

Excerpted from



>Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub

Masculinities and Relationships Online

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1 Blue Sky in the Morning

Late one morning in Berkeley in November 1994, I head off to my local pub. I'm hoping someone there will have heard from Rob, a friend currently en route to California from Colorado. I'm supposed to meet Rob later in the afternoon at UC Davis, seventy miles east of Berkeley, but don't want to make the trip if he's been held up by snows over the pass at Tahoe. Even if I do drive to Davis, I'll spend lunchtime here at the Falcon, where I can always find people I know, chatting and hanging out for a bit.

The Falcon is a small, out-of-the-way place, known mainly to its regulars, who tend to shun the occasional curious passersby. The utilitarian furnishings look a bit worn and include so many different styles that one patron says it looks "as though a used furniture store had exploded." A large schoolroom chalkboard hangs next to the bar. Today when I enter, the heading at the top of the chalkboard reads "Fave of the 50 Ways to Leave Your Lover." Various bar patrons have listed a phrase next to their name:

Fave of the 50 Ways to Leave Your Lover

OD on Crack, Jack
Sell the pics to the paper, Draper
Reveal that you're gay, Ray.
Give her the slip, Flip
Glue her to the wall, Paul
Slip Out The Back, Jack
hit her with a truck, buck
Don't like your new Teddy, Freddy
Be Seeing You, Lou
Change the locks, doc
move, no forwarding address, bess
Blow her away, Jay

As usual around lunchtime, the bar is crowded. A few people sit singly at tables, but most sit in small groups, often milling around from table to table to chat with others. As in many such local bars and pubs, most of the regulars here are male. Many of them work for a handful of computer companies in a nearby high-tech industry enclave. The atmosphere is loud, casual, and clubby, even raucous. Everybody knows each other too well here to expect privacy at any of the tables.

After exchanging greetings with several people, I ask if anyone has heard from Rob in the last twenty-four hours. "Does anyone know where he's staying in Reno?" Eric, a slight, pale, scholarly-looking young man with long hair pulled back into a ponytail, waves from one of the corner tables. People often retreat to the quieter corners when they've brought work to do into the bar. He calls, "I heard he departed Steve's [in Colorado], but nothing since." I reply, "Last I heard he was stuck in Reno due to snow, but he was supposed to call this morning, and I haven't heard from him. I wonder if he got chains?" Eric shrugs, shakes his head, and returns to his work.

At a table near the bar, Dave, a big, tall white man in a long leather coat, breaks into song, "Oh-a-wishing well will ya give me what ah want, will the prahce be no ob-ject?" Sam, a short, stocky Filipino, counters with, "That's the sound of the men working on the chain . . . ga-a-ang. That's the sound of the men working on the chain . . . g-a-a-ang." Adding to the cacophony, Rick grabs a microphone set into the wall near the bar and announces, "CHALKBOARD!" In response, Mike gets up and adds "Keel over dead, Fred" to the chalkboard.

Meanwhile John shows Sam an ad in the paper for an upcoming music store sale, and they discuss prices on guitar stands. Dave, finished with his singing, shouts out, "I HUNGER!" Chris stands up from the same table and calls out, "HUNGER ROLL CALL!" Chris, Sam, Dave, and I raise our hands; Rick shakes his head no and waves the Power Bar he's eating.

Andrea, a petite woman with lightly tanned skin and short brown hair, enters the bar. Mike, happy to see her, comes over and gives her a big hug, then picks her up and, pretending she's a football, starts running across the room with her as she laughs, a bit bewildered. Greg shouts out, "Don't spike her in the end zone!" then blushes wildly and insists he didn't intend the double entendre. "I just meant don't throw her down on her head!" Several others nearby roll their eyes, and Andrea smirks at Greg.

At the table where I've taken a seat, Mike, John, Sam, and Chris engage in a mock argument over the relative virtues of stringed instruments versus keyboards. When the argument dies down, I ask, "Should I assume

Rob bought chains and drive to Davis where he originally was supposed to meet me? Or should I assume he's stuck in Reno and wait in Berkeley to hear what he's doing?"

Chris smirks at me and says, "Chains! Kinky!"

John says, "I would just go with the original plan. It's up to him to call you if he does something weird."

Chris persists, "So what would you and Rob be doing with chains, hmmm?"

