biases and assumptions related to sex and sexuality, fostering an environment where they can address any discomfort or apprehension that may hinder effective communication with clients. This process of self-exploration not only contributes to the professional development of counselling psychologists, but also translates into enhanced comfort levels when broaching sensitive topics like OSA during client sessions. This comfort level is instrumental in establishing a rapport with clients, promoting trust, and creating an atmosphere in which clients feel secure in sharing their experiences without fear of judgment.

In essence, the incorporation of a sex-positive approach serves as a proactive and ethical strategy for counselling psychologists to navigate the complexities of OSA discussions, ensuring that their practices are aligned with the principles of cultural sensitivity, inclusivity, and the promotion of open communication within the therapeutic relationship. It emphasises the pivotal importance of perceiving sex and sexuality not merely as specific aspects of practice but as general competencies that every psychologist should possess. This transformative perspective challenges traditional notions that may compartmentalise these subjects, recognising them instead as integral components of the broader skill set required in counselling psychology. This shift in perception is deemed crucial for the proactive integration of sex-positive knowledge into the professional toolkit of counselling psychologists. Rather than relegating discussions around sex and sexuality to niche or specialized areas, this approach advocates for a comprehensive understanding that spans various aspects of therapeutic practice. By doing so, counselling psychologists position themselves to address a spectrum of client concerns, including those related to OSA, with sensitivity and cultural competence.

Furthermore, this paradigm shift ensures that counselling psychologists are not only well-prepared but also comfortable navigating conversations about sex and sexuality during therapy sessions. It acknowledges that these topics are not isolated incidents but are interwoven into the fabric of diverse client experiences. The aim is to create an environment where psychologists feel adept at addressing these dimensions, fostering a sense of ease and proficiency in handling discussions related to OSA without compromising the quality of care. Ultimately, the development of a sex-positive approach is positioned as an instrumental strategy in shaping the therapeutic landscape. It serves to cultivate an environment that is not only sensitive, but also inclusive and responsive to the multifaceted dimensions of clients' experiences within the realm of online sexual

activities. This approach aligns with contemporary perspectives on holistic well-being, recognising that sex and sexuality are integral aspects of the human experience and, therefore, essential considerations within the broader scope of counselling psychology. In navigating the complex terrain of challenging conversations, psychologists can enhance their communication efficacy by drawing parallels with other areas of conflict. Adopting unbiased positions, understanding the phenomenon at hand, and cultivating empathy, are essential components for fostering effective dialogue, as highlighted by Williams et al. (2013). This approach enables psychologists to transcend potential biases, facilitating a more profound understanding of the lived experiences of the individuals involved.

For ethical and competent practice, an unwavering commitment to a continual and sincere process of reflection is deemed necessary, particularly in cases involving topics that may be prohibited by social custom or are sensitive, such as sex, sexuality, and OSA, as emphasised by Cruz et al. (2017). The acknowledgement of societal taboos and sensitivities underscores the ethical responsibility of psychologists to navigate these subjects with utmost care, respecting the privacy and comfort of their clients.

A potential impediment to effective treatment arises when psychologists find themselves unable to tolerate the shame experienced by clients due to the practitioner's personal unease with sexuality. This highlights the significance of the practitioner's attitudes, level of comfort, and understanding as key factors influencing their ability to engage in discussions on sexual matters. To address these challenges, it is recommended that counselling psychologists not only enhance their competence, but also become more comfortable with discussing sex and sexuality, both within therapeutic settings and among their professional peers (Cruz et al., 2017). The imperative for increased competence and comfort in addressing topics related to sex, sexuality, and OSA transcends individual practice, emphasising the need for a collaborative and collective approach within the professional community. Psychologists are urged to actively participate in open conversations about these sensitive subjects with their co-workers, thus contributing to the establishment of an inclusive and supportive professional environment.

Engaging in such open dialogues within the professional community serves as a proactive measure to destigmatise discussions around sex and sexuality. It fosters an atmosphere where psychologists can share insights, experiences, and challenges related to addressing these topics in their respective practices. This collective exchange not only enriches the collective knowledge base; it also helps dispel any lingering discomfort or apprehension associated with discussing sensitive issues. Through these open conversations, counselling

psychologists can collaboratively develop strategies, share best practices, and offer mutual support in navigating the complexities of client experiences in the realm of sex, sexuality, and OSA. This collaborative effort creates a ripple effect, wherein each psychologist's enhanced competence and comfort positively impact the broader professional community.

By fostering an environment where discussions on these sensitive topics can take place without judgment or discomfort, psychologists contribute significantly to the creation of a supportive and empathetic community. This, in turn, empowers practitioners to approach their work with a greater understanding of the nuances involved in addressing client concerns related to sex and sexuality. Ultimately, this collective approach enhances the overall capacity of the professional community to provide more nuanced, culturally sensitive, and effective care to clients dealing with the intricate dimensions of sex, sexuality, and OSA. Aligning with the values of CoP concerning social justice and diversity (Bieschke & Mintz, 2012), counselling psychologists are uniquely positioned to approach matters of sex and sexuality proactively. This is particularly pertinent given that clients often approach these discussions cautiously, stemming from personal discomfort or concerns about potential biases or attitudes of the counsellor, as noted by Cruz et al. (2017).

In order to address these challenges, a systematic approach is advocated. This involves a deliberate effort to develop knowledge, awareness, and competencies in the field of sex and sexuality. This systematic approach is akin to the processes employed when dealing with client issues that extend beyond the clinician's current skill set (Cruz et al., 2017). It emphasises the importance of continuous professional development and a commitment to staying abreast of evolving perspectives and practices in the field. The assertion by Reissing and Di Giulio (2010), combined with the insights from CoP values and recommendations by Cruz et al. (2017), underscores the multifaceted nature of addressing sex and sexuality in therapy. It calls for a proactive stance, continuous learning, and the development of competencies to ensure that counselling psychologists are not only willing but also well-prepared to navigate these discussions with sensitivity, cultural competence, and a commitment to the overall well-being of their clients.

However, it is crucial to note that adopting a sex-positive approach should not be driven by an agenda to impose sex-positivity onto clients. Recognising that not every client may be comfortable discussing these matters, the initial exploration of this issue becomes essential. This phase allows counselling psychologists to gauge the client's comfort levels, preferences, and boundaries, ensuring that discussions surrounding sex and sexuality are

approached with sensitivity and respect for the client's unique needs and preferences. In essence, the emphasis is on creating a therapeutic space that is inclusive, client-centred, and adaptable to the diverse and individualised experiences of female clients in the realm of sexuality.

In summary, this research offers transformative insights for agencies assisting female clients with OSA issues. It emphasises collaboration, subjective understanding, and a paradigm shift in psychologists' approaches. The nuanced findings encourage psychologists to resist fitting experiences into existing theories, fostering open discussions and a sex-positive approach. The complexity of female experiences in OSA calls for a respectful and inclusive environment, promoting a proactive and ethical stance on sex and sexuality. Collective engagement in open conversations with colleagues ensures a supportive professional community ready to address the diverse dimensions of client experiences in sex, sexuality, and OSA.

5.4. Directions for Future Research

This study lays the foundation for further research, including research using IPA that concentrates on and engages in an in-depth investigation of how women perceive and experience the master themes and subthemes identified in relation to online sexuality. For instance, further research might concentrate on investigating how women perceive online sexual relationships and their associated lived experiences, or even how men experience and understand the perceptions of women regarding OSA. Another area of interest could be an in-depth exploration of how women in the UK experience OSA throughout their lives.

The use of the discursive psychology research approach might also enable this to be achieved, as it concentrates on the manner in which people discuss a specific experience within a particular context (or the functional and performance essence of language) and/or Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. The aim of such analysis is to generate knowledge regarding the availability of a specific means of discussing a topic, how it assumed its current form (historically) and the ramifications for individuals (in terms of their experiences, subjectivity, and sense of self) (Willig, 2012).

5.5. Reflexivity and Interpersonal Processes

As mentioned in Section 3.3.3, it is recognised in qualitative research that the research process is shaped and influenced by the researchers themselves; therefore, an important criterion for evaluating quality in the context of qualitative studies is reflexivity (Willig,

2012). This promotes reflection among researchers in terms of how their previous experiences and conceptions regarding the research topic, as well as their subjective feelings and thoughts during the process of conducting the research, are influenced by the research and associated findings (Willig, 2012). By being reflexive, researchers conducting interpretative phenomenological studies try to 'bracket' their normal methods of comprehending a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009; Zahavi, 2019) as a means of more intimately understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants, whilst simultaneously acknowledging and utilising them in order to develop understanding (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2012). Therefore, this section aims to reflect on the personal, interpersonal, and epistemological factors that might have influenced the current research.

With regard to my individual reflexivity, my general interest in this field, the research, and interview questions and the process of listening to and interpreting the data were influenced by the extant literature on the topic of OSA. For instance, based on my experience of engaging with the literature on women and their OSA usage, I discovered that female sexuality can be frequently disregarded or viewed from a medical perspective, as well as from a sex-positivity perspective. I discovered that, in the context of psychology, minimal attention has been paid to women and OSA, which was a source of frustration; this not only led me to focus on this topic, but also contributed to my personal thoughts and feelings, which undoubtedly influenced the literature I chose to include in the literature review, as well as my interpretation of the findings and the process of developing master themes. Throughout this process, I wanted to ensure women's voices regarding their online sexual experiences would be heard and accurately portrayed. However, championing a more sex-positivity approach in psychology as I do, it is possible that I slightly accentuated the positive themes and ideas that were drawn from the data, more so than the negative.

It can also be stated that, due to my role as a researcher with limited experience, my anxiety surrounding data collection and analysis could have influenced the approach I took in conducting the research, specifically the interview and analysis processes. Consequently, this could have led to constraints on the questions posed to the interviewees, as well as how their responses were interpreted. As I gain additional experience in conducting research, my interviewing technique and analytical skills will be enhanced, thus raising my confidence.

