

Expecting penises in Chatroulette: Race, gender, and sexuality in anonymous online spaces

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ABSTRACT

As a femme woman of color, I employ critical autoethnography based on my participant observation within Chatroulette for a qualitative study on how online impressions through web cameras with strangers are formed in quick bursts of time. Chatroulette's anonymity adds interesting context for impression creation in an online environment that emphasizes ocularcentrism of the embodied self. This article adds to methodologies of self-care for the qualitative researcher by positioning the issue of self-care in the online field, where "regular" interactions based on race, gender, sexuality, and more may leave autoethnographers from marginalized communities especially vulnerable. This study complicates the conceptual boundaries of "audience," "participation," and "observation" for online autoethnographic research. This research contributes to impression formation theory by focusing on the importance of the body in immediate, one-time impression constructions with conversational partners online. Race, gender, and sexuality impact online communication, even when a word is not even said.

Introduction

Individuals may choose to engage in disinhibited presentations of the self that create negative impressions, especially when responses are mediated through computers, where lasting sanctions to punish socially unacceptable behavior have been removed. Within the past decade, Chatroulette was the premiere site for webcam chat with anonymous strangers that spawned an entire generation of derivative webcam-based sites for anonymous sociality; Chatroulette continues as an active online social network site and endures as a cultural reference for meeting strangers online through Web cameras. Chatroulette provides a popular context in which users may express themselves, including in the nude. In fact, Chatroulette became known for its frequent nudity, helping to attract visitors to the website for voyeurism and exhibitionism. Sex is among the driving forces of Internet growth (Hamelink, 2000), and popular television programs, like *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and *Tosh.0*, declared with confidence that users would encounter men exposing themselves on Chatroulette.

In contrast to text-based chatting, computer cameras (re-)introduce the significance of the visual body in self-presentation (Boler, 2007) through ocularcentrism, or a visual scanning in which phenotype is given primacy in determining social cues (Korn, 2015a).

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Unlike other social networking sites (Pearson, 2009), identity performance may be curtailed in Chatroulette through immediate, anonymous, one-time, visual impressions (Korn, 2013). In contrast to current models of impression theory that are built upon impression formation cascading upon each encounter among the same people (Chambliss, 1965; Gardner & Martinko, 1988), Chatroulette allows for only single episodes between each set of parties (Ostrow, 1996). Under anonymity (Connolly, Jessup, & Valacich, 1990; Fainzang, 1994; Jessup, Connolly, & Galegher, 1990; Shulman, 1990) and with no possibility for sanctions against socially unacceptable behavior (Stuber, Galea, & Link, 2009), individuals may choose to create unfavorable, disinhibited impressions online via racist and lewd behavior (Flynn, Chatman, & Spataro, 2001). In Chatroulette, these impressions are tied to race, gender, and sexuality presented through a screen, which manifests in the time parties stay attached together and their reactions to each other.

In this article, I describe Chatroulette, highlighting its history, design, relevance, and features, especially its version of computer-mediated anonymity. I then review the pertinence of critical autoethnography based on my online participant observation as my method, which leads into a discussion of impression management as my theoretical framework. In the latter half, I share specific autoethnographic experiences related to race, gender, and sexuality that are informed by theories of impression management, particularly online disinhibition. Drawing from those vignettes, I close with three provocations applicable broadly to digital research across (a) the concept of the autoethnographic community, (b) the theory of online disinhibition, and (c) the method of webcam-based autoethnography.

Chatroulette design

Launched in November 2009, by then-17-year-old male Andrey Ternovskiy from Moscow, Russia, Chatroulette (chatroulette.com) is a free website that connects more than 10,000 random users at any given time (Fletcher, 2010). The site was unique because it was not supported by ads and was self-funded (Ternovskiy, 2011). In my experience, participants do not use the text-based chatting at all, preferring to rely solely upon the Web camera and microphone for communication. The “roulette” in the site’s name describes the adventure in whom users encounter. Users have no real control in choosing their partner. In fact, users have only three options in every encounter: (a) to communicate with the other party, (b) to find another partner, or (c) to quit Chatroulette. Users unsatisfied with their Chatroulette session may click on “Next” to find another party.