I laugh and whap Chris lightly on the shoulder.

John glares at Chris. "That joke is getting old, boyeee."

Mike chimes in, "Chris, that dead horse, he ain't gonna move no matter how hard you kick."

In response, Chris pulls a large lever, and a trapdoor opens under John, who falls through the floor. Conversation continues normally, and a few minutes later John returns through a door at the back.

. . .

Well, it didn't quite happen like that. It's true that most bars don't have trapdoors conveniently located exactly beneath the patron you wish to chastise. You may have guessed by now that the Falcon's location is not a back street in Berkeley. The Falcon is a hangout on an online forum called BlueSky.¹ I've presented an approximation of a set of conversations that occurred online and entirely through text. I did visit the Falcon on that November morning and greet people who were already there. "John" did get annoyed with "Chris" for harping on a bad joke. Chris's retaliation involved a text command to the computer program that runs BlueSky, causing the character that John uses online to be shunted from the Falcon to another "room" on BlueSky.

By introducing BlueSky, the Falcon, and some of its patrons in this way, I risk implying that I and the other BlueSky participants spend our time online enacting an elaborate pantomime of bar behavior. Perhaps we even appear to take our virtual metaphors too seriously. But rather than present the above narrative as an example of what "really" happens online, I propose it as something akin to the *feel* of interactions on BlueSky (although the Falcon is usually much more chaotic than the above exchange conveys, as may become apparent later). True, sitting down at a computer and logging on to BlueSky differs significantly from walking down the street and into a neighborhood pub. For one thing, Eric would never be able to get work done in such a boisterous place were it not merely a window on his computer screen that he can ignore at will. But the bar metaphor encom-

passes the friendliness, random bursts of song lyrics, joshing, and mock (and occasionally more serious) arguments that occur on BlueSky. Also, the online textual description of the Falcon plays into the metaphor, describing the site as a bar “with myriad tables and chairs of every conceivable material, height, and design, as though a used furniture store had exploded,” and BlueSky participants themselves use the local-pub metaphor to explain their relationships with each other and the appeal of hanging out on BlueSky.

In the ethnography of BlueSky that I present here, I use the pub metaphor to help interpret BlueSky’s social world. Although participation on the Internet is increasing, probably more people are familiar with bars than with Internet chat spaces, if not from their own experience, then from media representations of bars, such as the television program *Cheers*. The bar or pub metaphor also conveys something of the character of the social space on BlueSky, the participants’ relationships, and their use of the social space that BlueSky provides (Byrne 1978). Because the clientele is mostly male, the Falcon provides a space in which people enact and negotiate masculine identities within a particular class and race context (Cavan 1966; LeMasters 1975; Katovich and Reese 1987; Smith 1985; Communication Studies 298, 1997). The territoriality of BlueSky’s distinct group of “regulars” also resembles that of the patrons of a neighborhood bar (Cavan 1966; Katovich and Reese 1987; Smith 1985).

TEXTUAL VIRTUAL REALITIES

BlueSky is a type of interactive, text-only online forum known as a *mud*. “Mud” originally stood for “Multi-User Dungeon,” based on the original multiperson networked Dungeons & Dragons–type game called MUD. Muds are also sometimes referred to as Multi-User Domains or Dimensions. For a time, one could quickly start a “flame war” on one of the Usenet mudding newsgroups by making a statement about what the acronym MUD means.² To oversimplify the arguments greatly, some participants seek to deemphasize the historical connection between muds and earlier Dungeons & Dragons games, while others see this as an unrealistic “sanitizing” of the historical record. Although I am more sympathetic to those who seek to acknowledge muds’ lineage, herein I take a third path, referring to muds in the lower case (except where I quote other written materials) to deemphasize the acronym and its origin. Participants use the term “mud” as both a noun and a verb. “Mud” can refer to a type of mud program or to a particular social space using such a program. “Mudding”

refers to participation on muds, and a “mudder” is a mud participant. By using “mud” as a word rather than as an acronym, I reproduce mudders’ own terminology and also reflect the increasing recognition of muds as a particular genre of online forum.³

As in other online chat programs, people use Internet accounts to connect to mud programs running on various remote computers. They can then communicate through typed text with other people currently connected to that mud. Muds also allow participants to create programmed “objects,” which convey the feeling of being in a place, adding richness to the social environment. Hundreds of muds are available on the Internet. Many still operate as gaming spaces. Others are used for meetings, for pedagogical purposes, and as social spaces.

