Online Communication and Social Norms: Social Deviations in Pakistani Chat Rooms

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Abstract:

The widespread use of the Internet has significantly impacted the language people use to communicate. One of the clearest indications of this phenomenon are chat rooms. Many kind of chat settings are available online for the users, e.g. IRC (Internet Relay Chat), MUDs, MOOs, MIRC, ICQ, Instant Messengers and many websites like www.yahoo.com or www.cnn.com etc.offer their chat rooms. These chat settings allow users to create and join chat channels or rooms which may have an intended topic of discussion or multiple topics being discussed simultaneously. This paper proposes to discuss how conversation in the text-based Pakistani chat rooms differs from every day 'casual' conversation in a number of respects. The data was collected through internet chat logs from Pakistani chat rooms and questionnaires. The study aims to demonstrate the deviations in the 'chat' conducted online from that carried out face-to-face. Here the focus also falls upon the expression of culture or the absence of it in the speech. In this paper deviations from culture as well as social norms are focused upon in the light of the Pakistani socio-cultural norms.

Introduction

> People are likely to do what people always do with new communication technology: use it in ways never intended or foreseen by its inventors, to turn old social codes inside out and make new kinds of communities possible (Rheingold, 1995:68).

And this is what has happened with the boom of internet and World Wide Web in our lives.

In 2007 the Internet turned 38 years old. The World Wide Web (WWW) started in the early 1990s, and it went through an explosive expansion around 1995, growing at a rapid rate after that. Of the 107 million people who use the Internet worldwide, at least 40 to 50 million of them use chat, according to a survey in 1998. Yet it is not the numbers – however impressive – of people that are likely chat room users that is the real issue here, it is the unique type of discourse that occurs in these electronic channels. In chat rooms individuals can engage in mostly anonymous, free, unregulated conversation about any topic they choose.

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This research is a part of my doctoral research. In this paper I am going to discuss how conversation in the text-based chat world differs from every day 'casual' conversation in a number of ways. It aims to demonstrate deviations in the online chat from that carried out face-to-face. Deviations can be of many types but here the deviations from culture will be focused upon in the light of the Pakistani socio-cultural norms. Emphasis will be on how young people converse in virtual situations, and the parameters governing these conversations in contrast with when they interact with each other in face-to-face situations.

What is a Chat Room?

Chat rooms can be defined as Internet web sites that allow multiple users to engage in "synchronous CMC," a form of typed communication that occurs in real-time, as opposed to asynchronous e-mail.

To use a chat room, one first connects to the Internet via dial-up (modem), network connection, GPRS or wireless technology. Once connected, there are many web sites that offer chat room services. America Online (www.aol.com), Prodigy (www.prodigy.com) and other commercial Internet providers have their own chat systems that are accessible only to their subscribers, but one can find non-subscriber chat rooms very easily. Perhaps the largest free chat systems can be found on the sites of major web-based corporations such as Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com), Infoseek (www.infoseek.com), and through the services of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) or CheetaChat which requires the use of free software that are widely available on the Internet. Then we have chat messengers among which Googletalk, Yahoo messenger and MSN messenger are most popular. The Internet spin-offs of other companies like Cable News Network (www.cnn.com) also provide free chat rooms for patrons of their respective web sites. In addition to these corporate sites there exists a host of small and large non-profit web sites that provide chat rooms that are available to anyone.

Chat rooms themselves "involve the production of writing via computer such that synchronous textual dialogue takes place [among] spatially distant interlocutors." This type of communication has been labeled "interactive written discourse" (Allen & Guy, 1974: 47). In this manner of interaction interruptions are impossible. "Each utterance is . . . displayed in the chronological order in which it is" entered into the chat system by the composer, meaning that "disparate strands of conversation are juxtaposed, forming sequences that intertwine to form a multidimensional text" (ibid:51).

Methodology

This is an Ethnographic research. Ethnography is defined as "the acts of both observing directly the behaviour of a social group and producing a written description thereof." (Marshall, 1994: 158).

For this research I opted for the triangulation of data. The data was collected through internet chat logs from Pakistani chat rooms and questionnaires duly filled-in

by the internet chatters. The study aims to demonstrate the social deviations in the 'chat' conducted online from that carried out face-to-face. Here the focus also falls upon the expression of culture or the absence of it in the speech. Deviations from culture as well as social norms are focused upon in the light of the Pakistani socio-cultural norms. Cultural sensitivity in the topics of discussion, reflection of current social discourses, and interaction strategies are also discussed. Here one thing is to be clarified that cultural norms taken as standard for this research are general societal norms of middle-middle and upper-middle class families.