Chatroulette’s relevance

Chatroulette is a social network site because it serves as one of several “virtual places that cater to a specific population in which people of similar interest gather to communicate, share, and discuss ideas” (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Chatroulette became the first and foremost site for webcam chat with anonymous strangers. My forays into Chatroulette matched the timeline of its heyday: The height of popularity of Chatroulette occurred during its first few years. Over the past 5 years (2010–2015), Chatroulette has inspired many mimetic webcam-based sites for interacting with anonymous strangers, sites that have exploded in popularity. Contained within the descriptions of the copycat sites is the

word “Chatroulette” as shorthand for online webcam chatting with anonymous strangers. For example, Bazoocam labels itself as “the top international Chatroulette” and “video-chat site that pairs you with a complete stranger for you to chat with” (<http://bazoocam.org/chat>); ChatrouletteWorld leverages Chatroulette’s popularity as self-explanatory as it describes itself as “Chatroulette around the world” and divides its channels according to various languages, including English, Spanish, Hindi, and Arabic (<https://chatrouletteworld.com>); DirtyRoulette encourages explicit nudity as “the chat roulette [sic] for naked people” (<http://dirtyroulette.com>); GayRoulette targets men looking for sexual play with other men as “free gay roulette chat for adults” (<http://www.gayroulettechat.com>); Omegle urges users to “talk to strangers” through its site that “pick[s] someone at random” (<http://www.omegle.com>); Random Skip identifies as a “Chatroulette similar site,” “web cam roulette,” and “free random webcam chat room” (<http://www.randomskip.com>); SexChatster does not require the creation of an account for its users to “get naked on webcam” to engage in cybersex (<http://www.sexchatster.com>); and Tinychat’s “live video chat rooms” rely upon user recognition of Chatroulette for its Chatroulette-named channel (<http://tinychat.com/chatroulette>). In direct contrast to Facebook’s intent to connect individuals known to one another as “friends” in stable communities, Chatroulette-based sites emphasize ephemerality, anonymity, and temporariness. Their “anonymity” may be defined as a lack of permanent connections afforded through sites that serve as temporary gathering places for online strangers (Connolly et al., 1990; Fainzang, 1994; Jessup et al., 1990; Shulman, 1990). Online social media sites that simulate Chatroulette-like anonymity provide a different, fleeting context in which to analyze the emergence of social, sexual, racial, and gendered norms by individuals that have no way to maintain contact after their initial experience with one another. As additional sites, like Skype, offer sociality mediated by webcam, the emphasis on embodied selves will increase, including for autoethnographers engaged in contemporary media studies.

Mediated anonymity

Because online social network sites differ in affordances and practices, defining the specific sociotechnical context that Chatroulette facilitates for its users is crucial in understanding the attraction and outcomes for Chatroulette’s audiences (Ellison & boyd, 2013). From its launch in 2009 until 2011, Chatroulette was the premier place online that touted anonymity and actually afforded it. The site did not ask visitors to set up a username. When I logged into Chatroulette, I was stunned that I was not forced to create a user identity, choose a password, or complete any steps to associate my online self with my offline self. This uncommon experience of using video connection services through a website without identifying myself was an immediate attraction because it “felt” truly anonymous. Users, free from the registration of a name on the site, operated under the premise of anonymity. The expectation of mediated anonymity, the norm of male nudity, and the practice of unknown encounters defined the context of Chatroulette that I experienced. Since 2012, Chatroulette has installed a mandatory login.