Muds can be considered a type of text-based “virtual reality” in that people have the feeling of being present together in a social space. Stone has suggested that in fact several types of text can constitute forms of virtual reality or at least have served as part of the continuum in the historical development of “cyberspace.” She proposes as a starting point in this continuum the seventeenth-century exchange of written descriptions of experiments among scholars. “By means of such writing, a group of people were able to ‘witness’ an experiment without being physically present” (1991: 86). Anderson (1991) similarly describes the role of textual representation in the creation of a feeling of community among dispersed people in his analysis of newspapers as key to the formation of national identities in the New World.⁴

Other media may similarly connect geographically dispersed people and provide a sense of connection with people never encountered face-to-face. For instance, like the long-standing tradition of travel narratives (Pratt 1986), television’s *You Are There* promises people a “visit” to other times and places so they can get to “know” people they may never meet. Adams suggests that television itself can also be viewed as a place, to the extent that it is “(1) a bounded system in which symbolic interaction among persons occurs (a social context), and (2) a nucleus around which ideas, values, and shared experiences are constructed (a center of meaning)” (1992: 118). As such, television provides viewers with the experience that they are interacting with others, either through vicarious identification with people and places viewed on it, or through the knowledge that large numbers of dispersed others are also viewing the same images.

By the same logic, online forums can also be viewed as places. World Wide Web pages provide experiences similar to television in that they often provide pictures (sometimes even motion pictures) of other people and

places and can similarly be viewed by multiple, remote others. The term "surfing," ubiquitously used to describe browsing on the web, also derives from television experience, in which people "channel surf." The variety of material available on the web exceeds that found on television, and the experience of choosing links to follow may provide an even greater sense of going somewhere. The World Wide Web also enhances the possibilities of interconnection with others in that some web pages include links to chat spaces. Some also display the number of "hits" so far—that is, the number of times a page has been accessed. This statistic allows people to imagine the number of others who have shared their viewing experience and even allows them to compare popularity of websites.

More interactive forums—such as e-mail lists, newsgroups, and chat rooms—provide an even greater feeling of contact with remote others because they allow people to interact and respond to each other. Of these, "synchronous" forums—those that allow for near-instantaneous response (including the various chat programs and muds but not including e-mail lists and newsgroups)—can provide a particularly vivid sense of "place" and of gathering together with other people. Rather than merely viewing a space through the electronic window of television, many people feel that when they connect to an online forum, they in some sense enter a social, if not a physical, space. Conversation in such chat forums takes place at a pace similar to face-to-face conversation, the room description and most of the objects remain stable from visit to visit, and people's entrances and exits generate text messages that allow them to "see" each other come and go.

Researchers have also described bulletin boards systems (BBSs) as giving people a sense of group membership in a common place (Baym 1995; Correll 1995; Myers 1987). For instance, Correll (1995) indicates that participants on the Lesbian Cafe describe it as a space. BBSs enable participants to post messages and read what others have posted. These messages resemble e-mail more than synchronous conversation. Even if people are logged on to the computer system at the same time, with posts and responses occurring in fairly rapid succession, they have less of a feeling of sharing the same space and time than participants in synchronous forums have. On the Lesbian Cafe, participants frequently had to redescribe "objects" in order to maintain the spatial metaphor. Object descriptions changed depending on the messages people wanted to convey and because of their forgetfulness. Also, lag time between posts decreases the sense of copresence. Although gaps in conversational rhythm also occur on muds, often because of network slowdowns, they are usually brief. BlueSky par-

ticipants almost always remark upon these instances of “lag,” illustrating the extent to which time delays in communication disrupt the feeling of shared space and conversational competency.

“MULTITASKING” AND THE SELF

Meyrowitz, writing about television, suggests that “the information transmitted by electronic media is much more similar to face-to-face interaction than is the information conveyed by books or letters” (1985: 118). Although, superficially, muds and similar online forums bear a strong resemblance to texts, they may be closer to face-to-face interaction than television is. Muds are interactive and occur in “real time”; that is, participants are connected simultaneously, and communications are transferred back and forth nearly instantaneously. Rather than merely observe people with whom they cannot interact (as on television), participants on muds can engage in conversation with others, requesting more information, questioning representations, and redirecting topics of conversation. Thus, online interactions provide connections with other people who probably seem more “real” to most participants than people seen on a television screen.