Literature Review

According to Grice human communication is based on the following cooperative principle (CP): "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975: 45).

Almost 29 years after it was initially published, Brown and Levinson's ([1978] 1987) theory of politeness universals is still highly influential. Although it has been criticised on many counts, researchers continue to adopt Brown and Levinson's definitions as the basis for their studies (see Johnstone, Ferrara and Bean 1994, Holmes 1995, Cheng 2001, Perez de Ayala 2001).

Brown and Levinson (1987:62) see communication as potentially dangerous and antagonistic. They explain politeness by deriving it from more fundamental notions of what it is to be a human being. The basic notion of their model is "face", following Goffman (1967). This is defined as "the public self-image that every member (of society) wants to claim for himself". Face consists of negative face, the desire to be unimpeded, and positive face, the desire to be liked/admired. All participants in spoken interaction emotionally invest in face, and it must be constantly considered. Brown and Levinson argue that, in general, it is in the mutual interest of interactants to maintain each other's face.

Data Analysis

Agreeing with Harris (2001: 470) who commented that Brown and Levinson are 'seeking to define a set of politeness universals which are applicable to numerous cultures,' I have drawn from the theory of politeness of Brown and Levinson ([1978])1987) in analyzing the social deviations in Pakistani chatrooms. They argue that the rational actions people take to preserve 'face', for themselves and the people they interact with, add up to politeness. Brown and Levinson also argue that in human communication, either spoken or written, people tend to maintain one another's 'face' continuously. Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain his/her self-esteem, and be respected.

But in online communication/CMC[2], namely, chat , we see that people are less careful of others' 'face, So the question arises,

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2   Computer Mediated Communication

- Are face needs less important when we are not face-to-face?

- How important is politeness when using CMC ?

While looking for FTA's in a Pakistani chat room I found a number of deviations from our socially and culturally accepted forms of speech.

I classified these deviations under four heads:
- Ids of the chatters
- Terms of endearment
- Abuses/taboo expressions
- Topics related to sex

A questionnaire was given to 60 individuals- 30 male, and 30 female. Their ages ranked from 18-35. The purpose was to find out if there was any difference in the way these people interact in virtual world from the way they do in the actual world. Two variables used in this data are— gender and age. Age variable is presented as A (age 18-26) and B (age 27-35)

In Q.1 respondents were asked about the time they spend in chatting.
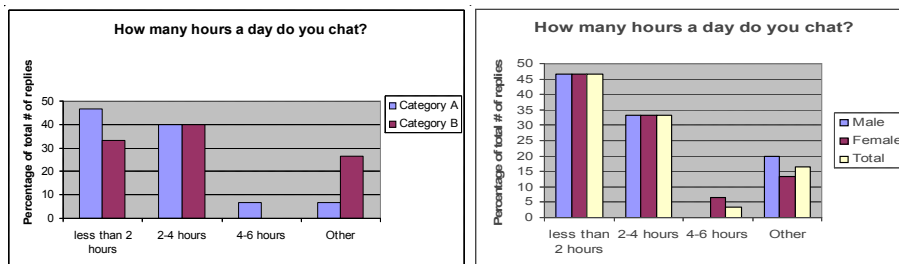
We see that female respondents are as much fond of chat as male respondents.On the other hand 26.6 % respondents belonging to B category are not regular in chat. This must be because of the responsibilities of their professional life. Category A i.e respondents whose ages ranked from 18-26, tend to spend more time in chatting.

In Q.2 they were asked about the identity revelation on net.