The presumption of anonymity is deepened by the design of Chatroulette: Users play a game of chance with whomever they are connected with. During the time that the two screens interact, both parties have the option to engage in chatting via text and/or webcam or terminating the chat to move on to new participants through “nexting.” The only

recourse users have for offensive behavior is to click on the “report” button. The offensive user must incur “report” clicks from two other users within 5 minutes to be banned from Chatroulette temporarily for 40 minutes. For the Chatroulette user, once a connection has been severed, returning to that previous person is nearly impossible, so Chatroulette users experience anonymity in terms of no repetition. Even though Chatroulette’s first rule on its home page states “Broadcasting or offering nudity is not allowed” (Chatroulette, 2015), the game-like feel affords little accountability between paired partners. In such a mediated environment in which sanctions seem minimal for socially unacceptable behavior (Flynn et al., 2001; Stuber et al., 2009), Chatroulette infamously became a pop cultural icon for engaging in nude behavior online. Chatroulette’s reputation persists as an appealing haven for nude men, attracting every day “50,000 naked men,” whom Chatroulette now uses as referral revenue by directing them to adult partner sites, if they receive enough flags for indecent behavior (Carr, 2011).

Critical autoethnography

I combined autoethnography with participant observations online in 2011 to reflect analytically on autobiographical experiences within Chatroulette. Because participating and observing in Chatroulette incorporates the physical self and emotional reactions around race, gender, and sexuality (Jones, 2015; Kawulich, 2005), I employed critical autoethnography, which pays special attention to social difference and power manifestation (Besio & Butz, 2004; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Hanson, 2004). Besides analyzing personal experience to understand culture (Clough & Ellis, 1997; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Kogut, 2005), critical autoethnography highlights reflexivity and awareness regarding the positionality of the person conducting the autoethnography. Critical autoethnography renders hegemony as visible and the implicit as explicit, especially within the construction and negotiation of the presumed Other as part of progressive, postcolonial research (Besio & Butz, 2004; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). Power and authority are interrogated: The narrative produced through interactions involving the critical autoethnographer is interpreted and analyzed for hidden biases that are overlooked due to the privileged position of the researcher. Every autoethnographer imports certain subjectivities into the field; the critical autoethnographer actively aims to address privilege and unpack (un)shared presumptions about race, class, gender, and sexuality by the researcher and participants in social encounters (Hanson, 2004).

Real-time, webcam-based, computer-mediated autoethnographies involve embodied practices of the self (Boler, 2007). Moving away from text-based communication, online services and sites such as Skype and Chatroulette feature visual components, like physical poise and body language, in addition to verbal speech. Everything in front of the camera becomes a prompt in Chatroulette and other webcam-based interactions. Our clothing, bodies, even how we sit, all become a prompt for the other user in determining whether to chat with us or “next.” Some of these choices are intentional and deliberate, such as my choice to wear nondescript clothing, a man’s choice to have his webcam focused on his pubic hair only, or the choice of another user to hang a Confederate flag in his background, within sight of his webcam. These choices may reflect a complicated arrangement of trust, vulnerability, and connection with strangers: Some individuals trust anonymous strangers more easily than people they know and are willing to share their vulnerability

quickly, while other people need to build trust with an individual across multiple interactions in sustained connection. The Chatroulette user is not just an embodied, living prompt for individuals using the site; the background and everything within (and those things chosen to be hidden from) the sight of the webcam become prompts too for Chatroulette users.

Impression theory

In their extensive literature review of impression theory, Mark Leary and Robin Kowalski (1990) differentiated between impression formation (which is used reciprocally with impression construction and impression creation in this article) and impression management. According to Leary and Kowalski (1990), impression formation involves analyzing and bringing together information (i.e., physical and personality characteristics, behaviors, beliefs, personal values, and the like) to form an “understanding” of an individual (Sanders, 2010). Impression management, the process by which individuals attempt to control others’ perceptions, is pervasive in social interaction (Becker & Stamp, 2005). Implicit within impression theory is the repetition of impressions that build over time, creating favorable and unfavorable impressions (Becker & Stamp, 2005; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Sanders, 2010). In contrast, Chatroulette offers a unique convergence of personalized chat drawn from a public, randomized sample of conversational partners with whom impressions are made through immediate and “spontaneous involvement” (Goffman, 1961, 1967; Ostrow, 1996). Users have little control over partners assigned to them, and shifts in partners are rapid, creating an interesting environment for self-presentation. From my critical autoethnography, the anonymity afforded by Chatroulette affects impression theory in at least a couple of ways: leveraging anonymity for sexual play through subtle and overt cues, and possibly harnessing anonymity for untraceable enactments of racism.