Meyrowitz also argues that television “invades” the space of the viewer without completely displacing the reality of that physical space. Reading, on the other hand, requires fuller attention, such that “the reader tends to be removed from those physically present” (1985: 124). While Meyrowitz may overestimate the engrossment necessary for reading, his description of the dual reality created by television provides a useful perspective on mud participation. Like television, muds enter the participant’s physical locale without completely redefining it. Online interactions can at times become intensely engrossing, and some participants report experiencing physical sensations that echo the experiences of the characters who serve as their online representatives, or analogues.⁵ However, while participating in social interaction online, mud participants may also be participating in other online or offline activities. In any case, each participant has a physical body that remains involved in experiences separate from the interactions occurring online.

For instance, when mudding for long periods of time, I frequently leave the computer to get food, go to the bathroom, or respond to someone in the physical room in which I’m sitting. If the text appearing on my screen slows to a crawl or the conversation ceases to interest me, I may cast about for something else offline to engage me, picking up the day’s mail or flipping through a magazine. Thus although the mud provides for me a feeling

of being in a place, that place in some sense overlays the physical place in which my body resides. Both “places” constitute a type of reality, and either may engross my attention, but the mud place remains more ephemeral, transparent, and easily disrupted by events in the physical world. Muds are particularly vulnerable to events such as power loss or modem disconnection, which can abruptly destroy the conceptual space of the mud, dropping me back fully into experience of the physical world.

This split in attention between two experiential worlds or places introduces a problem with viewing cyberspace as a separate sovereign world. Nobody inhabits *only* cyberspace. Online participation requires the form of split attention I have described, as many media experiences do (reading, movies, radio, etc.).⁶ Most BlueSky participants report a well-developed ability to “multitask.” They use this term, derived from computer hardware operations,⁷ to refer to engaging in several forms of online interaction and media use simultaneously. Many use computer windowing systems that allow them to view multiple online spaces, or they split their attention between the computer screen and television, radio, or other offline activities. BlueSky participants frequently mud while at work and use their ability to multitask to get work done while they socialize online. Indeed, many of my interviewees reported acquiring the ability to multitask specifically through their mud participation.

Some commentators have suggested that such attention splits result in understandings of the self as multiple (Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). To the extent that people make different presentations of self in different forums, multitasking does provide evidence of the multiplicity of the self. However, Goffman (1959, 1974) suggests that, despite the ability to adapt our presentation of self to accommodate different social situations, people resist viewing the self as performative. To some extent, our performances of identity acquire their meaning precisely from the belief that they are not performances. We organize social life to allow us to tell meaningful stories about ourselves, while accomplishing a “sleight-of-hand” concealment of the distance between the “I” that tells the story and the “I” about whom the story is told (Goffman 1974).⁸

Although people seek essentialized bases for themselves and the selves they encounter online, the performative nature of identity there seems almost unavoidably obvious. Tales abound of multiple and fluid identities and of online deceptions and revelations (McRae 1997; Reid 1994; Rheingold 1993; Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). Online participation enables the creation of multiple personae, facilitating varying presentations of self. However, people also engage in different presentations of self to different

audiences in other arenas of everyday life and did so before online forums existed. Both Goffman (1959, 1963, 1974) and Gergen (1991) document numerous pre-Internet examples of this multiplicity of identity performance. But despite the mundaneness of such splits and fractures of identity, people (in U.S. and similar cultures, at any rate) still tend to perceive their identities and selves as integral and continuous. They persist in describing themselves in essential, unchanging terms. (For a discussion of a more relational experience of self, see Kondo 1990.)

SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF CYBERSPACE

As the use of online communication media has increased, so too have media and academic accounts of online life. These accounts have tended to treat cyberspace as a completely separate, isolated social world, "without taking into account how interactions on it fit with other aspects of people's lives" (Wellman 1997: 446).⁹ A few works have begun to examine connections between online and offline interactions. While Baym's linguistic research on a Usenet newsgroup devoted to the discussion of soap operas does not specifically discuss the offline lives of the people she studied, she points out the importance of the "multiple external contexts" within which computer-mediated communications are situated (1995: 141). (See also Baym 1993, 1996, 2000.) Similarly, Turkle (1995) includes interview material from mud participants about their offline lives. However, her analysis focuses mostly on each individual's psychological profile and history, which she connects to the person's potential use of muds for personal growth and development. While she includes some discussion of the relationship of online socializing to changing political and economic realities, she relies mainly on interviews and participants' own descriptions of their experiences. This provides a view of online life that insufficiently distinguishes the very different social contexts of different forums and overemphasizes the degree of personal choice involved in online self-presentation.