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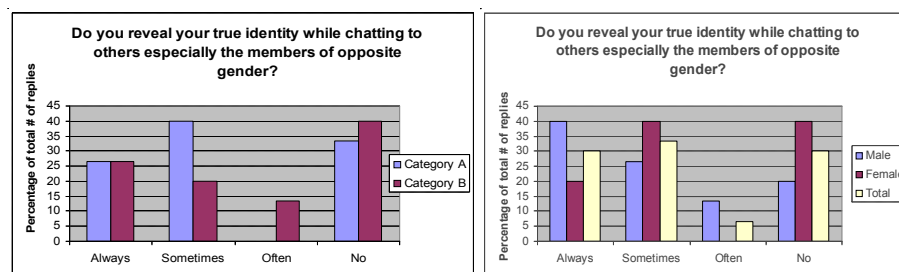
Here most of the male respondents as compared to the female respondents reveal their true identity in chat. Whereas the other variable reveals that 40% of respondents from category B do not reveal their true id. This is in keeping with the norms where girls would not like their identity to be revealed. However, when it comes to chat nicks or chat ids it was found that the chatters do not care much for their **'face'** needs. 'The primary difference between oral communication and electronic communication is how we re-address the Self", (Turkle,1995: 56). Here are a few examples of ids containing abusive and obscene words. This is a big deviation from our social norms as nobody would like to be identified with such names in actual world but in virtual world they do so because their true identity is not known:

> Asif_ kameena, sexy_girlz2002, baba_nikama, hum_kutta420,goblingoo, kullo_qaasai, lucha_lafanga_Pakistani, wafadar_nookar, fart_smell_1, nanga_patanga, Jeera_blade007, hindu_kutta, pajama100,sum1weirdo
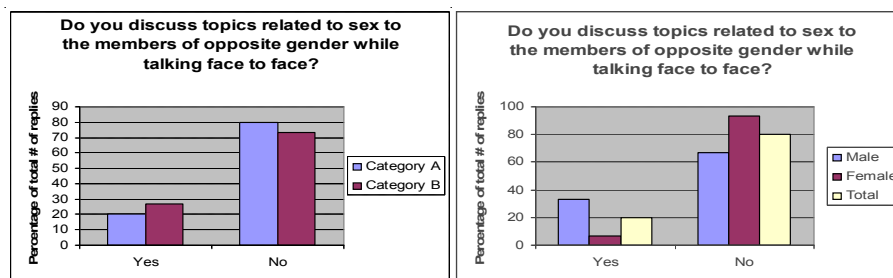
It must be noted here that one of the interesting things about the internet is the opportunity it gives to its users to present themselves in a variety of different ways. They can indulge in wild experiments with their identity by changing their age, location and even the gender. The wish to remain anonymous reflects the need to eliminate those critical features of one's identity that s/he does not want to display in that particular environment . As Suler (2002:1) points out 'The desire to lurk - to hide completely - indicates the person's need to split off his entire personal identity from his observing of those around him: he wants to look, but not be seen.'

In the next question respondents were asked if they discussed topics related to sex while chatting.
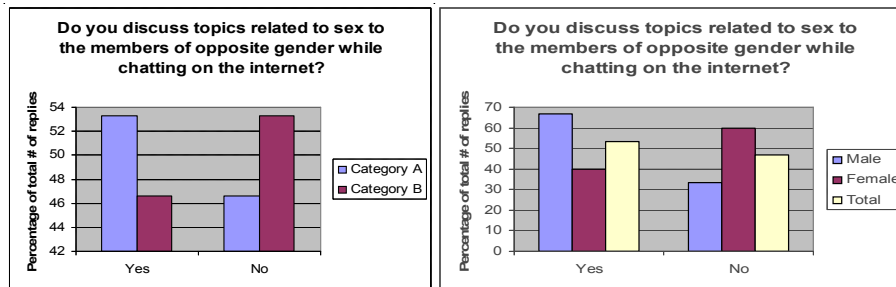
In reply to this question 66.6% male and 40% female respondents said they chat about topics on sex. This number is a big deviation from our social norms. On the other hand through AGE variable I found out that the difference in the number of YES-respondents between both the age groups is not much.

Then in the next question they were asked if they discussed topics related to sex in f2f conversations.

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Do you discuss topics related to sex to the members of opposite gender while talking face to face?

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The result was interesting to note. Only 20% said YES to it. This shows that the chatters take liberty of the virtual world. Now, through the chat rooms I found out many examples of this deviation. Following are the few examples. For reasons of anonymity I have deleted the ids of the chatters and identified them as X, Y, Z etc. and their gender is written with the id as F or M. I have also censored those words which contained obscenity.
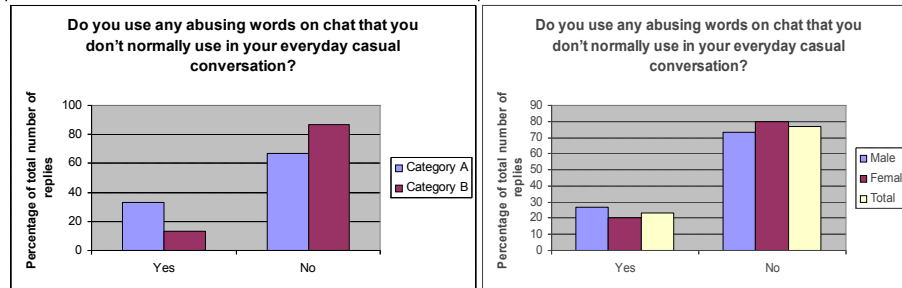
EXAMPLES:

o   *X[F]*: **<!— Hey!! how r u...?? your asl plz.. want to See my hot hot body..?? ....visit www.see-my-hot-b**.unixlover.com n check out the hot RED links over there...**

o   *X[M]:* **Any married or single lady from- lahore islamabad pindi multan faisalabad sargodha want real p**** l****** plz pm me without any hesitation**

Take this example. Here its interesting to note that the male chatter A[M] is not deviating and he is saying whatever is the practise in our society as sex education is still taken as a taboo in a Pakistani society. Whereas the female chatter has taken the initiative of talking about something that is a social taboo.

X[F] says, "***hey Blue Train do you want a sex education class....***"
A[M*]* says, "***yuck @sara @sex teacher***"
X[F] says, "***sex education...Fayaz***"
X[F*]* says, "***and u shouldnt knock it***"
X[F] says, "***u need to know***"
Y[F] says, "***lol***"
X[F] says, "***to prevent AIDS and other VD's***"
A[M] says, "***well we dont do sex with everyone so we dont need teachers for sex***"
A[M] says, "***we r mulims we dont belive in sex before marriage***"
Z[F] says, "**lol@fayyaz**"
X[F] says, "***yeah i know Fayaaz i'm muslim too***"

Whittle (1998:38) rightly points out that the novelty of chatting online 'allows us to communicate and share experiences vicariously... in ways never before possible.'

Next question addressed to the category of abusive expressions/words:

Do you use any abusing words on chat that you don't normally use in your everyday casual conversation?

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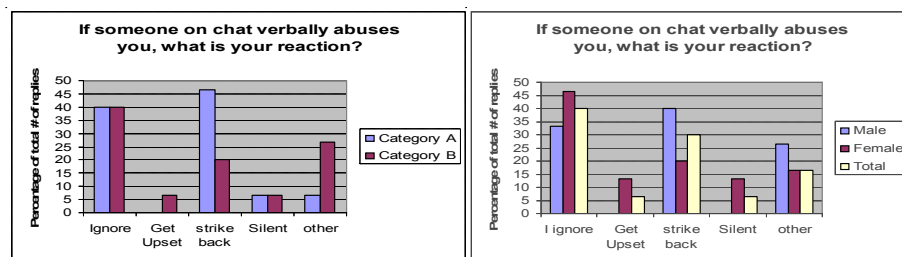
The above results agree with Lakoff (1975) who asserts that women are more linguistically polite than their male counterparts. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Brown (1980) and Holmes (1995) who offer empirical evidence to justify their arguments. As Holmes (1995:1) comments,

> …But perhaps I should say right at the outset that, when all the necessary reservations and qualifications have been taken into account, I think the answer is 'yes, women are more polite than men'.

When asked if they use abusing words in chat the number of respondents from category A is more than double than those of category B. Here one can assume that this is because of lack of maturity in category A respondents.

The next question dealt with the reaction of the individual if they are verbally abused in a chat room:

If someone on chat verbally abuses you, what is your reaction?

If someone on chat verbally abuses you, what is your reaction?

Here 40% respondents ignore/block the abusers and this is not a deviation since this happens in actual world too. But none of the male respondents get upset when they are abused and only 13.3% female respondents get upset. Now that is quite strange since tolerance for abuse is quite low in our society.Only 20% female respondents said they strike back.13.3 % female remain silent and only 6.6 use other

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ways to handle such situations.This shows that women are still not equipped to handle such situations. They are not fighting their fights even on the net.

On the other hand we see that 26.6% of the respondents belonging to category B in age variable handle these situations tactfully, using various moves. This could be because of their maturity in age.