An impression theory applicable to both the sexual and racist episodes narrated within this article is online disinhibition. The theory of online disinhibition suggests that some people behave in worse ways online than offline, which may result in rudeness, anger, hatred, and toxic behavior (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Suler, 2004). When users operate under online anonymity, they tend to perceive online-based consequences from their disinhibited behavior not to be immediate, substantial, or significant, especially in contrast to the often instant, serious, and harmful reactions to similar offline behavior. For example, Chatroulette users may feel disinhibited about online nudity because rejection or other adverse reaction to the bare display of their bodies is more easily managed through their control over “nexting,” rather than risking ridicule or the threat of legal action against their public indecency. In terms of racial prejudice, an individual may be less likely to engage in explicitly racist behavior in person because the physical repercussions could be swift, painful, and dire. In contrast, a person may be more likely to engage in an overtly sexual or racist manner through computer-mediated communication that fosters anonymity because physical consequences are absent, accountability is void, and the online interaction is evanescent. In other words, users who operate with less inhibition online than offline may create negative impressions through acts of sexism, racism, homophobia, and other prejudices.

Expecting penises: Chatroulette

The very word Chatroulette became synonymous with nudity as it transformed into a popular cultural phenomenon (Fletcher, 2010). Its reputation as a site where strangers would show their penises under the guise of anonymity was spread by television programs such as *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and *Tosh.0* that catered to a demographic audience likely to use the website. Jon Stewart described Chatroulette as “cock-filled chambers” comprised of “95% free-floating dongos” (Stewart, 2010). Daniel Tosh ridiculed the size of penises he encountered on Chatroulette by remarking “that thing is tiny” and “that looks like your thumb inside your fist” before concluding with “so, what we learned is that it’s just a lot of dudes whacking it” (Tosh, 2010). BuzzFeed characterized Chatroulette as a site of “mostly dudes masturbating” and a place “to chat with the most socially depraved people you will ever interact with” (Greenring, 2010). Though not much academic press has focused on Chatroulette, a couple of scholars who have examined the site also tout its male sexual voyeurism (Kreps, 2010; Umut, 2010).

Chatroulette’s standing as the premier site for mostly male nudity caught my attention. At the time, Chatroulette was the only webcam chat site that connected anonymous strangers to one another, though its popularity quickly spawned copycat sites. It was not clear at the onset to whom Chatroulette men were brandishing their penises: Were these men seeking other men, women, groups? As Theresa Senft (2008) has found, webcams are often associated with exhibitionism and voyeurism, to the point of inaccurate mythology, especially for women users of webcams seeking celebrity. Chatroulette presents a different case from hers in that its reputation for nudity centers upon men, not women, and celebrity cannot be cultivated through Chatroulette due to its lack of the same audience consistently. Though rampant male nakedness might exist as true for others, it was not the norm for me as an Asian woman in nondescript clothing. As a researcher of computer-mediated communication, I am interested in digital areas in which human behavior is purported to be worse online than offline. Based on popular coverage, Chatroulette provided a place in which individuals, under the safety of anonymity, seemed to showcase their genitals in ways and frequency that they would not likely do in person.

