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FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON CYBERSEX

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

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Tartu 2018

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## Introduction

In my thesis, I want to answer two questions: what is cybersex and should feminists support it or not?

Both these questions are important for the philosophy of sex and for feminist philosophy because the first question helps to clarify how we define human sexuality and how we should revisit our views on the already existing definitions of sex because of the appearance of cybersex. The investigation of cybersex from a feminist perspective will help to better understand whether and how the position of women has been changed due to the appearance of such technologies that allow having cybersex and what are the advantages and disadvantages of it.

In my thesis, I will argue that cybersex does bring some real benefits for women in terms of the expansion of their autonomy. Thus, due to cyberspace women received more freedom to choose partners and sexual practices in which they can participate or/and more easily escape from if they do not like something. Women have also received the possibility to "wear" different identities and, as a result, to explore their own sexuality. The anonymity of cyberspace has decreased the level of shame. All these positive phenomena, in the end, can be summarized as the promotion of the female sexual autonomy. However, this benefit for the moment at least comes at a very high cost, because cybersex systematically reproduces many other negative phenomena that undermine women's sexual (and also non-sexual) autonomy such as rape, objectification, (coerced) prostitution. In other words, this benefit does not spill into the offline world: it doesn't become also a benefit for all women in their offline lives, only for some individual women in their online lives. Whereas the online costs are also costs at the offline level - they affect women's real lives. Therefore, there is a clear "vicious" loop: everything bad that we have offline (cyberrape, sexual objectification, prostitution) goes to the online life and from that, it comes back to our offline world (bad offline => bad online => bad offline again). But we do not have a "virtuous" loop: good online (less shame, more choice in partners, safer environment, etc.) gets stuck on this online level without spreading into the offline world.

For defending my argument, my thesis will have the following structure: firstly, I will define what is cybersex and how it changes our understanding of sexuality. Secondly, I will research all positive effects that cybersex brings to women and I will try to defend that in the end all of them works for the promotion of women's sexual autonomy. Thirdly, I will consider all negative phenomena that cybersex may have on women and I will argue that they have much higher cost than the positive effect of cybersex. Fourthly, I will consider two other views on cybersex and show how my position is different from them.

## Chapter 1. The philosophy of cybersex

In this chapter, I will give the definition of cybersex and discuss different ways in which people can have sex through technologies. Then I will analyze how cybersex fits the already existing definitions of sex and in what ways it challenges them.

I decided to start from the definition of cybersex and only after that I will refer to the different definitions of sex because there is no agreement on how we should define sex (a separate research is needed for analyzing it). It is not a goal of my thesis to define sex but it is a goal to define cybersex. Therefore, I will examine all definitions of sex only for checking whether or not cybersex fits them or not and how they should be changed if we want to include cybersex as a genuine form of sex.

### 1.1 The definition of cybersex

During the last decade, technologies have dramatically affected all spheres of life including sexuality. Thus, a new type of sexual activity has appeared, which people have started calling cybersex, or virtual sex.

I will use both these terms as synonyms further in my work but I will give preference to the term "cybersex". Etymologically, the term "virtual" has a long history starting from Medieval Latin when the word "virtualis" meant "being something in essence or effect, though not actually or in fact" (Harper, 2001-2018). From this meaning, the term "virtual" came to the modern English when it has started to be defined as something that is "not physically existing but made to appear by software" (Harper, 2001-2018). In common sense, it still has associations with something unreal or potential. But because there are a lot of debates whether cybersex is sex, I decided not to use a term that has already the meaning of something non-existing. I prefer to use the word "cybersex" because the term "cyber" does not have such a long history and before it started to serve separately as a prefix for cyber-anything, it was used in the word "cybernetics" which comes from the Greek word *kubernētēs* (κυβερνήτης), which means "to steer, govern, guide". Basically, nowadays the prefix "cyber" signifies that this phenomenon is related to the computer world, virtual reality and Internet culture (Harper, 2018).