From a deeper individual perspective, the fact that I have previously been trained in sex therapy could have furthered my motivation to comprehend OSA behaviour from the

perspective of women, and thus conduct this research. I started with the assumption that female users were not sufficiently represented in the literature, as well as on a more general basis in the broader sociocultural context. Resultantly, I deemed it necessary to provide an opportunity for women to express their opinions and accounts, while avoiding the imposition of previous knowledge regarding the topic of women and their OSA usage. My aim was to empathise with the participants by understanding their OSA experiences, while also providing them with the opportunity for personal expression via this research. This facilitated the interview process as the participants were able to speak openly, providing in-depth accounts of their experiences.

The way in which I perceived OSA may have impacted how the interview schedule utilised for the project was developed, which comprised both positive and negative aspects (Appendix VI). In retrospect, whilst arguably the questions were limited to focusing on participants' perceptions of positive or negative aspects of OSA, these questions were intended to prompt discussion, and I – as a novice interviewer – was attempting to remain neutral and ask questions that could not be interpreted as leading. I was also satisfied that these questions satisfactorily addressed the research question. Of course, asking more nuanced questions may have encouraged participants to give more in-depth accounts of their experiences. For instance, questions could have been formulated to determine how the participants believed their experiences were different from other OSAs, whether they believed their experiences evolved over time and how, what role OSA played in their lives in the past, if at all, and what role it currently plays. I could also have explored whether participants believed that engaging in OSA affected their self-perception, and if this was the case, how. This could have created an environment in which the participants were able to reveal their personal accounts on their own terms and also permitted more in-depth engagement with their stories, such that I could further my understanding of their personal lifeworld. However, I felt that it was important to enable the participants' voices to come through, including giving these women agency over the kinds of topics they wished to discuss that helped them to explain and explore their OSA experiences. Therefore, I refrained from asking too many questions and, rather, provided some prompts to simply encourage my participants to speak freely.

Additionally, the way in which I understand OSA could have impacted my perception and interpretation of the data, and, therefore, the findings. The fact that I identified with elements of some of the answers given by the participants potentially affected my decision to draw on them and develop specific themes. For instance, I believe that the definition

of a sexual encounter is when somebody touches another person physically. It is possible that this caused me to concentrate on the instances in which the participants disclosed different beliefs, which may have contributed to the emergence of the 'lonely experience' master theme that was subsequently retitled, 'hindrance to engaging in romantic relationship'. However, regular discussions were held with a research supervisor on the development of themes to ensure the quality of the research, as well as to verify the validity of the findings and that the data supported the interpretations.

Furthermore, in hindsight, it is plausible that my female gender and my role as a doctoral researcher/trainee psychologist (which could be regarded as having authority and expertise) caused the participants to intentionally present themselves in a more dominant manner, which subsequently impacted how they responded in the interviews, therefore influencing the overall findings.

Because core aspects of CoP philosophy involve searching for understanding and meaning with a specific focus on engaging with subjective experience, values and beliefs (Douglas et al., 2016), I chose to adopt a relativist ontology and interpretative phenomenological epistemology. Thus, with regard to epistemological reflexivity, I believe that the research aim, interview schedule and connected analysis were all impacted by this position. For example, the use of the term OSA as part of both the research aim and interview schedule was based on the assumption that this phenomenon does exist, while also acknowledging that individuals' perceptions and experience of the said phenomenon are partially dependent on their own expectations and beliefs (Husserl, 1931; Zahavi, 2019). I recognise that the perceptions and experience of what seems to be the identical phenomenon may differ from person to person; for example, the ways in which OSA can be utilised vary significantly and it is important to respect the diverse interpretations of this phenomena which should be explored in their own terms (Heidegger, 1926; Husserl, 1931; Zahavi, 2019). Resultantly, the stories expressed by the participants, as well as the general findings, are comprehended as subjective interpretations of the female participants' lived experiences and perceptions of OSA.

Furthermore, while IPA is primarily concerned with participants' lived experiences, the ultimate outcome is consistently an account of the ways in which the person conducting the analysis (the researcher) perceives the thoughts and meanings of the interviewee (defined as the 'double hermeneutic') (Smith et al., 2009). Hence, in the present research, the analysis is not afforded the status of fact, and is always provisional; therefore, I

acknowledge that while different interpretations have the same level of validity, the findings are not automatically invalidated.

In general, the study has largely been influential on the way in which I think and practise in my role as a trainee counselling psychologist as it re-emphasises the importance of subjective understanding and experience. Furthermore, I have become more interested in the subject in question by conducting this research, which has also increased my motivation to explore the topic further.

5.6. Critical Evaluation of Methodology

From a methodological perspective, the current research had certain strengths, including the process by which the validity and research quality were evaluated. However, the current study also had various methodological limitations. Firstly, as a result of IPA's idiographic concern (Smith et al., 2009), the sample of participants interviewed remained comparatively small in order to allow the specific details of each participant's case to be examined in depth. This meant it was possible to analyse the data in a richer, more nuanced, and thorough way, thus conveying a sense of texture and quality (Smith et al., 2009). Willig (2012) suggested that, in a small sample, while it is unclear who or how many other people have similar experiences, the outcomes still indicate that a specific experience is accessible in a particular society and culture, therefore prompting additional studies to be conducted in the future. Moreover, when conducting IPA research, rather than empirical generalisability, one can establish theoretical transferability, as connections have been generated between the analytical findings and arguments within the existing literature (Smith et al., 2009). In this regard, the extent to which IPA research is effective is assessed on the basis of the insight it brings in this wider context (Smith et al., 2009). However, as the participants were largely cisgender, heterosexual and/or lesbian women, the outcomes may not be applicable to the experiences of individuals who identify differently, prompting further research with a more diverse sample to ensure all voices of women are heard.

Furthermore, the process of collecting data was based on semi-structured interviews, where an interview schedule was developed such that important issues could be explored in greater detail. My lack of experience meant that I may have missed potentially useful follow-up questions, and adhered to the schedule more strictly than I might have done otherwise. An approach that could be considered in the future is focusing on conducting the semi-structured interviews in a more flexible manner. This requires that any relevant

points raised by the participants with respect to the aim of the research that fall outside the established interview schedule are followed up. Consequently, an environment would be developed in which participants can speak openly about their experiences with minimal influence from the interviewer, thus producing accounts with greater richness and detail. This also conforms to IPA, in which participants are viewed as experiential experts (Smith et al., 2009).

The fourth limitation of the study, which has particular relevance for a subject as sensitive as OSA, is that the participants may not have felt comfortable with truthfully and comprehensively expressing their thoughts on all elements of their experience. Among others, they may have refrained from answering questions about being rejected and the anxiety caused by deception.

5.7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to conduct an exploration of the lived experiences and personal perceptions of women engaging in OSA. The findings indicated that for the four interviewees, OSAs were comprehended and experienced with respect to how they felt, lived, and engaged. Utilising IPA, this research offers a unique contribution to the broader domain of research into sexuality in general. In particular, the findings produced suggest that the ways in which women make sense of sexual behaviour online are complicated, specific, and diverse, and thus lay the foundation for the emergence of novel and richer insights into the topic of women and OSA. This simultaneously supports and augments the extant literature in this field.

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Appendices

Appendix I Ethics Approval – UEL

School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION

For research involving human participants
BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

REVIEWER: Hebba Haddad

SUPERVISOR: Zahra Tizro

STUDENT: Catherine CADART

Course: Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

Title of proposed study: Exploring the lived experience of female users of online sexual activities in the UK

DECISION OPTIONS:

1. **APPROVED:** Ethics approval for the above named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice) to the date it is submitted for assessment/examination.

2. **APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES** (see Minor Amendments box below)**:** In this circumstance, re-submission of an ethics application is not required but the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made before the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box below when all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to her/his supervisor for their records. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.

3. **NOT APPROVED, MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED** (see Major Amendments box below)**:** In this circumstance, a revised ethics application must be submitted and approved before any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.

DECISION ON THE ABOVE-NAMED PROPOSED RESEARCH STUDY
(Please indicate the decision according to one of the 3 options above)

1 - Approved

Minor amendments required *(for reviewer)*:

Major amendments required *(for reviewer):*

Confirmation of making the above minor amendments *(for students)*:

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data.

Student's name *(Typed name to act as signature):* Student number:

Date:
(Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed, if minor amendments to your ethics application are required)

ASSESSMENT OF RISK TO RESEACHER *(for reviewer)*

Has an adequate risk assessment been offered in the application form?

YES / NO

Please request resubmission with an adequate risk assessment

If the proposed research could expose the researcher to any of kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard? Please rate the degree of risk:

☐ HIGH

Please do not approve a high risk application and refer to the Chair of Ethics. Travel to countries/provinces/areas deemed to be high risk should not be permitted and an application not approved on this basis. If unsure please refer to the Chair of Ethics.

☒ MEDIUM (Please approve but with appropriate recommendations)

☐ LOW

Reviewer comments in relation to researcher risk (if any).

Reviewer *(Typed name to act as signature)*: Hebba Haddad

Date: 28 Sept 2021

This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

RESEARCHER PLEASE NOTE:

For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's Insurance, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

For a copy of UELs Personal Accident & Travel Insurance Policy, please see the Ethics Folder in the Psychology Noticeboard

Appendix II Information sheet for participants

PARTICIPANT INVITATION LETTER

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree it is important that you understand what your participation would involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Who am I?

I am a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology at the University of East London and am studying for a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. As part of my studies I am conducting the research you are being invited to participate in.

What is the research?

I am conducting research into how women in the UK experience and understand online sexual activities.

My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. This means that the Committee's evaluation of this ethics application has been guided by the standards of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Why have you been asked to participate?

You have been invited to participate in my research as someone who fits the kind of people, I am looking for to help me explore my research topic. I am looking to involve women who:

- Use online sexual activities (sex chat, sex web, view online pornography, online sexual partners…)
- Have been actively using one on them (activities listed above) in the last three months
- Are age 18 and over
- Live in the UK
- Able to participate in semi-structured interview via computer-video
- Would not find it too upsetting to talk about their experience

I emphasise that I am not looking for 'experts' on the topic I am studying. You will not be judged or personally analysed in any way and you will be treated with respect.