I was also curious about how Chatroulette’s promise as “a place where you can interact with new people over text-chat, webcam, and mic” (Chatroulette, 2015) would differ for an Asian-American CIS-woman instead of White male celebrities Jon Stewart and Daniel Tosh. Autoethnographic research from a specifically Asian-American woman perspective adds diversity to existing literature of autoethnographies by other Asians (Eguchi, 2011), Blacks (Boylorn, 2008; Johnson, 2013), Latinx (Chávez, 2012; Vidal-Ortiz, 2004), and Whites (Boyd, 2008; Kenny, 2000; Martin, 2014; Warren, 2001). As a form of inquiry, critical autoethnography gives primacy to the situatedness of my personal experiences with others in Chatroulette, highlighting the socially shaped reactions between participants and me (Besio & Butz, 2004; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Hanson, 2004; Spry, 2001). I wanted to test Chatroulette’s reputation as a site for nudity. Nudity sells precisely because of the way it attracts attention (Stanley, 2010). Unfortunately, research on sexuality is often stigmatized (Rambo, Presley, & Mynatt, 2006). Rather than contribute to the normative frames of shaming or ridiculing the prurient status of Chatroulette, I accepted the likelihood of nakedness as part of the expectations shaped by popular and academic

presses. I sought to analyze the Chatroulette space reputed for dishabille to examine its user behavior and sociotechnical affordances.

Sexual encounters

Like other autoethnographic researchers (Custer, 2014; Raab, 2013), my autoethnography includes emotions across the spectrum of positive to negative. In terms of a general trend, my excitement and time in the field were related inversely; the more time I spent in Chatroulette, the more its novelty waned. As a self-identified positive thinker, I engage in daily practices of sharing gratitude publicly to remind myself to stay optimistic. Such a perspective helped to prepare me for the feelings of rejection that “nexting” induced. Still, after so many times of seeing another person’s face for a split second before that person chooses to leave me for another, I would inevitably reach a feeling of dullness within each Chatroulette session. When I reached that point, I would take a deep breath and aim to stay within the field for another minute or so. The experience of being “nexted” is an extra special type of computer-mediated negativity: Instead of just merely being “swiped left” (the action of rejection in popular dating mobile applications), I see the actual visage of the person choosing to swipe left or “next” me, even if it is for less than a second. There is extra “heft” in having a face attached to such a minimizing action. “Nexting” became my default context, not nudity, as I had expected. And since “nexting” was associated with rejection, I had to dig deep to remind myself that a myriad of reasons existed for why another human may not want to chat with me.

To my surprise, I encountered zero penises in Chatroulette. The people interested in engaging in nude display seemed to be quick to judge me as either an unwilling or undesirable participant. I saw screens of faceless, solo men whose Web cameras focused only on their torsos; I met very few individual users who were women. In an act of hailing (Althusser, 1971), screens would be focused on men’s hands, holding their underwear down, revealing pubic hair, but still covering their genitals, not saying a word. My autoethnographic experiences supported earlier academic research on gendered differences in online use that found men more often pursuing sexual interests online than women (Weiser, 2000). Many of those men “nexted” me immediately, perhaps in search of a Chatroulette partner who read as a man or a differently raced woman. Others, performing a cursory examination of me in jeans and a shirt, might have inferred that I was not seeking a similar type of experience or deemed me as otherwise incompatible with what they desired. For the most part, based on how I was sitting in front of my laptop’s camera, the other person could only see my top half, which was a plain shirt. I had chosen such attire intentionally because I did not want my clothing to influence the likelihood that a person might chat with me. Yet in my attempt to be non-descript, my choice in having clothing on at all likely did send the message that I was not on Chatroulette for nude play. Perhaps if I had appeared scantily clad, some underwear-wielding individuals who found me attractive might have stayed to interact with me. Within a matter of half a second, the decision was made by Chatroulette users to find an online partner better suited for their purposes.

Those men may not have been looking for a woman at all. The reputation for penises that Chatroulette had gained as a popular cultural reference reflected a heterosexual viewpoint in mass media: Chatroulette was touted as a place where men brandished

their penis in the hope of finding a willing woman to reciprocate sexual play. However, Chatroulette may have been negotiated as a favorable space for men who desire sex with other men or for other queered practices of sexual behavior (Brown, Maycock, & Burns, 2005; Seidman, 1997; Warner, 2000). The anonymous and safe nature of Chatroulette, much like the oft-touted anonymous park bench encounter whose reputation has flourished among gay men as a popular hookup location since the 1970s, may have facilitated queer sexual activity (Leap, 1999; Parsley, 2012; Somlai, Kalichman, & Bagnall, 2001). Consequently, as this critical autoethnographic analysis interrogates heterosexist norms, the men who “nexted” me and were obviously in the mood for sexual play may have been looking for a Chatroulette partner who read as male.