Here is an example of a conversation between 2 girls discussing a cricket match:

X[F] says, "pakistan is never gonna win"
Y[F] says," **hey mariam r u mad?**"
X[F] says, "arzoo"
X[F] says, "i am being realistic"
X[F] says, "u bitch have a look at the score"
Y[F] says, "**hey cmon do u have to be realistic?**"
Y[F] says, "**no kutti i wont**"
X[F] says, "***u damn bitch***"

Do we use such language with our peers in actual life? As far as cyber world is concerned we can agree with Freed (1996: 55) who points out, whilst 'people generally persist in believing that...women are more polite than men', research which continues to address such questions is both 'misguided and naive'.

Example
X[m] says, "***TITANIC GOT DROWNED IN HIS MOTHER'S C*** HE WAS SEARCHING FOR HIS NEIGHBOUR THERE***"
X[m] says, "***titanic is the great f***** ever born on this earth!!***😕***;)***
Z[f] says, "**how about ignoring the really obnoxious ppl?**"
A[f] says, "**blue train what r u on about?**"
C[m] says, "**blue train go jump off a cliff man**"
Z[f] says, "**ignore bluetrain**"
B[f] says, "shut the f*** up blue train
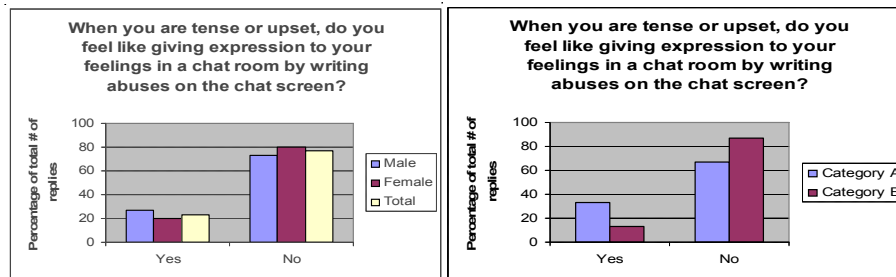**C[m]** says, "**SHUT UP BLUE TRAIN GO SCREW YA SELF**"

In the above example, the manner of fight is again a deviation.

The next question dealt with the issue of random abusive scroll/spam that goes on in the chat rooms.76.6% denied doing any such thing. There is not much of a difference in the number of abuse-scrollers or spammers between male and female here. That is again a deviation since women are supposed to be more polite in our society.

Majority of the respondents deny scrolling random abuses in chat but those who do they use a very strong language which is not in keeping with our social norms.

Here is one of many examples I found in the chat rooms where the chatter was not addressing any particular individual but s/he was simply scrolling this text in the

When you are tense or upset, do you feel like giving expression to your feelings in a chat room by writing abuses on the chat screen?

(Male, Female, Total — Yes / No)

When you are tense or upset, do you feel like giving expression to your feelings in a chat room by writing abuses on the chat screen?

(Category A, Category B — Yes / No)

chatroom again and again.The sex of the chatter was not mentioned in the profile neither could I guess it from the id.

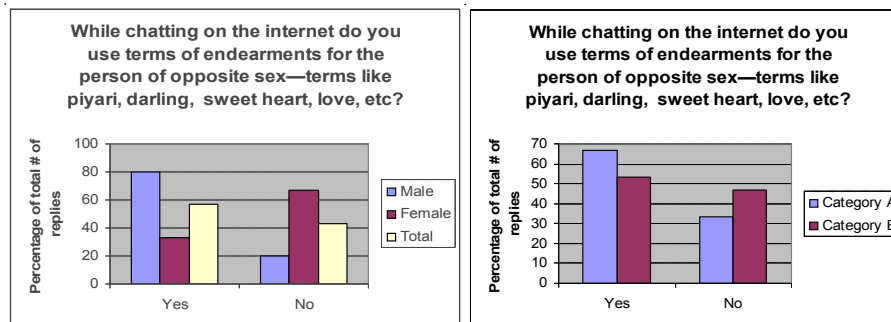> **X[-]** says, **"i am here to screw all of u"**
> **X[-]** says, **"so i heard that Mush was licking Bushs a**"**
> **X[-]** says, **"tell him to lick my instead"**
> **X[-]** says, **"f*** all pakis"**

Because we do not have the least inkling of another's background in the chatroom, so the lack of constraint leads to the hurling of profanities at other users. These immature, insecure people seem prepared to fight, or 'flame' at the slightest insinuation. Such online attacks are called 'flaming'and it can trigger anger, or hatred among other users 'causing them harm, fear, distress or offence'. (Whittle,1996: 197).