In the last decade a lot of philosophers and researchers paid their attention to the new appeared phenomenon of cybersex and started to discuss how to define it (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Döring, 2000; Lunceford, 2012). They noticed that it is a very broad term that includes a variety of different erotic activities mediated by technologies from simple text-based sex that happens in chats to sex with robots. However, it can even include the viewing and enjoying of sexually explicit materials online, sending e-mails of nude

pictures to your lover, searching for sex partners using websites, etc. In very general terms, cybersex is defined as a sexual activity that happens through and/or with technologies.

Obviously, there have been attempts to narrow it. For example, Ben-Ze'ev proposes to define cybersex as "a social interaction between at least two people who are exchanging real-time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused" (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004: 5). I think that such definition narrows cybersex too much limiting it to the real-time messaging and bounding it to human partners. With the rise of the artificial intelligence, one partner could be a programmed bot or even an independent artificial intelligence.

That is why in my thesis I will use the definition given by Döring with some modifications: cybersex is "a computer-mediated interpersonal interaction in which the participants are sexually motivated, meaning they are seeking sexual arousal and satisfaction" (Döring, 2000: 864).

Firstly, I would like to underline the interpersonal nature of cybersex in this definition, so the number of partners should be two or more. All cases when a partner is just fantasizing about the other without interacting with them will be excluded from cybersex (e.g. when he watches porn or reads erotic literature online, etc.).

Secondly, I want to rephrase Döring and claim that at least one of the participants (and not necessarily all of them) should seek sexual arousal and satisfaction. This modification will allow investigating such hard cases as cyberrape and cybersex with a weak artificial intelligence which can not feel the true sexual arousal but just imitates it.

Thirdly, I will not consider sex with robots as one type of cybersex. By robots I mean an artificially designed and programmed machine that acts in the real offline world and, therefore, people can have sex with it in the physical environment. I underline that cybersex is "a computer-mediated interaction", so it always happens in the virtual dimension. To include sex with robots that happens in the physical world, therefore, would be contradictory to the definition of cybersex. But I do not deny the possibility that robots can have cybersex with people or even with each other in future if they connect to the virtual reality through a computer or any other technology. By doing this, they will have sex not in the offline world but in the online space which is a necessary characteristic of cybersex. Obviously, it is still a matter of future nowadays, but the development of bots, software programs that run in messengers and websites in order to help users with navigation or just to entertain them (*Siri, Alexa*, etc.) shows that soon they will pass the Turing test and we will not know whether we speak with a real person or with the artificial intelligence. That is why I do not want to narrow my definition only to human participants because you can interact in virtual space not only with humans but also with artificial

programs.

What are the ways to enter this virtual space and to have cybersex in it? According to Döring, there are three types of cybersex:

1) virtual-reality based cybersex in which partners will enter "into a three-dimensional, audiovisual, and tactile virtual reality via a full-body data suit and data helmet" (Döring, 2000: 864). This is not possible at the moment but may happen in future when we learn how to quickly send the big amount of data including smells and touches.

2) video-based cybersex in which users hear or/and see each other using video cams and microphones. However, it is not obligatory that both parties should see and hear each other but at least one of them should be seen. For example, in commercial video-based cybersex, clients usually give commands to the model through chat or microphone while the model does not see them (Hudges, 2002: 143-144). Models may even have devices that sexually stimulate them in real time on the basis of inputs (like virtual "coins") sent by the client.

3) text-based cybersex, that is "a computer-mediated text dialogue when the participants describe body characteristics to one another, verbalize sexual actions and reactions, and make believe that the virtual happenings are real" (Döring, 2000: 865). Text-based cybersex can be performed using any program or website that allows exchanging textual messages, such as *Telegram*, *WhatsApp*, *Facebook Messenger*, etc. Cybersex lovers could also use MUD's (Multi-User Dungeon, Dimension or Domain), that is a textual computer game having a particular theme that allows their users to act simultaneously. It converts first-person comments and actions into third-person reports on other users' screens. But the ways in which participants are having text-based cybersex vary: from flirting and "talking dirty" in chats to giving very detailed and long descriptions of having intercourse.

To these three ways I would like to add also a fourth one:

4) game-based cybersex in which participants run a program or enter a website where they can choose or create a character that they like and interact with other users online giving commands to their characters and then see on the screen how their characters have sex. It can be a specially created computer sex game which the primary goal was to allow their users to have sex, or it can be a hack-mode or additional mode to any other online computer game that was created for other goals and in which players can not only have cybersex, but also do any other actions.