You are free to decide whether or not to participate and should not feel coerced.

What will your participation involve?

If you agree to participate you will be asked to answer several open-ended questions in an interview, which will be very informal. You will be asked to describe your experience of online sexual activities (sex chat, sex web, view online pornography, online sexual partners…).

The interview will take place online via video call using Microsoft Teams, lasting from 30-90 minutes (depending on how much or little you would like to say). The interview can be arranged at a time that is convenient for you, when you feel comfortable speaking and have privacy.

The interview will be like an informal conversation but will be audio-recorded.

I will not be able to pay you for participating in my research, but your participation would be very valuable in helping to develop knowledge and understanding of my research topic

Your taking part will be safe and confidential

Your privacy and safety will be respected at all times.

- Participants will not be identified by the data collected, on any written material resulting from the data collected, or in any write-up of the research.
- Participants do not have to answer all questions asked of them and can stop their participation at any time.

What will happen to the information that you provide?

What I will do with the material you provide will involve:

- Audio recordings of interviews and personal contact details will be stored securely and not available to anyone but myself and my University research supervisor, Professor Zahra Tizro.
- The interviews will be transcribed into written form and any identifying data will be removed/replaced with pseudonyms – at this point the audio recordings of interviews will be destroyed
- Quotes from the anonymized interviews will be included in a doctoral thesis that will be published in a public university repository and may be used in future publications such as journal articles or books
- Consent forms will be destroyed by April 2024 upon completion of doctoral examinations
- Anonymized transcripts of the interview will be stored on a password protected computer only accessible to the researcher for 5 years after which it will be destroyed

What if you want to withdraw?

You are free to withdraw from the research study at any time without explanation, disadvantage or consequence. Separately, you may also request to withdraw your data even after you have participated data, provided that this request is made within 3 weeks of the data being collected (after which point the data analysis will begin, and withdrawal will not be possible).

Contact Details

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

My name is Catherine Cadart, Counselling Psychologist Trainee, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ, Email: u1823106@uel.ac.uk.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted please contact the research supervisor Dr. Zahra Tizro at School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ, Email: Z.Tizro@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Appendix III Informed consent form

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

Consent to participate in a research study

Exploring the lived experience of female users of online sexual activities in the UK

I have the read the information sheet relating to the above research study and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researcher(s) involved in the study will have access to identifying data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the research study has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason. I also understand that should I withdraw, the researcher reserves the right to use my anonymous data after analysis of the data has begun.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

…….

Participant's Signature

……..

Participant's address (at the time of interview)

……..

Participant's GP details

……..

Participant's age

……..

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

……..

Researcher's Signature

……

Date: ……..…….

Appendix IV Debriefing

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF LETTER

Thank you for participating in my research study on exploring the lived experience of female users of online sexual activities in the UK. This letter offers information that may be relevant in light of you having now taken part.

What will happen to the information that you have provided?

The following steps will be taken to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the data you have provided.

All data collected during this research project will be stored on a password protected computer, which I only have access to.

Recordings of the interviews will be kept until the interviews have been transcribed into written form and any identifying data removed. Consent forms will be kept until doctoral examinations are complete, April 2024 at the latest. Participant contact details will also be destroyed at this date. No one but the researcher will have access to this data. The anonymized interview transcripts may be shared with my supervisor to assist with data analysis. Examiners from the School of Psychology may also request access to anonymized transcripts decontextualized of any identifiable information. Excerpts from the anonymized interviews may be quoted in the writeup of my doctoral thesis that will be published in a public university repository. These may also be used for future publication, such as in academic journals or books. None of these would include identifying personal details. The anonymized interview transcripts will be stored for 5 years, after which all files will be deleted.

You can request to withdraw your data within 3 weeks of the interview, after which point the data analysis will begin and it will not be possible to remove your data.

What if you have been adversely affected by taking part?

It is not anticipated that you will have been adversely affected by taking part in the research, and all reasonable steps have been taken to minimise potential harm. Nevertheless, it is still possible that your participation – or its after-effects – may have been challenging, distressing or uncomfortable in some way. If you have been affected in any of those ways you may find the following resources/services helpful in relation to obtaining information and support:

- Your local GP

- National Sexual Health Helpline, If you would like to talk to someone about a sexual health you can call the national sexual health helpline free on 0300 123 7123. Your call will be treated with sensitivity and in the strictest confidence.

The Sexual Health helpline is open from 9am - 8pm Monday to Friday.

- Croydon Sexual Health Centre, Their website www.croydonhealthservices.nhs.uk/a-to-z-of-services/service/sexual-health-services-188/ provides information about sexual health services for all ages. To book an appointment at their clinic call 020 8401 3766.
- Sexual Advice Association, Helpline: 0207 486 7262
- Samaritans, providing confidential support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair, available 24/7 at 116 123.
- Crisis Text Line, free, 24/7 support for people who struggle to cope or feel overwhelmed, text on 85258

You are also very welcome to contact me or my supervisor if you have specific questions or concerns.

Contact Details

If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

My name is Catherine Cadart and my email address is u1823106@uel.ac.uk.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted please contact the research supervisor Dr. Zahra Tizro at School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
Email: Z.Tizro@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr Trisha Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Appendix V Recruiting leaflets – Participants

WOMEN!!

Fancy participating in a piece of psychological research about

YOU…AND ONLINE SEX

(Pornography, online sex talk, virtual reality porn, sexting, online sex cam…)

So, if you're a:

- ***Woman, aged over 18 +, and consider yourself to have had recent past and/or present experience of sex online, are fluent in the English language, lives in the UK, and willing to talk about your experience of sex online, please contact me.***
- ***The interview only take an hour.***
- ***It will take place online.***
- ***Confidentiality is assured.***
- ***You may elect to withdraw from the study at any time.***

For further information, feel free to contact:

Catherine Cadart (Counselling psychologist in training – University of East London)

Telephone: 07505133781

Email: u1823106@uel.ac.uk

University of East London

School of Psychology

Romford Road

London

E15 4LZ

Appendix VI Interview schedule

Interview Schedule

The interview is semi-structured, and as such, will be conducted flexibly with participants asked only enough questions to tell their story and additional prompts included that might be used if needed to ensure the research questions are explored. The questions do not need to be asked in this particular order, although the 'Introduction' and 'Ending' will be kept at the start and finish respectively. Flexibility is left to explore additional material that participants might want to talk about.

Introduction:

- Go over main points in participant information sheet.
- You can take breaks if needed
- I will leave 10-15 minutes at the end to discuss how you found the interview or anything that comes up for you that you'd like to talk about before we finish.
- Just because we are online, in the unlikely event that you are so distressed that you need to switch off, is there someone you would like me to contact?

Possible questions for participants:

1. How would you describe online sexual activities?
2. How do you know online sexual activities?
3. Can you tell me about your own experience of online sexual activities?
4. What do you consider as bad aspects of the use of online sexual activities?
5. What, if any, negative emotions do you experience from these activities? How do you manage these emotions?
6. What do you consider as good aspects of the use of online sexual activities?
7. What, if any, positive emotions do you experience from these activities? How do you manage these emotions?
8. What, if any, kinds of difficulties do you experience as a result? How do you manage these difficulties?

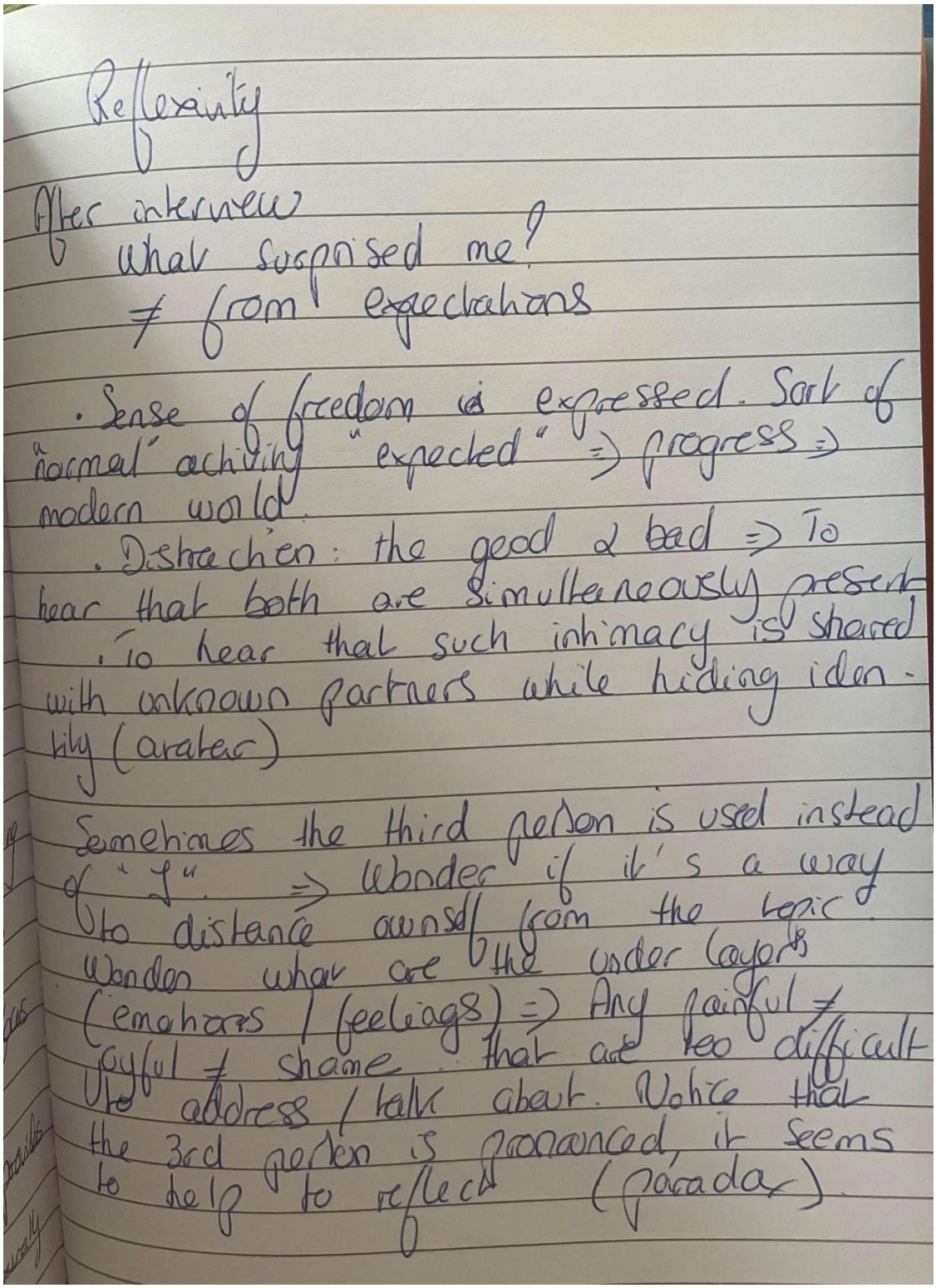
Possible prompts and probes:

Can you tell me more about that?
Can you give me an example of what you mean?
What do you mean?
What was/is like for you?
How did that make you feel?
How do/did you know?
Is there anything else that you might like to add?
What makes you say that? What
happened?