Discussions that construct cyberspace as a distinctively different arena of social interaction emphasize the differences between online and offline interactions and suggest that offline "rules" concerning identity do not apply online. This stance is popular among both researchers and online participants. Turkle has proposed, for instance, that "technology is bringing a set of ideas associated with postmodernism . . . into everyday life" (1995: 18). Her interpretation of postmodernism specifically highlights multiplicity and fractured identity, and she suggests that a primary appeal

of online interactions is the possibility for people to enact identities unavailable to them offline. "The Internet is another element of the computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it, people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves" (178).

Descriptions such as Turkle's characterize social effects as flowing mostly from cyberspace to the offline world, rather than the other way around. The identities people bring to their cyberspace interactions matter less in these stories than the new lessons of self they carry with them from their online interactions. This represents cyberspace as a separate but equivalent social arena, with its own rules and logic. It also suggests that the existence of online forums represents a distinct break from previous social life and implies that online interactions provide experiences unavailable offline, some of which have powerful effects on people's selves.

Such a portrayal finds favor with many online participants, for whom it offers the hope of a "postmodern" transformation of "modern" society. For instance, John Perry Barlow, a well-known net personality, commentator, and writer, wrote "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" in response to the signing of a United States law that would impose limits on online communications.¹⁰ Barlow's manifesto addresses itself to "Governments of the Industrial World":

I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. . . . [Cyberspace] is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions. . . . We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. . . . Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. . . . Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion.
(Barlow 1996)

Barlow acknowledges that his declaration was written in "grandiose" terms. However, his assertion that cyberspace constitutes an *organically* separate, sovereign realm resonates with many net participants. His description highlights the absence of bodies in cyberspace (an absence that others have questioned; see, for instance, Wakeford 1996). This absence posits for cyberspace's "citizens" a bodiless identity that, he claims, negates the effects of privilege and prejudice. For many like Barlow, much of the hype and hope of cyberspace reside in its sovereignty and separation from "real life" and in its ability to correct the inequalities existing outside its boundaries.

However, this hope is called into question by recent research on gender

online. A large and growing list of articles suggests that norms of gendered behavior continue to shape online interactions (Cherny 1994; Herring 1992, 1994, 1996a, b; Kramarae and Taylor 1993; Sutton 1994; We 1994). Herring (1994) suggests that women and men use different communication styles online and react differently to flaming. Gladys We similarly found that men tend to post more messages to Usenet newsgroups than women and that "when women speak up, they may be actively harassed" (1994: para. 54). Cherny studied a mud on which, as on BlueSky, many participants have met offline and have participated online together for several years. In mud interactions, she observed, "men use more physically violent imagery during conversation, and women are more physically affectionate towards other characters than men are" (1994: 102).

Cherny's work stands out from other research on muds in its attention to connections between participants' offline gender identity and their online gendered behavior. Her account contrasts with other research that suggests that online "gender switching" can change people's expectations and understandings of gender. Several recent works have proposed that such gender switching can lead to a greater understanding of gender as constructed and of the self as mutable (Bruckman 1992, 1993; Deuel 1995; Dickel 1995; Poster 1995; Turkle 1995; Burris and Hoplight 1996). As quasi-physical "hangouts" that allow for speechlike interactions among groups of people, muds in particular seem to inspire these kinds of hopes. For instance, Turkle states that muds allow people "the chance to discover . . . that for both sexes, gender is constructed" (1995: 223). Similarly, Bruckman suggests that "MUDding throws issues of the impact of gender on human relations into high relief. . . . It allows people to experience rather than merely observe what it feels like to be the opposite gender or have no gender at all" (1993: 4). Bruckman concludes that "the network is in the process of changing not just how we work, but how we think of ourselves—and ultimately, who we are" (5). Dickel also suggests that, rather than "reifying conventional, hegemonic gender bias" (1995: 105), which he acknowledges as a possibility existing on other online forums, muds allow a "play of gender within the imagination[, which] opens up . . . a destabilization of gender positions which might spread beyond the internet into the larger culture" (106). Poster, in even stronger terms, suggests that the ability of mudders to adopt a "fictional role that may be different from their actual gender . . . drastically call[s] into question the gender system of the dominant culture as a fixed binary" (1995: 31).