According to data, text-based cybersex was the one to appear first due to the limitations of technologies that we had in past (it is easier to transmit textual symbols than

audio files and images) and it is still the most popular one (Daneback, Cooper, Mansson, 2005). However, the textual nature of it may be philosophically problematic in different aspects.

Thus, it is important to differentiate cybersex as the act of sex from just conversations about sex which may happen on the Internet. I believe that the first difference between these two actions lies in the purpose of such act. If both parties are talking about sex primarily in order to become sexually aroused and receive sexual satisfaction, then this act should be classified as cybersex. But if they talk about sex in order to enlighten each other, receive new information or even gossip, i.e. their main purpose is something else from seeking sexual arousal and satisfaction, then such act is just a conversation about sex and should not be classified as cybersex. The second difference lies in the involvement of the participants. When people are having cybersex, everything that is happening feels real to them like it is happening right now. They feel sexual arousal and satisfaction, they feel emotional engagement and bonding with a partner. They do not react in the same way when they just talk about sex. Cybersex may require using imagination much more than offline sex, but it does not make it less real.

Because of this feature, cybersex is similar to reading fiction, watching movies or consuming any other work of art. We definitely see the line between imaginative and real worlds, but when we are in the process of reading or watching, the events that happen there feel so real and intense that we even forget about this line. We all agree that imaginative events may hurt us or make us happy, the emotions that we feel because we are worrying and empathizing to our favorite fiction characters are definitely real and sometimes even more intense than we can feel towards real people and events. Something similar happens when both people are having cybersex, but the feelings that they have are even stronger and more intense because they have an active role in this action. When we read or watch, we passively consume information and cannot influence on what is happening in the book or movie. When we are having cybersex, the actions of our partner depend on our reactions and vice versa. "Our active role in cyberspace makes this environment more exciting and seductive than that of daydreams, erotic novels, or X-rated movies" (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004: 5).

This imaginative aspect of cybersex makes it also very problematic when we start to think about the arguments for and against the idea that cybersex is a form of real sex. Discussing and providing good arguments for defending one or another point of view is not in the focus of this thesis due to the lack of space, but I regard cybersex as real sex and I will just quickly outline why I think so.

Obviously, technologies have changed and broadened our sexuality, but they also

showed that our mind plays a necessary role in sexual arousal and satisfaction. That makes sexual desire so different from such other basic body desires as hunger or thirst for which the link with the body is more important. The mind plays a necessary central role in sexual desire and satisfaction, while the body is needed only in order to support the necessary mental processes and no specific part of the body, apart from the brain, is strictly necessary (e.g. disabled people whose body is paralyzed can satisfy their sexual desire in unusual ways and other parts of the bodies that are not intended for this purpose). By contrast, hunger and thirst require more strict connection with the body and its parts, and if your digestive system is not activated, then you probably have not satisfied your hunger, even if it "feels" that you have. So, in sex "there is not just a body with its secretions, but also a mind with volitions, attitudes, thoughts, emotions and imaginings" (Liao, Protasi, 2013: 104). Moreover, recent researchers in neuroscience and psychology proposed that orgasm is "a variable transient peak sensation of intense pleasure, creating *an altered state of consciousness* that resolves the sexually induced tension, usually with an induction of well-being and contentment" (Meston, Hull, Levin, Sipski, 2004: 173). Therefore, sex is not so tightly related to the body and usual manipulations with it as we get used to thinking (if sex were only about the body, then we should include night pollutions as sex, etc.). Sex is also a lot about our mental activity and, thus, I believe it can happen through technologies.

Our intuitions confirm that. Empirical researchers showed that people who see that their partners having cybersex tend to say that it was cheating and, thus, that the sexual act was real (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Daneback, Cooper, Mansson, 2005). However, there are still voices who deny that, but these voices are not specifically directed on cybersex. Some people do not classify mutual masturbation or oral sex as sex, but some of them do. The definition of sex itself is still ambiguous and cybersex just underlines this once more. It transformed our understanding of sex and showed that our mind has an important role in our sexuality. I will discuss in the second section how exactly cybersex challenges our understanding of what is sex.