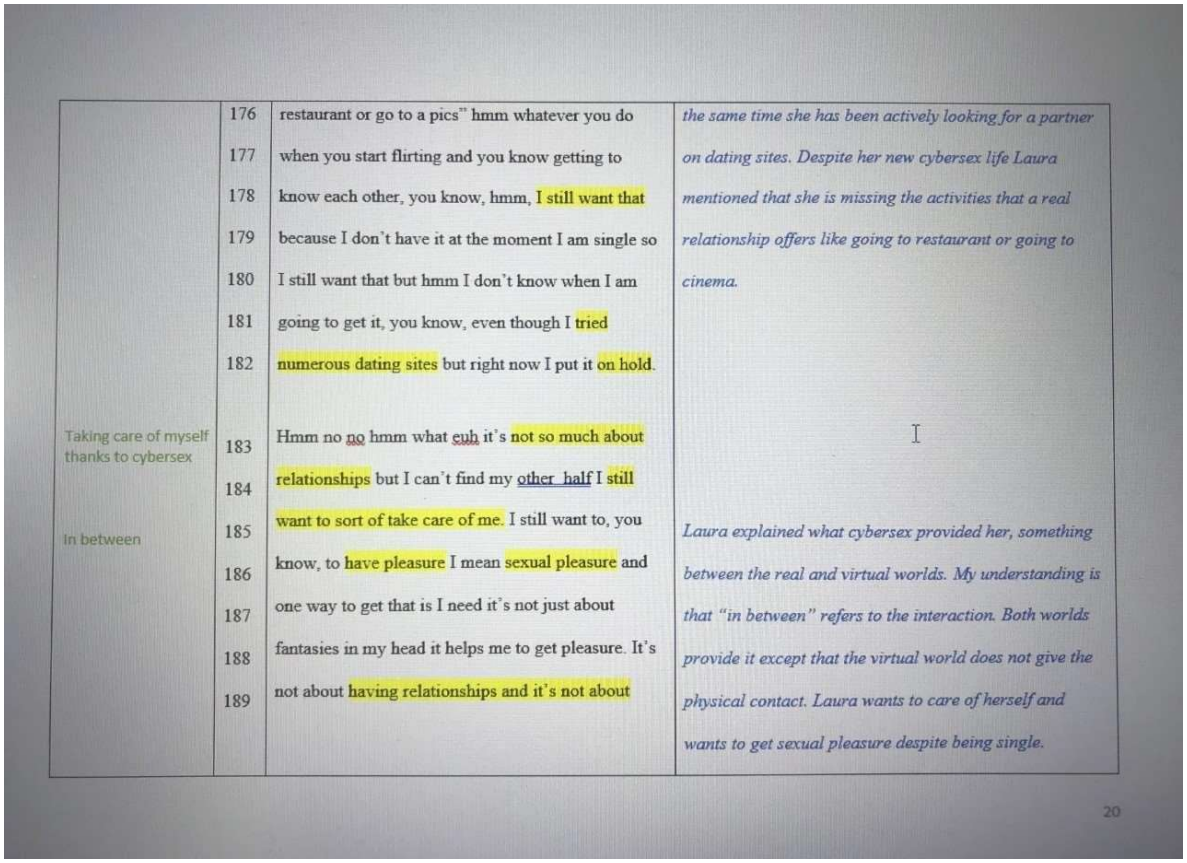
Ending

- How are you feeling now?
- Explain and email participant debrief sheet.

Appendix VII Extract from reflexivity journal



Appendix VIII Example of analysis

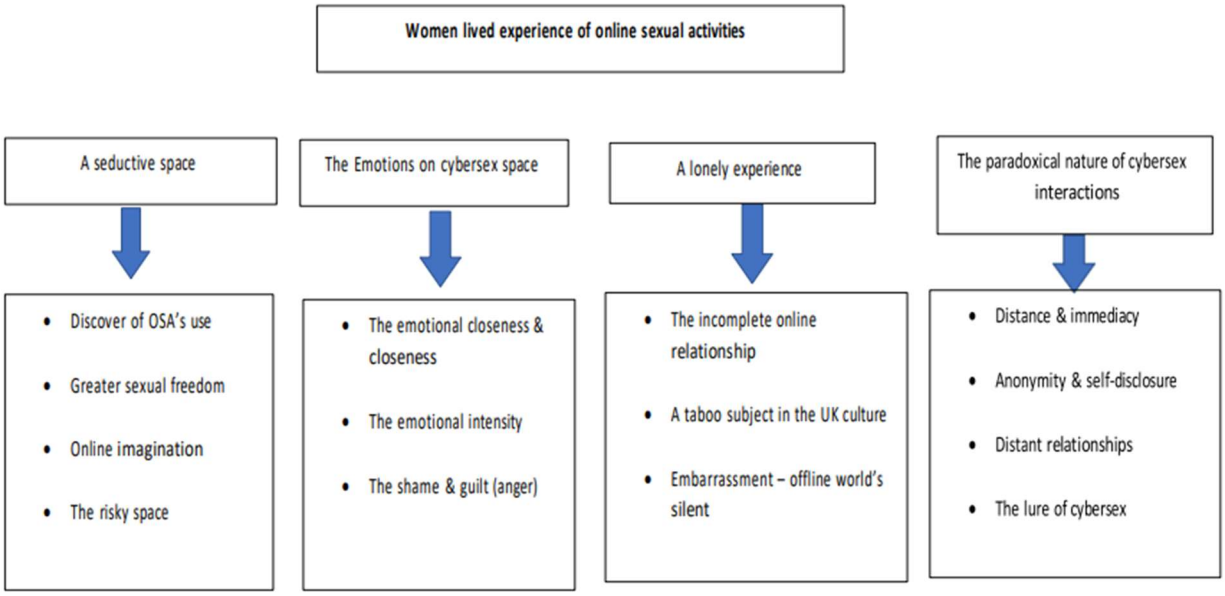


	176	restaurant or go to a pics" hmm whatever you do	*the same time she has been actively looking for a partner*
	177	when you start flirting and you know getting to	*on dating sites. Despite her new cybersex life Laura*
	178	know each other, you know, hmm, I still want that	*mentioned that she is missing the activities that a real*
	179	because I don't have it at the moment I am single so	*relationship offers like going to restaurant or going to*
	180	I still want that but hmm I don't know when I am	*cinema.*
	181	going to get it, you know, even though I tried	
	182	numerous dating sites but right now I put it on hold.	
Taking care of myself thanks to cybersex	183	Hmm no no hmm what euh it's not so much about	
	184	relationships but I can't find my other half I still	
In between	185	want to sort of take care of me. I still want to, you	*Laura explained what cybersex provided her, something*
	186	know, to have pleasure I mean sexual pleasure and	*between the real and virtual worlds. My understanding is*
	187	one way to get that is I need it's not just about	*that "in between" refers to the interaction. Both worlds*
	188	fantasies in my head it helps me to get pleasure. It's	*provide it except that the virtual world does not give the*
	189	not about having relationships and it's not about	*physical contact. Laura wants to care of herself and*
			wants to get sexual pleasure despite being single.

20

Appendix IX Pictorial representation of themes

Version 1 – 20.12.22



Version 2 – 10.01.23

Women lived experience of online sexual activities

1. A seductive space	2. A lonely experience	3. The paradoxical nature of cybersex interactions
A personal journey from porn to virtual interactions	Cybersex a solitary activity	Distance and immediacy
Sexual freedom behind a screen	A taboo subject in the UK culture Feeling embarrassment, shame and guilt	Anonymity & self-disclosure
A space of your own		Distant relationships
Sexual intimacy and communities, ease in finding similar others		
The lure of cybersex		