These accounts rely predominantly on participants' own assertions regarding the liberatory potential of their online interactions. Researchers

have not generally contextualized these assertions by considering the social norms and expectations within the online groups or by using examples of online gender enactments. Such research reports thus fail to take into account potential discrepancies between what people say about the online experience and what they actually do online. They also tend to blur distinctions among identity performances, participant understandings of those performances, and the descriptions and assertions participants offer to outsiders.

Before hailing virtual life as ushering in a new sense of self-identity, we need to examine the meanings of online interactions. Without prematurely closing down whatever moment of disruptive possibility exists in the ambiguities of online identities, it is important to examine the ways in which relationships of power influence online interactions and are reinscribed within them. Through this ethnography of BlueSky, I attempt to provide examples of participants' performances of gender, race, and class identities along with their understanding of these performances. I further contextualize these performances and understandings through examination of the social contexts, both online and offline, within which they occur.

Given the popularity of themes of great transformation, many works published to date on the topic of online interactions not surprisingly take overly narrow utopian or dystopian views of such interactions. As Wellman suggests, such "criticisms and enthusiasms leave little room for the moderate, mixed situations that may be the reality" (1997: 446). My hope here is to provide a window into just such a mixed situation, where relationships both suffer and benefit from the conditions of online interactions and where participants both disrupt and reproduce power relations and hierarchies existing in offline social contexts.

In the chapters that follow, I include in my examination of BlueSky's social contexts the effects they have on people's online interactions, with an emphasis on gender. Participants bring particular backgrounds and understandings to their interpretations of each other's presentation of self online. I also look at what people gain from their online participation and what offline experience and knowledge they bring to their online interactions.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide background information about muds, their history and culture. Chapter 2 describes my research project. (Readers interested in more detail about my relationship as a researcher to BlueSky participants may wish also to read appendix B, in which I consider various practical and ethical issues involved in doing research online and discuss the relationship of my project to ethnography generally.) I also provide

demographic information about BlueSky's participants and discuss the connections between their work with computers and their choice of BlueSky as a social and leisure forum. To help readers understand the chapters that follow, I also explain in chapter 2 some of the basic technical features of muds. Chapter 3 provides information about BlueSky's subculture and its relationship to other online subcultures. I detail BlueSky participants' use of various mud technological capabilities in the development and maintenance of their culture and interpersonal connections.

Chapter 4 provides the theoretical focus for the book. In it, I discuss gender, focusing on the particular masculinities performed on BlueSky and their relationship to hegemonic masculinity. The dominant masculine identity on BlueSky is connected to computer-related work. BlueSky participants enact masculinity in and through discussions related to work. I also discuss BlueSky participants' understanding of what it means to be a "nerd" and the advantages and disadvantages that BlueSky's male-dominated space provides for female participants.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with identity and relationships mediated by computers, with particular attention to the effects of gender. In chapter 5, I discuss the effects of the mediated and networked character of Internet communications on online interaction. When combined with the cultural context of the Internet, such effects create a special vulnerability of online social groups. I also describe how exclusively textual communications can facilitate deception and lead to identity ambiguity and confusion. In chapter 6, I describe relationships among people on BlueSky and discuss some surprising advantages and disadvantages of socializing online. I examine some of the reasons people still find face-to-face contact important. Friendships also provide an important arena for the performance of gendered identities, and I demonstrate some of the ways people enact understandings of gender through group conversations. I argue that gender underlies and informs all relationships with others and that friendships recognize, reinforce, and/or reconstruct gendered identities.

Chapter 7 discusses class and race online. The class backgrounds of BlueSky participants enable their participation in a variety of ways and allow them to use BlueSky to support and continue their middle-class status. I also examine participants' perceptions of their own racial identities and the racial character of BlueSky. Online spaces remain predominantly white in both demographics and culture.

Finally, chapter 8 presents a summary analysis of identity and power on BlueSky.