Besides the category of faceless men I described in the preceding paragraphs, a category of straight couples that delved into computer-mediated sexual play also came across my screen. In contrast to the faceless men, these couples engaged in short verbal discussions with me. A White woman, clothed and sitting on a bed with a similarly clad White man, both in their twenties, asked me in an English accent where I was located. Because Chatroulette’s default setting is to connect with any country, I replied with my country of the United States. She was insistent about ascertaining my exact location, asking me again, “Where?” To which I answered with my region (the Midwest), then my state (Illinois), and finally my city (Chicago). I did not return her interrogation with asking whether my presumption about her accent as English was correct. In the silence that fell after her rapid questions, her intent for sitting on a bed was revealed: “Would you mind if we took off our clothes?” I felt amused and even a little flattered that they wanted to include me in their sexual adventure. I chuckled, shook my head, raised my hands with my palms facing them, and waved in a “stop” gesture, “Sorry, I can’t get into that, but thank you.” I appreciated how polite they were with their invitation to one-sided nudity. This type of sexual encounter mediated through screens left me feeling generally positive about both me as a person deemed physically attractive enough to warrant such an invitation and about the couple who took the time to seek explicit consent from their Chatroulette partner before sharing nudity.

Under the surface, interpreting these interactions through queer and feminist standpoints, a woman-led invitation to sexual play reads differently than a man-led invitation. A woman-led sexual invitation felt thoughtful, whereas a man-led invitation ranges from creepy and presumptuous, to expected and boring. The sexual encounter could have been an opportunity for woman-to-woman sexual play, which could have been either the woman’s own, the man’s, or the couple’s fantasy. Because no physical touching could actually occur between the woman and me, perhaps any morality attached to potential cheating was elided. And although there was no objection from the man, the evaluation of the attractiveness of potential sexual partners via Chatroulette was held by the woman. Her power involved defining whether the person with whom the couple interacted was suitable; in my case, I may have read as femme, so perhaps the woman’s preference, either on her own or influenced in advance by her male partner, mirrored the straight male gaze found in most pornographic movies that pair femme women with one another in woman-to-woman sex (Dolan, 1987; Sullivan, 1997).

Racist confrontation

A different encounter on Chatroulette contained no actual words exchanged between my partner and me, though his message of racism was clearly communicated. [Note: The

following vignette may trigger trauma related to racism.] My screen connected to a young man with a light complexion who appeared to be in his twenties. At first, he stared at me, and I, obligingly, looked at him. After a couple of seconds, he raised each hand up to his corresponding eye, put a finger on each corner of his eyes, and then pulled his eyes back to slant them in an exaggerating manner (Chung, 2004).

To his racist action, I did my best not to respond with any noise or gesture. Seeing that I did not move, he lowered his hands, then repeated the eye-slanting motion, and gave an audible huff. Again, I remained nonresponsive. The man became annoyed visibly. He was not playful. He was angry. He stood up, pushed his chair back, and then waved his arms at his computer's video camera, as if he were trying to gain my attention. In fact, he should have known that he had my attention because I had maintained eye contact with him from the beginning. Still, his large movements were more to ensure that I was watching him, even though he could see that I was still looking at him. Again, he pulled back his eyes. This time, I furrowed my eyebrows. It was a reaction that enraged him. In his final move of fury, he leaned into his computer's keyboard to find the button to end our session.