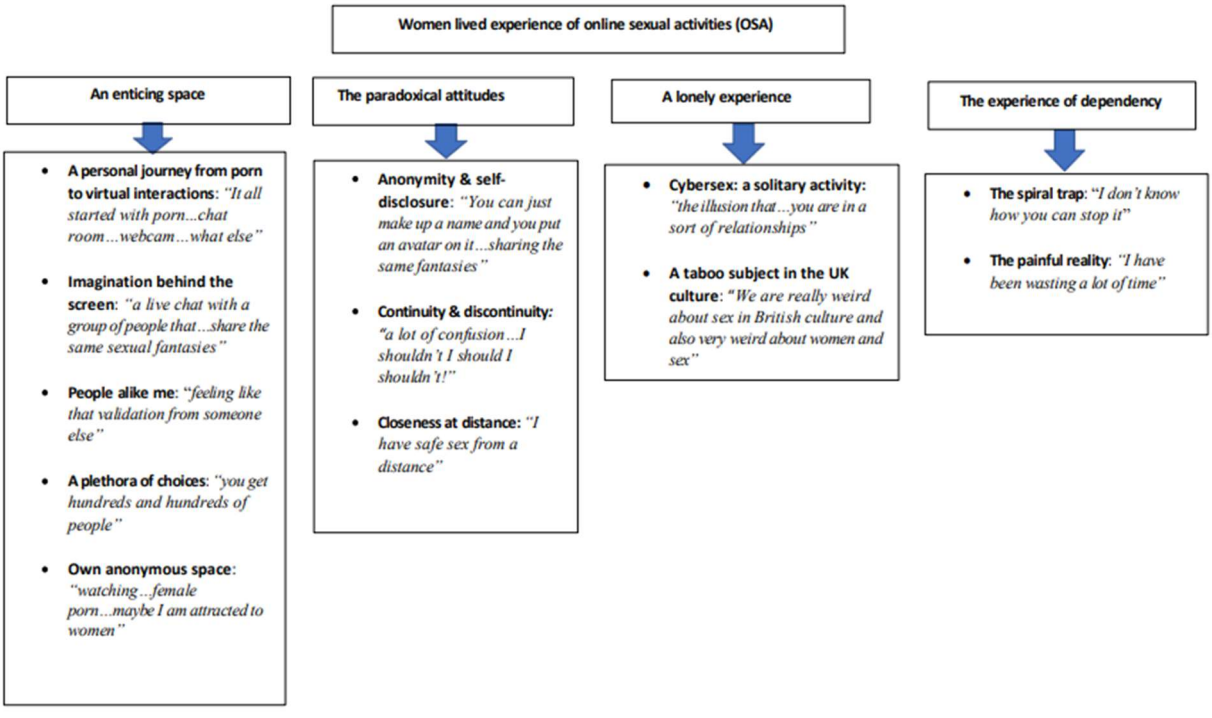
Version 3 – 13.01.23

Women lived experience of online sexual activities

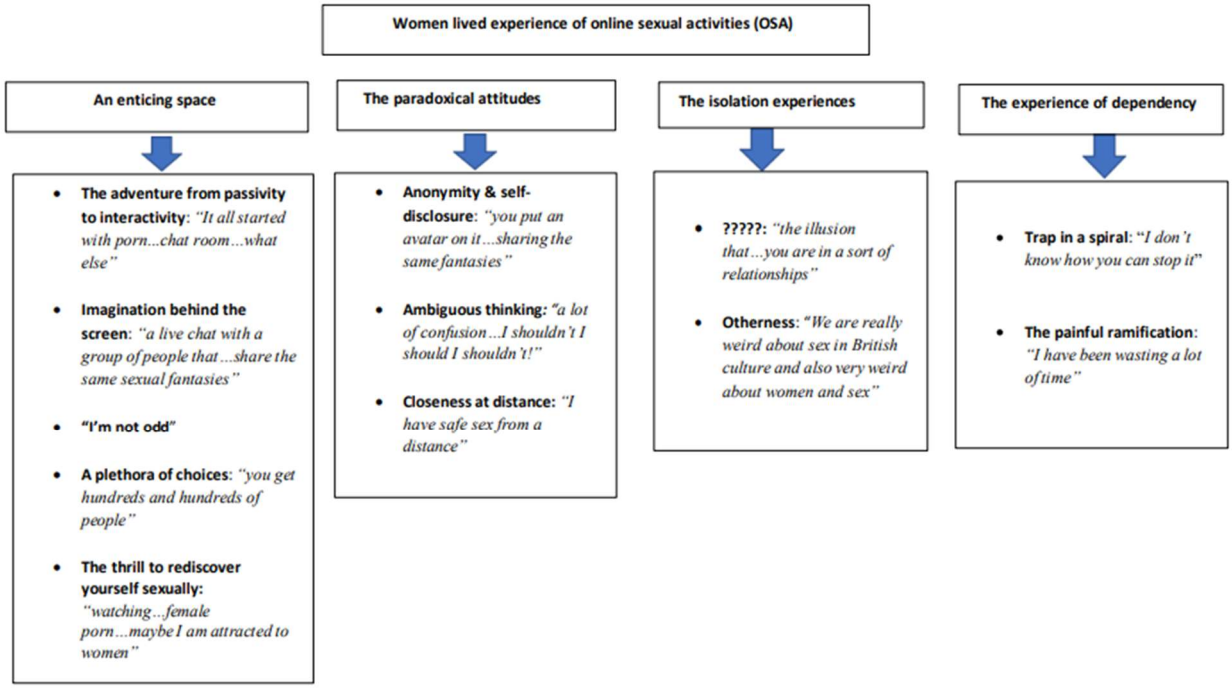
Master themes:

1. An enticing space	2. The paradoxical attitudes	3. A lonely experience
Sub themes:		
1. A personal journey from porn to virtual interactions	1. Distance and immediacy	1. Cybersex a solitary activity
2. Imagination behind a screen	2. Anonymity and self-disclosure	2. A taboo subject in the UK culture
3. Intimacy amongst others	3. Continuity and discontinuity	
4. A plethora of choices	4. Closeness at a distance	
5. Own anonymous space		

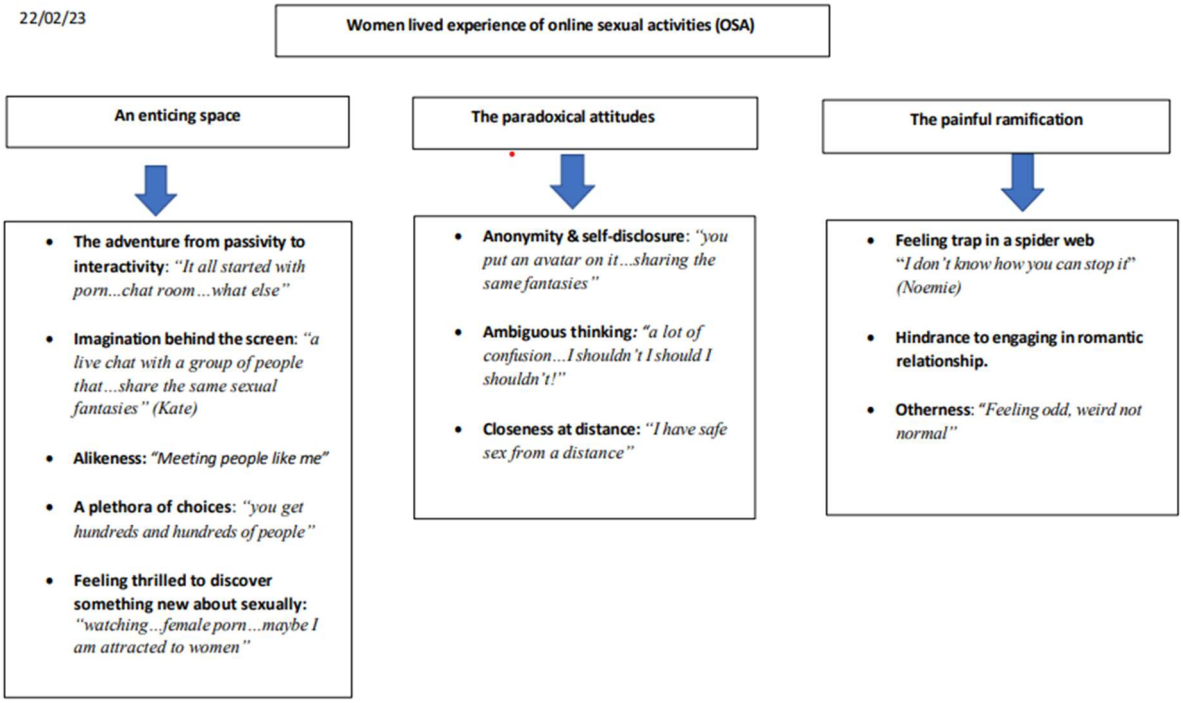
Version 4 – 28.01.23



Version 5 – 08.02.23

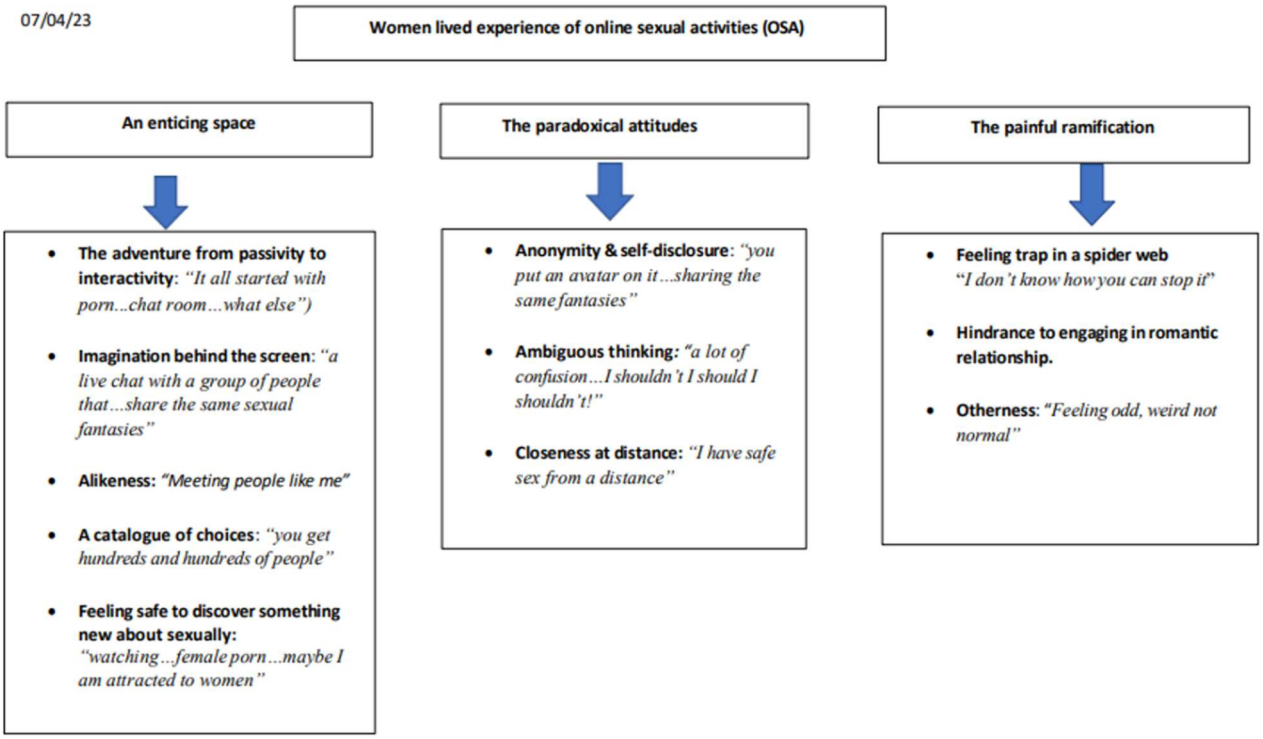


Version 6 – 22.02.23



Final version 7 – 07/04/23

07/04/23



Appendix X Theme frequency table

How many participants contribute to each theme?