## 1.2 The problems with the existing definitions of sex: applying the case of cybersex

In the contemporary philosophical literature on sex, there is no agreed definition of what is sex and what actions should be classified as such. There is also no agreement on what to call normal (ideal or sometimes even morally approved) and abnormal sex.

I will try to demonstrate that our understanding of what is sex needs further improvements and clarifications in order to have a definition of sex that will allow

cybersex to count (1) as real sex and (2) as not in any way abnormal when compared to offline sex (this does not mean that so-called abnormalities or "perversions" cannot happen online, for example, cyberpedophilia).

The classic definition of sex as reproduction is usually presented by Christian tradition: "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28) and it considers only actions which directly lead to reproduction and involves two partners with different gender as sex and as a normal sex. Obviously, according to this definition cybersex does not count as a type of sex and as a normal sex because there is no possibility (at least for now) to be pregnant through computer-mediated technologies. But this conception is in general unacceptable because most tend to agree that sex for us is not only about reproduction.

A second approach defines sex as the continuation of love and romantic relationships. For example, Russell argues that "sex intercourse apart from love has little value, and is to be regarded primarily as experimentation with a view to love" (Russell, 1959: 87, quoted by Goldman, 1977: 272-273). From this evaluative claim I consider here the variant: sex is normal only when it includes love. Interestingly, this definition can be applied to some cases of cybersex, because people can fall in love through the Internet. Despite the fact that there are also those who deny the possibility to love or to be friends with someone whom you have never seen, nowadays most of the people tend to agree that such things as cyberfriendship or cyberlove exist and share all the same features as offline feelings. The main difference is that there is no presence of the real body in online relationships, so such feature as the attractiveness of the partner's body is less important, while her abilities for self-presentation, as well as common interests, seeking the same type of relationships, are more crucial. Cyberspace helps people to get know each other closer because they feel less shame as well as provides greater abilities to find the best suitable partner. "While in offline romantic circumstances you get to know someone from the outside in, in online circumstances the direction is from the inside out" (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004: 197). Cyberlove may even provide greater intimacy and emotional engagement because people tend to spend more time together talking and getting to know each other, they are more concentrating on common interests and the personality of the partner.

But the general criticism of such definition of sex is that people can also have sex without love and emotional engagement with the partner. Offline and online they can seek only sex for its own sake without any romantic relationships. They can also love someone but have sex with others and all of this is usually regarded as "normal" sex. Thus, this definition does not cover a lot of cases of sex and normal sex both in and outside

cyberspace.

Goldman defines sexual desire as "a desire for contact with another person's body and for the pleasure which such contact produces; sexual activity is activity which tends to fulfill such desire of the agent" (Goldman, 1977: 268). Also this definition seems problematic for describing cybersex on both levels (as sex and as a normal sex) because in cybersex there need be no desire for contact with the other person's body: for example, A can like having cybersex with B, but does not want to have sex offline with B because A does not like how B looks like or even because B's offline gender is different from online gender, etc. However, Goldman's definition can be modified: sexual desire may include a desire for contact with a partner's imaginary body and not necessarily with their actual body<sup>1</sup>.

It is also interesting that Goldman defines sexual activity as the fulfillment of a desire for contact with other person's body and this raises epistemological questions about sex: how do we know that we have sex and fulfill our sexual desires? If A had cybersex with B and feels that her desire for contact with other persons' body was fulfilled even in this non-usual cyberway then why cannot A call cybersex as sex? I agree that in the ordinary case we know it because we feel the pleasure and we know that contact with the other's body was the source of this pleasure. In the cyber case, it is basically the same, except that the source of pleasure was not the contact but our imagination. But Goldman has problems with considering masturbation a sexual activity because the fulfillment of sexual desire, in this case, does not depend on contact with another person but only on our imaginations. Perhaps, the modification suggested above could help with this problem too. If also desire for contact with an imaginary body counts as sexual, then sexual desire can also be fulfilled through imaginary contact, and therefore cybersex would count as real sexual activity on Goldman's modified account. Anyway, more work should be done on it and it is clear that we cannot accept Goldman's definition in its most straightforward interpretation.