Growing up Asian in Alabama as the "outsider" to its Black and White residents taught me at an early age how to withstand race-based ridicule (Korn, 2015b). Reacting with nonchalance had been practiced across many years. I chose not to submit to anger outwardly. Instead, I watched my partner through the screen; I witnessed a stranger grow increasingly angry that this woman who read as Asian to him was not hurt or riled by his racism. I share this racist encounter not to argue that Chatroulette is an inherently racist digital space, but to illustrate how mediated anonymity may foster racist interactions, as suggested by online disinhibition theory. The man chose to emphasize racial difference in his first and only impression.

Autoethnographic provocations

I conclude with three provocations regarding critical autoethnographic research involving the increasing number of online social media sites that offer anonymity across intermittent partners:

Conceptually: How does the definition of community need to be revised to include partners linked temporarily through the same online social media site? How might the definitions of "participation" and "observation" be updated to include the practice of nexting?

In traditional ethnography, the key is immersion into a community in which continuity is presumed (Keating, 2001; E. T. Meyer, in discussion with the author, July 2015). The first provocation of this article questions the boundaries for the community constructed by online social media sites, especially computer-mediated community predicated on a lack of stability and constant evolution. Might community be defined as the autoethnographer's collection of online partners, although those partners will never meet one another and will never be encountered again by the autoethnographer? And how does the practice of nexting factor into our understandings of participation, apart from and in relation to observation, online? As an increasing number of online social media sites incorporate, improve, and expand the ability for communication with anonymous individuals, the issue of defining the autoethnographic community, along with the

constitutions of participation and observation, becomes more significant. These sites that feature mediated anonymity across impermanent partners complicate the conceptual boundaries for autoethnographic research.

Theoretically: How do theories of impression management, and specifically online disinhibition, need to be updated to reveal more nuanced understandings between digitally embodied and physically embodied communicative practices within socially challenging contexts involving race, racism, sex, queerness, and gender?

The second provocation of this essay questions the boundary demarcating online disinhibition from offline disinhibition. Disinhibition because of anonymity speaks intuitively as a common-sense explanation for unseemly behavior online for which the offline form would be sanctioned against quickly and strongly. Yet it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which a computer-mediated environment encourages actual disinhibition that is different from the person's offline inclination. In other words, is it possible that the person who engages in overtly sexual or racist behavior online also chooses to act in those ways offline, such that sex and race provide contexts in which disinhibition operates in similar ways to one another, digitally and physically? For example, the person who acts racist online might also behave in racist ways offline as well, which would mean online disinhibition theory does not necessarily translate into worse behavior online than offline for individuals already inclined toward racist disinhibition. Similarly, perhaps individuals who are sexually forward online may express that sexual aggression in person within legally acceptable ways. It is possible that a person who beckons another into sexual play online may be more likely to visit physical areas that facilitate sexual play in person, like parks, dungeons, or bathhouses. Though some ethnographic studies have begun to address differences across online and offline spaces in different audiences (Leander & McKim, 2003; Orgad, 2009), more research that examines the online and offline behavior of an identical group of individuals within the same topic for communication (Sade-Beck, 2004), like race and sex, will help to define the contextual boundaries for when online disinhibited behavior will be more likely to be worse than offline disinhibited behavior.

Methodologically: What emotional, physical, and spiritual types of labor are interconnected with mediated autoethnography as a method for research, especially for embodied selves from underrepresented populations? What self-care practices are useful for researchers to restore their minds, bodies, and spirits, and how often should they be deployed?

What I did not account for was the emotional labor of being “nexted.” My original goal was to stay in Chatroulette for up to 30 minutes a day, relinquishing control of moving to a new partner to the other party. For some sessions, I told myself that the men that looked at me for a couple of seconds before “nexting” me were looking for sex only, and they had deduced correctly that I was not a source for such play, so I did not perceive “nexting” as a rejection of my visible person, but of my nonsexual purpose. On the other hand, for many sessions, I did feel unwanted, as, within only half a second of looking at me, numerous strangers deduced that I was not worthy of their time. Their pace for deciding not to engage with me was even faster than that at a speed-dating event. Whatever their reason, the numerous sessions that ended at the impetus of the other party felt like rejection. Multiple times. In succession. Quickly. Tolerating rejection from getting “nexted” is

certain; racist interactions like the one described are possible. This article contributes to methodologies of self-care for the qualitative researcher by moving the issue of self-care beyond expected areas such as health care research (Rager, 2005) that are deemed as challenging emotionally for physical fieldwork, to the online, where “regular” interactions based on race, gender, sexuality, and more may leave autoethnographers from marginalized communities especially vulnerable. The emotional labor of managing awkward to intractable encounters mediated through camera-equipped computers can drain an autoethnographer of color’s spirit.