	Kate	Laura	Anais	Noemie
An enticing space				
- The adventure from passivity to interactivity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
- Imagination behind the screen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
- Alikeness: "meeting someone like me"	Yes	Yes	Yes	
- A catalogue of choices	Yes	Yes		Yes
- Feeling safe to discover something new about sexuality	Yes	Yes	Yes	
The paradoxical attitudes				
- Anonymity & self-disclosure	Yes	Yes		
- Ambiguous thinking		Yes	Yes	Yes
- Closeness at distance	Yes	Yes		Yes
The painful ramification				
- Feeling trap in a spider's web	Yes			Yes
- Hindrance to engaging in romantic relationship	Yes	Yes		
- Otherness	Yes	Yes	Yes	

Appendix XI Illustrative quotes for themes

Quotes from Themes – Master Theme 1

Master Theme	Sub-theme	Quote	Participant	Line number
An Enticing Space	The Adventure from Passivity to Interactivity			
		In the beginning a while back now, there was the fantasy just looking at porn on certain TV channels at late nights. That was before the Internet…With the websites you have access from mobile phone you can do sexting when you are on the move…Well, my favourite is group chatroom	Kate	115-118
		you chat on those rooms you choose your group depending on what you are looking for	Kate	70
		on the same websites you have access from mobile phone you have a sexting that when you are on the move you can go for normal text service	Kate	88-89
		on the personal chat I have signed up for a couple free chatrooms which have more of Europeans on them. That I find it quite satisfactory	Kate	146-148
		I guess the most popular or the one which comes in mind straight away is porn sites. Those sites can lead to other sites which are more engaging meaning you are less passive in a way I mean you just don't watch you participate or interact.	Laura	2-5
		I guess it's just some sort of entertainment. But the ones I like are the one in which I chat with sexwebcam in a live adult video chat room.	Laura	12-13
		there is so much more out there on the Net, you know, not just porn, you can have interaction with others who are like seeking the same thing	Laura	121-123
		It's kind of fun because you can bring the experience of a dance club on your screen.	Laura	9-10
		I was just flicking through the channels hmm on the television just randomly hmm like you do euh silent and to my surprise there was this channel well with porn displayed hmm I stopped I watched I looked at it. I stopped I watched, I looked at it.	Laura	64-69

		I think if I remembered "it was Brokeback mountain" it was two men who had ordinary lives and somehow they ended up having a romantic relationships. I experienced the same excitement (deep breathing) and some really nice warm feeling and then I started watching porn now and then	Laura	104-107
		Yeah, that was the start, that's kind of how I discovered it	Laura	111
		Hmm now I know I am at a different level	Laura	128
		Hmm it probably started with Internet access from home… So I think I would have been like 13, 14 when I probably got a router at home and I was able to come across these sites, like I probably knew these things existed beforehand but to be able to access and all the sexual contents online I could only once we had a router at home.,, Hmm Any types or maybe like chat room hmm yeah webcam things hmm what else hmm (thinking) maybe like social media hmm may be also like a way hmm may be also like a formal online sexual activities hmm… I guess you could name like snapchat where you can share images hmm that was very big when I was growing up hmm that was easy because it meant you could send images… It was so exciting and fun	Anais	
		Any types or maybe like *chat room* hmm yeah *webcam* things hmm what else hmm (thinking) maybe maybe like *social media* hmm may be also like a way hmm may be also like a formal online sexual activities hmm. I used to send nudes and watched porn. Nowadays I watch interactive live porn but just now and then.	Anais	16-20
		I guess you could name like *snapchat* where you can *share images* hmm that was very big *when I was growing up* I loved it because I got compliments I was looking for. Back then I needed to hear I was stunning.	Anais	22-25

		I think it would have been like 13, 14 when I probably got a router at home and I was able to come across these sites, like I probably knew these things existed beforehand but to be able to access and all the sexual contents online I could only once we had a router at home. How exciting and hmm fun that was Yeah yeah	Anais	63-67

		In the very beginning I think most things started off with porn. porn videos. I think there is different levels I would say There are different things depending on what you are trying to achieve with it. It's very versatile, porn is very versatile	Noemie	21-24
		I think I found them hmm a nice distraction	Noemie	2
		It's quite enjoyable I found it a distraction it is more of a background thing I usually I often for example put the radio on or have porn on I am not watching or listening to it but I want a break I just have a quick look euh you know even just out of satisfaction … it's kind of zooming zooming out zooming in that kind of thing. I would say I don't regard at most of the time I wouldn't say it's super erotic like it's more of a distraction hmm at times	Noemie	68-74
		online pornography hmm I would include in that not sexting because I wouldn't personally do it but when I talk about those things I would say talking about anything online that is visual and hmm is a distraction possibly sometimes stories like that articles about sex hmm I don't know if that is relevant, but I suppose it is as it is about sex about people having group sex.	Noemie	90-95
		It is quite fun to be connected to live web cam that's quite fun to be connected to the world and it's more fun to be connected with a naked girl and a dressed girl. (laughing) yeah that's fun. (laughing) yeah it's fun to see humanity to do their thing	Noemie	220-223
	Imagination Behind the Screen			

		When we chat on forum this is where you describe your position, what you like to do and there are certain people who actually one particular woman said what she like doing with me. She said I get very excited when we describe our fantasies.	Kate	165-168
		There was another woman she responded to all my fantasies. Hmm that was a week ago. She was actually responding to all my fantasies, how she would like to do it and that I got so excited that I can't explain it to you	Kate	168-171
		with me it is more of elderly women with nice body shapes and everything nice anything over 50 is my personal	Kate	157-161

		preference and euh body shape perfect euh perfectly shape vagina and good size boots that my personal preferences. Features are important to me and euh there are certain position I like to do. One is standing up		
		the positioning is always from standing up, doggy style.	Kate	164
		they are women through their avatars and that make you more excited you are extremely excited because you are sharing your fantasies with multiple people rather than just one because in those chatrooms the ones with multiple people using the app at the same time and you put your fantasy through, and one person replies to you after a couple of hours and sometimes your fantasy is so exciting you get several people replying at the same time. This is not even visual. Our cameras aren't even on. I would only use my camera on a one to one.	Kate	177-184
		If I am sitting with a group of women and we are chatting and all sudden we start getting into sexual activities and get naked but of course this is just fantasy because we don't see each other's we describe ourselves and imagine the rest. It is all descriptive in words. The whole idea is that my fantasy is have a bunch of women in the room and we get excited, and we create scenarios like rubbing cream on bodies things like that give me so many replies	Kate	186-193

		that everyone read your sex texts and the little bubble starts getting bigger bigger and bigger and the next thing you know is all the women on that chat they go in engage and that for me it's very exciting.	Kate	202-204
		On top of my head I think live sex on cam sites for instances. You get different type of live stuffs. Some of cam sites offer live striptease but the problem is to find good ones with men who are willing to do it because most the striptease are done by women. Not sure why but (silent) It's kind of fun because you can bring the experience of a dance club on your screen while you are in your living room or in your bedroom or anywhere basically. I guess it's just some sort of entertainment. But the ones I like are the one in which I chat with sexwebcam in a live adult video chat room."	Laura	5-13

		Like I would chat with a guy on the other end but we both respectively live-in different places like we don't know each other but we meet to flirt and eventually masturbate in front of each other. That's a massive turn on for me.	Laura	17-19
		That's the best sex ever I guess well not always but it's fun, I guess. I guess the Internet changes that in me I prefer to go online	Laura	43-44
		I started watching porn now and then and just watching images and movies and masturbating myself	Laura	107-108
		I give myself pleasure hmm pleasure that I am not getting in other ways, not to that same level, not to that same intensity.	Laura	115-116
		we share what our fantasies are, what we like	Laura	153
		you get the heat you get aroused more and more and you then you you often (deep breath)	Laura	

		we are often lightly dressed, and we might decide to get undressed, and we see each other and we respectively kind of touch each other. Well not each other but like I touch myself and he touches himself and hmm and hmm I see his penis and he see my sex and then we, I use soft toys and euh and I and I see the guy being super aroused and and then you know we play that way and we get an orgasm	Laura	164-169
		I had like sent images through Snapchat like I would one or two. Hmm I was like 16, 17 maybe but that was kind very very short lived, and I wouldn't say I would class them as nude images…were sent as sexual activities sort of things. It was sent to boys I was attracted to at the time	Anais	118-122
		snapchat where you can *share images* hmm that was very big *when I was growing up* hmm that was easy because it meant you could *send images*	Anais	22-26
		I guess initially it was just curiosity, learning anything possible about sex, excitement and getting aroused like let's see what is out there	Anais	73-75
		I would say that I now watch specific porn with my partner.	Anais	115
		I often for example put the radio on or have porn on I am not watching or listening to it but when I want a break I just have a quick look euh you know even just out of satisfaction … it's kind	Noemie	69-

		of zooming out zooming in that kind of thing. It is quite fun to be connected to live web cam. That's quite fun to be connected to the world and it's more fun to be connected with a naked girl than a dressed girl. (laughing) yeah that's fun. (laughing)"		
		I might masturbate specifically to get a nice feeling of an orgasm (deep breath) so I think there is different levels I would say There are different things depending on what you are trying to achieve with it. It's very versatile, porn is very versatile.	Noemie	115-118