My next question dealt with the terms of endearment used in chatrooms. 80% male respondents admit using such terms for the female chatters.whereas 1/3rd of the female respondents deny using them.The reason could be that females are less open and bold in their speech as compared to their male counterparts. But there is not much of a difference between the respondents of both the age categories.This means that chatters of all the ages use the terms of endearment in one way or the other.

While chatting on the internet do you use terms of endearments for the person of opposite sex—terms like piyari, darling, sweet heart, love, etc?

(Male, Female, Total — Yes / No)

While chatting on the internet do you use terms of endearments for the person of opposite sex—terms like piyari, darling, sweet heart, love, etc?

(Category A, Category B — Yes / No)

The data that I found in the chat rooms show male chatter using endearments, unfortunately I could not find any example in which a female chatter is using them.

> *X[f]*: **salam**
> *Z[m]*: **w/s <u>darling</u>**
> *Z[m]*: **how ru?**
>
> *X[f]*: says,"**hello everyone!"**
> *Z[m]:* says, "**SALAAM KOIL...AA**"
> *Z[m]:* says, **<u>"PYARI</u> KAISI HO?**

In the end the respondents were asked to give any reasons why people behave differently in internet chat as compared to the way they behave in real life?

Here the respondents came up with some very interesting and enlightening views. And to sum them up in a nutshell:

o   Chatters know that they are physically inaccessible so they fear no harm
o   Anonymity of the id make them open and different—gives greater freedom.
o   No penal action-no law to bind them to etiquette of speech
o   You don't have to pay a price for your words on the net unlike real life where you can't get away with saying such rude stuff.
o   Usually because there is no chance of meeting the other person f2f again in future so they take advantage of cyberspace and and misuse the CMC.

Conclusion

Many upsetting scenarios erupt in chatrooms because chatting online represents means to substitute one kind of reality for another. The virtual world can make us "forget ourselves, forget where we are", (Weiss ,1996: 70) So we see that the lack of face-to-face cues has a curious impact on how people present their identity in cyberspace.

The factor of anonymity is always there in a chatroom, one never knows the real identity of the chatter—one can only guess from his/her username or chat dialogue. Due to most-often coded or abbreviated usernames, (for example, titanic_200,ami_pk, hawaiian_dream, dimwit_222 etc) the author of a chat posting is not known, except through what she or he reveals subsequently about her or him self but this does not necessarily explain who the author is because you never know if the person is revealing the true identity or not. That is why chatters usually take advantage of this anonymity factor to deviate from their social-self. When it comes to anonymity people in cyberspace often change their name for use in other chatrooms, and sometimes within the chatroom they will change their name. For example, if the discussion in the chatroom is scholarly about an issue a person may log in as 'professor_2000'. If the discussion is political the same person may be 'Mush_Bush'. In a sex-related discussion the same person may choose to be 'hot_sexy_lady'. One's characters are only part of one's on-line repertoire. A person can be a feather, animal, cloud or a flower. In cyber world a person's 'speaking' persona changes in different chat situations as Suler (2005:1) comments that
> On an even deeper psychological level, users often

> describe how their computer is an extension of their mind and personality - a "space" that reflects their tastes, attitudes, and interests… Under less than optimal conditions, people use this psychological space to simply vent or act out their fantasies and the frustrations, anxieties, and desires that fuel those fantasies.

Due to the freedom and anonymity online, on one hand chatters are more open online than f2f and they freely give online hugs and kisses that we rarely see in f2f contacts. On the other hand people tend to become more abnoxious as they are hiding behind anonymity. Chatrooms have a tendency to breed perverts and pranksters with insatiable sexual appetites, 'Just as there are inept people in your neighbourhood, you will find socially inept users on IRC' , (Pyra ,1995: 82) Chatters say things in public that they would never say f2f only because they are hiding behind a coded chat id and their computer screen. Many a times this element of anonymity allows

> …immature, insecure people to throw their virtual weight around, harassing people and interfering with their attempts at pleasant online chatting.
> Reiner & Blanton(1997: 93)

From the above study the conclusion that can be drawn is that the cyber space chatters are more likely to do things online than they would in the real world as real people have limits. The fact that your online partner does not know anything about you other than what you choose to tell him or her 'can embolden you to share your intimate thoughts or to pour out your bottled-up frustration',(Yee, 2003:3). It's the 'You can't see me, I can't see you' phenomenon that makes the chatters deviate.

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