For me, self-care practices for conducting mediated autoethnography included shortening my time within Chatroulette. I also had to take lengthy breaks between Chatroulette sessions for healing and gathering strength for subsequent episodes. Clicking on a button is much faster than the act of changing chairs at a speed-dating table to meet new people. Computer-mediated autoethnography affords numerous encounters with a greater number of strangers in a shorter amount of time than is possible offline. Mediated autoethnography that relies upon two-way visual technologies necessitates spiritual strength, emotional stamina, and physical fortitude for dealing with definite “nexting” rejections, likely sexual invitations, and potentially racist interactions. Such spiritual, emotional, and physical types of often-overlooked labor are interconnected with mediated autoethnography as a method for research, especially for embodied selves from underrepresented populations.

The division between physical and mediated autoethnography is artificial: We import our biases, subjectivities, and standards of the body from the physical world into online interactions (Robinson, 2007). My physicality as an Asian woman was a factor every time I was engaged in Chatroulette by a partner that could view my face and body, and the solicitations I received for sexual play were influenced by my body that read as a woman. Users, with their baggage from encounters with other Asian women, reacted to me based on those earlier experiences and conceptions of what it would be like to engage with an Asian woman. If I were in a body marked as male, it is likely that the number of invitations for sexual play involving straight men might have dropped, but the possibilities for queer male play might have increased. Similarly, some Chatroulette partners might find an Asian stranger’s face with slanted eyes as attractive to the point of extending a sexual bid, while others might find such physical attributes infuriating to the point of reacting with outright racism. Critical, mediated autoethnography reminds us of the significance of the positionality and reflexivity of the self as the situated researcher within the interplay among privilege, power, and physicality across the screens among strangers (England, 1994).

Implications and conclusions

Chatroulette is so powerfully connected with random chatting via webcams that it is shorthand used by other online social network sites to describe their own communicative practices. Unlike Jon Stewart’s and Daniel Tosh’s narratives, Chatroulette did not introduce full nudity into my online experiences; rather, Chatroulette underscored the significance of the physical imbricated with the digital through the use of Web cameras, crystallized into the other person’s judgement of my (un)desirability related to race, gender, sexuality, and appearance. In the move from traditional to digital autoethnography, I questioned that

which constitutes a community in computer-mediated environments that afford anonymity and temporariness. I have shared autoethnographic accounts of communication mediated by Web cameras that demonstrate nuances to Chatroulette's characterization as a convenient site for sexual encounters with strangers, from individuals who show only their underwear, to couples who solicit explicit permission for unclothed play. I have provided a troubling critical autoethnographic vignette involving racism that was specific to my embodied self that reads as an Asian woman. Through critical autoethnography, an implication for research within and beyond online spaces is that race/racism and sex/sexuality are challenging contexts that may actually serve as theoretically robust and practically rich boundaries in which the difference between online and offline disinhibition may be small. Through the process and as an outcome of "Chatrouletting," I maintain that self-care should be viewed as a call to action for critical autoethnographers, particularly those from marginalized groups, whose interactions with anonymous strangers may lead to incredibly emotionally taxing and spiritually draining field experiences. Chatroulette's anonymity adds interesting context for impression creation in an online environment that focuses on the embodied self. This study contributes to impression formation theory by focusing on the importance of the body in immediate, one-time impression constructions with conversational partners online. Race, gender, and sexuality impact online communication, even when a word is not even said.

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