		I think people imagine that if you watch pornography, it is to masturbate yourself but it's not. You can just have a glance at it. It doesn't have to be something more than that but there are other times you do to get a nice feeling and there are other times when you just watch, you can search pornography you can wait a lot of time searching to see what options are out there	Noemie	119-123
		Pornography used to be and still is two actors who do pornography films. Hmm but more recently it is live hmm and people doing web cam and they are quite of interesting because you can go all around the world anytime or day in Moscow or when it's dark in Brazil you know that kind of stuff it's fun and also the difference it's quite interesting to notice in how they are hmm how some look well some don't again depending on the country hmm there are more into it than just the pure sex it's actually interesting to see. So what I am saying is that there is a personal interest into it not just a sexual interest I suppose.	Noemie	126-134
		Because you can see there because they are not actors or actresses you get a bit to know them it's a bit like tic toc but it is live so it's very interesting hmm yeah ok you are doing that right now while trying to do some work that sort of thing you know it is very interesting in the past you would never have been sitting at your desk as a scientist writing your paper or whatever and then there is a woman in the corner masturbating for you to glance at from time to time. Hmm you would never have things before but someone live doing it doing something for you know hmm right there hmm right now you can just flick doing real stuffs and … They don't	Noemie	137-148

		really fit together so it is really interesting to see how you do psychologically switch from serious things to watching people masturbating		
	Alikeness			

		You either join a group of people chatting together or you can have individual chat…you have a section where you have individual chats with one person and that person over time you feel like you're related to that person, so you keep on chatting with the same person and that's one thing I enjoy	Kate	15/20-
		more people who use the app are the people who are in the group sharing similar fantasies	Kate	95-96
		everyone is on the same page	Kate	226
		You get the professional webcammer or the webcam performers who use social networking like Twitter or Snapchat to keep in touch if you want but those ones are no not free. Because it's their job you got to pay to have them in your chat room. No no what I like is meeting someone like me like a male version and flirt only. Someone who wants the same thing without paying.	Laura	20-24
		I think it is more genuine because we are the same and that it's exciting Hmm hmm I guess a professional act, says things or do things to please. But if I meet someone like me meaning not professional, we kind of get to know each other to a certain level we chat stuffs like how we end up on the site or discuss other sites anything and then we flirt."	Laura	26-30
		We normally use our keyboards to introduce ourselves and we see our pictures hmm euh the camera is off you only see the pictures but after texting you think "oh we get on" so then we meet in a chat room where we put our camera on so we don't need to text anymore we talk to each other's. We chat and we see each other's, hmm, it's not a relationship but you kind of get to know the person a little bit.	Laura	147-151
		Hmm and it's nice because you don't feel lonely and here it is you, hmm, you talk whatever crap, we complement each other,	Laura	152-153
		what is super nice is that we know why we are there we don't have to pretend or being scared of what the other is going to think, you know.	Laura	154-156

		We know why we are there we just openly talk about it. That is what it is.	Laura	161
		It is about sharing same thoughts	Laura	162
		this site the one you advertised on humm this site euh I have been on for a while now and euh I know everyone hm I wouldn't say everyone because there are people in and out of the site but they are the regular ones I could call myself a regular one. We are a community I guess.	Laura	174-177
		When I interact (pause) interact with someone, it feels like it's a shared moment.	Laura	197
		I could have those conversations with people and be comfortable and be more open and it was at that early stage where you work out to find out who you are. It is all sort of confusion and hmm you are also worried that the things you do are shameful	Anais	195-198
		when you like be talking to people with whom you feel close enough	Anais	43
		feeling like that validation from someone else	Anais	129
		I think that was validating at the time and looking back I can see that I was looking for validation, like sexual need if that means anything if that makes any sense.	Anais	134-136
		help people you know they are ok like they are not odd or weird because they see people who have also different needs out there in sexuality	Anais	145-150
	A Catalogue of Choices			
		You get hundreds and hundreds of people talking	Kate	59
		sometimes when you are in a chat room there are two or three hundred people talking together.	Kate	60-61
		you choose your group depending on what you are looking for	Kate	69-70
		different nationalities have different fantasies. This is the reason why there are different websites	Kate	77-78
		You either join a group of people chatting together or you can have individual chat	Kate	15-16

		The way I just meet up a guy I mean it's random you just go to certain sites where you can browse around or shop and they do the same thing and sort of have hmm sort of have sex chat and you and then something kind of click something like "oh" this guy seems cool	Laura	142-146

		and he is good looking we kind of engage in an erotic chat		
		…porn sites. Those sites can lead other other sites	Laura	3
		live sex on cam sites for instances. You get different types of live stuff.	Laura	6
		…the ones in which I chat with sexwebcam in a live adult video chat room	Laura	13
		There is so much choices out there, it's unbelievable.	Noemie	
		oh no other websites other kind of people use other technologies porn has sort of encourage for other things euh like all the Internet that you all know has become of all the browsers and sophisticated things and the google searching and all the other kind of stuffs because porn has evolved	Noemie	36-42
		you can go all around the world anytime or day in Moscow or when it's dark in Brazil, I can do a lot of other things	Noemie	
		I saw a thousand of them in the past year (laughing)	Noemie	159
	Feeling Safe to Discover Something New About Sexuality			
		With me it is more of elderly women with nice body shapes and everything nice anyone over 50 is my personal preference and euh body shape perfect euh perfectly shape vagina and good size boobs that my personal preferences. Features are important to me and euh that what I discovered online."	Kate	155-160

		The whole idea is that my fantasy is to have a bunch of women in the room and we get excited, and we create scenarios like rubbing cream on bodies things like that give me so many replies. The chat goes on for a while (silent) that is something that you can only discover and experience online.	Kate	190-194
		Plus, I don't think I would have learnt so much about myself, about my sexual fantasies without this system in place.	Kate	281-282
		I stopped I watched I looked at it. It was actually euh sexual Intercourse between two women I suppose I could say euh lesbians who were having sex euh and very very quickly to my surprise I got	Laura	67-74
		aroused and got that intense heat inside me even thought I have always been heterosexual hmm and I can't can't describe what the feeling was like almost intense but beautiful I loved it…And hmm so I left it there but it questioned me on my sexuality I questioned if I sort of was lesbian or "what it meant?".		
		I really wanted to get this feeling again but I couldn't get that excitement just let's say in the traditional ordinary sex life.	Laura	98-99
		I had so many questions in mind (silent) about my sexuality. Finding gay porn that arouses me hmm "what it meant?"	Laura	100-101
		I saw this movie euh I think if I remembered it was Brokeback mountain.It was two men who had ordinary lives and somehow they ended up having a romantic relationships. I experienced the same excitement (deep breathing) and some really nice warm feeling.	Laura	103-106
		I was watching was very much like I don't know I would say it wasn't typical porn hmm like…I guess you know like watching like female porn or like women on their own and hmm feeling like maybe I am attracted to women	Anais	91-95

		hmm the excitement hmm around like you know yeah discovering new things what is out there hmm looking back I wouldn't probably change about it because it was part of my development that was a big part of my life growing up and it was part of my sexual journey yeah I wouldn't change because it made me who I am. It has a lot of positive aspects	Anais	253-257
		Back then I needed to hear I was stunning	Anais	24
		Going online enabled me to explore my sexuality and get more confident. The men I engaged with complimented me on my beauty. That's helped me to feel value and beautiful.	Anais	87-89
		I think it was scary like but I guess that usually what the thrill is about right, the not knowing if the other person is going to receive it and then feeling like that validation from someone else that you are sexy you do look great	Anais	127-130

Quotes from Themes – Master Theme 2

Master Theme	Sub Theme	Quote	Participant	Page number
The Paradoxical Attitudes	Anonymity & Self-disclosure			
		You can just make up a name and you put an avatar on it….".	Kate	65
		there is no way for them knowing who is hmm if you are a woman or not.	Kate	67
		Another thing. Yeah, I mentioned using an avatar especially when I'm in a group. I like to remain anonymous as much as I can. It might sound odd but it's important to me. After all you don't know for sure who is out there. I prefer to be cautious by keeping my real identity for myself.	Kate	285-288

		Hmm and it's nice because you don't feel lonely and here it is you, hmm, you talk whatever crap, we complement each other, we share what our fantasies are, what we like, euh, what is super nice is that we know why we are there we don't have to pretend or being scared of what the other is going to think, you know. Euh, after all you don't have to give your real identity.	Laura	152-155
		I mean that the guys I meet they are nice. The funny thing is that we don't know each other in real life. This is not the point. We are safe because we say what we want to say. We are in control; I am in control.	Laura	48-51
		I mean hmm well my name is not my real name. I don't give my real name. This way I separate my life from my any activities online	Laura	53-54
	Ambiguous Thinking			
		I would always kind of doing it very quickly and then just switched off and then erased everything, so it was almost to forget that everything happened I suppose	Laura	110-112
		I think that's yet and I switched off the cam and the game is over.	Laura	172

		I am quite traditional I am quite traditional in my sexual life. Well, I like to think it. Hmm (pause) to be honest I don't like to see myself as someone having a sex life online. I feel ashamed I guess but I like it at the same time.	Laura	194-197
		it's kind of weird because sometimes, I wonder if it is really sex because it's not someone who touches my clitoris or my vagina or penetrates me. Not always sure if this is real. It can be confusing.	Laura	236-238

		Hmm it happened that few times I felt a bit I don't know if I felt a bit guilty or if I felt a bit dirty. I questioned I questioned oh I know I thought "I am a weirdo" (deep breath) that's sort of things, or I felt that there is something wrong with me perhaps, but I think it's because of our Christianity heritage we are supposed to be a traditional relationship and when you do something outside the box it can be seen as something weird but I moved from that. I think women are not allowed to have pleasure, not this way or you are classified as a cunt. Pardon me for the language but this word illustrates well how women are still viewed in my opinion. I suppose the bad thing is sometimes the loneliness not before and during the act but afterwards.	Laura	259-268
		I guess initially it was just curiosity like let's see what is out there but a lot a lot of shame so not really telling anyone about it and feeling like wrong and illegal somehow, hm, like someone is going to find out… because there is so much shame around it and a lot of confusion I would say. I was very much like I shouldn't I shouldn't I should I shouldn't	Anais	75-79 94-96
		I guess it was probably *going in phases* like going what was out there and then not watching anything at all	Anais	83
		It is a bit awkward thinking back but despite what I previously said I enjoyed the thrill.	Anais	86
		I suppose it is as it is about sex about people having group sex. It's a distraction. I should do gardening instead I guess (silent).	Noemie	96-98

		I found them hmm a nice distraction yeah that what I would say a distraction from everyday life and that the fact that can make it can be like an escape and if it turns like an escape the (pause) it becomes hmm a problem I think I had that I think in the past where it becomes likes avoiding doing work for example or something like that because you don't want to work or hmm that's what I would say	Noemie	3-7
		When it is good it's a distraction if it gets too much and becomes an escape you can wait too much watching I think It is a potential time wasted I think	Noemie	8-9
	Closeness at distance			
		The good aspect is that if you are a lonely person then you can find friends with whom you fantasy online and with a safe distance. You can also do normal chats. I suppose I have safe sex from a distance.	Kate	272-274
		Because you are isolated you are not with the person physically it is easier to share fantasies.	Kate	105-106
		I n a way I live my fantasies without taking the risk of being too close with someone. I decide when I want to go online and when I don't want to go. I think the screen helps in that respect.	Kate	277-279
		I suppose I have safe sex from a distance. I have fun and sexual pleasure with no commitment to someone	Kate	281-282
		We normally use our keyboards to introduce ourselves and we see our pictures hmm euh the camera	Laura	147-153

		is off you only see the pictures but after texting you think "oh we get on" so then we meet in a chat room where we put our camera on so we don't need to text anymore we talk to each other's. We chat and we see each other's from our respective bedroom, hmm, it's not a relationship but you kind of get to know the person a little bit.		
		Sometimes I wonder if this is real or not. Can I call these relationships? No no it isn't. I know. I feel so close, so intimate with the guys I have sexual encounters with, but how much of this is real. Do we really know each other? In a certain way we do but on a different level we don't. Not sure what I am saying makes any sense at all.	Laura	263-267
		More recently it is live hmm and people doing web cam and they are quite of interesting because you can go all around the world anytime or day in Moscow or when it's dark in Brazil you know that kind of stuff from the comfort of your living room it's fun	Noemie	129-132
		it's more for distraction euh just because you want a break or and you know I do hmm quite intellectual hmm when you are using your brain rather your body it's not physical and it's very intensive so it's better to zoom out from what you are doing	Noemie	77-80
		So what I am saying is that there is a personal interest into it not just a sexual interest I suppose. That would be one thing I notice particularly with online live because you literally have a person doing it live so you kind to get the personality as well even though I don't tell much about myself.	Noemie	135-139

		I like the freedom out there. I mentioned the distraction it represents but I like to meet new people without having to talk much about myself. It might sound	Noemie	215-219
		awkward to share the most intimate aspects of yourself without really knowing them. Putting that way, I only know what they agree to tell me and vis versa.		

Quotes from Themes – Master Theme 3

Master Theme	Sub Theme	Quote	Participant	Page number
The Painful Ramification	Feeling Trap in a Spider Web			
		Once you get on the chat it can get on for hours for days. You don't want to be left out…	Kate	96
		You can text and get replies to a couple of hours later. This is where the notifications come handy. You don't get left out and this way you can quickly get back in there.	Kate	98-101
		The beauty is that you don't have to go home or carry your pc to login. I can be in a park sitting on a bench and get access to the apps and carry on what you were doing at home.	Kate	102-103
		at that time I became addicted because I would spend most of my time on those activities	Kate	133
		I am talking spending time on this day and night. It was that addictive	Kate	134
		to be honest I spend euh 4 to 5 hours on it per week.	Kate	140
		I said to you it's an escape. When I should be getting on with something difficult and I don't then it is bad. I think it is the problem but I don't know how you can stop it...	Noemie	163-165

		I think you can procrastinate for a long time. You waste a lot of time I have done it… it's just too easy to just actually to spend hours to do some crappy you know watching someone online doing stuff you know it's very easy but that could be the	Noemie	171-178

		same with watching something else, anything, any activity so what is the point really.		
		I think I found them hmm a distraction yeah that what I would say a distraction from everyday life and that the fact that can make it can be like an escape and if it turns like an escape the (pause) it becomes hmm a problem	Noemie	2-4
		too much watching I think it is a potential time wasted	Noemie	9
		I have found that particularly in the last 3 years it's gone up and down	Noemie	109-110
		I said to you it's an escape. When I should be getting on with something difficult and I don't then it is bad. I think it is the problem but I don't know how you can stop it.	Noemie	163-165
		Anything you can convince yourself to do rather doing the really stuff you need to do is the real problem. Pornography falls into that.	Noemie	167-169
		If I am feeling down I spend far too much down and that is a problem. I mean spending hours on	Noemie	211-212
		This has a major downside to it if spending too much time on it.	Noemie	214
	Hindrance to Engaging in Romantic Relationship			

		I haven't met anyone in real life since I am on chatroom, but I have friends otherwise. Some of my girlfriends met offline some of the women they chat with online. I find it much harder to pass that barrier	Kate	253-256
		I do not find safe to meet someone I met online offline. It might not be the same thing. I might be really disappointed that the person isn't to my liking.	Kate	263-265
		Yeah, if I wasn't so scared, I would like to meet the person in real life. I would like to, but I can't.	Kate	
		I found my fantasies to be slightly embarrassing in real life. I am just not comfortable doing it. Maybe that prevents me from dating someone.	Kate	251-253
		Hmm how can I ever be in a relationship? I would need to meet someone who understands me and accept me but I am not so optimistic about this.	Kate	268-269
		Oh yeah, I am not quite sure about my emotions regarding staying single. I feel like I live into two worlds and neither of them can overlap	Kate	296-297
		The bad aspect would be to forget what it is to be in contact with another body hmm touching the skin hmm hmm accepting that in a real-world thing are more complex than they are in the real world hmm	Laura	246-248
		I feel I would feel quite insecure to engage in a more serious relationships because that would always be in the back of my mind, youknow, the way I met him	Laura	185-187

		Men online find me attractive if you see what I mean. I never experienced that before.	Laura	209-210
		I could meet someone hmm I have friends who asked, “why don’t you meet someone?”. You know, well, it’s not that easy. It’s just not that easy	Laura	213-214
		I feel like nothing is missing in my life. But anything is missing you know euh but at the same time having someone when you go home, someone you know you trust, someone comforting, having a cuddle you know going on holidays, laughing, meeting friends together, having my own family all of that is missing but I suppose we don’t get it all in life. We go in phases and maybe right now I’m I’m in this euh yeah so yeah euh it’s	Laura	222-228

		my experience of euh of living my sexual life and yeah (pause) yeah (silent).		
	Otherness			
		I know that no one would get it. Worse they would probably make me feel terrible about myself.	Kate	105-106
		I found my fantasies to be slightly embarrassing in real life. I know I would be judged. I am just not comfortable talking about it.	Kate	251-252
		In real life it can become quite embarrassing Hmm I would say for me	Kate	109
		I can’t talk to anyone because people are quick to judge you. You can imagine the comments made if I was telling about my sexual life.	Kate	297-298

		Hmm it happened that few times I felt a bit I don't know if I felt a bit guilty or if I felt a bit dirty. I questioned I questioned oh I know I thought "I am a weirdo" (deep breath) that's sort of things, or I felt that there is something wrong with me perhaps, but I think it's because of our Christianity heritage we are supposed to be a traditional relationship and when you do something outside the box it can be seen as something weird.	Laura	301-306
		if I was telling anyone I think they would be shocked. This is not something that can be told but this is my secret life.	Laura	118-119
		I think women are not allowed to have pleasure, not this way or you are classified as a cunt. Pardon me for the language but this word illustrates well how women are still viewed in my opinion.	Laura	307-309
		I wouldn't call a friend because if I am feeling low and my friend would ask "what's going on? Why are you feeling like that?" that means I would need to share what I do and I think	Laura	318-320

		this is my secret life. I share a lot with my friends but I would not go into those details hmm (pause) it's not something (laughing) there are a lot of people out there that probably do the same thing but I mean I don't think it's in our culture to say "hey let's have dinner and talk about I do camming" (laughing) so no I wouldn't call a friend.		
		No one rejects you online. We are there for the same thing. No one judges.	Laura	287-288

		I think if we were more open in this culture about sex it would be more regulated as opposed to really unsafe and shaming	Anais	170-172
		a lot a lot of shame so not really telling anyone about it and feeling like wrong and illegal somehow	Anais	77-78
		at at the time euh there were a lot of homophobia	Anais	95
		I guess it is the inequality that what women tend to face when they might put themselves out there hmm you know with sexual activities online	Anais	161-163
		I think it is very different for women and men. So that it is very difficult and also it is just the shame around you know accessing porn means that women can't access what they need to or they feel ashamed about what they would like to access	Anais	164-167
		I think if we were more open in this culture about sex it would be more regulated as opposed to really unsafe and shaming.	Anais	170
		We are really weird about sex in British culture and also very weird about women and sex and feeling and thinking of pleasure, it is still undermined the female pleasure and very very little sex education at school about this sort of things I mean around sex and pleasure you know like	Anais	173-180
		masturbation it's all about very pragmatic hmm for example education about risk of having baby if you don't want baby and are not protected you get infos but nothing about pleasure or sex online. Yeah I think the curriculum is to blame.		
		A lot of things are very demining to women	Anais	188

		there is acknowledgement of that online like on Instagram probably where I see the most pro like openness around sex and women and women and sexual needs who can enjoy sex.	Anais	189-191