Nagel proposes a more sophisticated definition of sex (or more precisely normal sex) that seems to include cybersex because it is focused on the mutual recognition of partner's desire and does not require the presence or even the imagination of another person's body. "Sex has a related structure: it involves a desire that one's partner be aroused by the recognition of one's desire that he or she be aroused" (Nagel, 1969: 12). So,

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<sup>1</sup> I think that such definition of cybersex requires further clarifications because I showed that the link with the body is not so important for sex while the link with the mind is necessary. Therefore, at least for now this definition is contrasted with my argument. However, I believe that more attentive research on what is a body, the imaginary body and how it is connected with the mind is needed and it may bring some productive philosophical insights on this topic.

he described a multi-layered picture in which A desires B because A senses that B also desires A, while B desires A because B notices that A desires B, etc. He even uses the metaphor of a complex set of mirrors which also can be now perfectly adapted to the exchange of messages between two computers (Magnus, 2004).

It is important to underline that Nagel uses this definition to draw the line between normal sex and perverted sex. The last one does not mean for him that it is immoral sex, Nagel argues that the perversion is simply a less than ideal sexual interaction and that makes his view different from moralistic accounts of perversion.

But the problem with his definition starts when we try to imagine the cases in which one of the participants is the programmed bot. Nowadays artificial intelligence has become more clever and more bots that can talk as humans have appeared (*Siri, Alexa, etc.*). It is not hard to imagine that in near future we will not know with whom we speak online in some cases: with a real person or a bot and whether it would matter so much. But such bot will be still a weak version of artificial intelligence, meaning that it will simulate having an intelligence, while true it does not have it. Therefore, it will not have desires and cannot be truly sexually aroused. In this case, would Nagel consider such sexual act as a perverted one and could we intuitively agree with that? If a bot even does not have a possibility to truly feel sexual arousal, a person does not know that and thinks that she is having sex with a human, would it be fair to say that it is perverted sex? There is no clear answer. However, it is for sure that this case will be different from a case of having sex with a sex doll which is completely passive because the bot will behave completely as a human and there is no body and any other characteristics to test whether it is a human or not. A person will know nothing, moreover, the bot will pretend that it has a mutual sexual desire, so will the notion of being truly sexually aroused matter? Cybersex challenges Nagel's definition on this line of argument.

Solomon defines sex as a communication that expresses interpersonal attitudes: "sexual activity consists in speaking what we might call "body language". It has its own grammar defined by the body" (Solomon, 1975: 270). The perverted sex for Solomon is one that has problems with structure or meaning of the messages and partners do not understand each other. Therefore, a mutual understanding is highly important for calling sex as a normal one. But let's imagine that A is having sex with a bot B and B does not truly understand everything that is happening because B is a weak artificial intelligence that just combines words as it was programmed (that was shown by Searle in his Chinese room thought experiment (Searle, 1999)). According to Solomon's definition, A and B are engaging in perverted sex or they even do not have sex at all because there is no exchange

of information and B does not truly understand A. But does it seem intuitively true for us?

Cybersex also challenges this definition in other ways: why some meaning is better to transmit through the body instead of the sentences of English or any other natural language? And why is it specifically important for sex to transmit these messages through touch and not just body images as you can do in some types of cybersex? According to Solomon, bodily gestures lose something very important when they are translated into sentences and this is true. But it is easy to imagine the future when we will have virtual reality in which all senses will be transmitted even better than you can do in real life meaning that all our abilities to sense will be improved, you will feel through special virtual-reality technologies the smallest touches or movements of your partner's body that normally you cannot. If we apply Solomon arguments here, then it will mean that real life sex will become a perversion because it will lose some content and transmit information worse than the virtual-reality technologies. But does this sound satisfying for us?

All these questions should be answered in future and cybersex just showed the weak sides of already existing definitions of what is sex and what we call normal and abnormal sex. At least for now, it seems that Nagel's definition is the most suitable for cybersex because a lot of cybersex counts as real and as normal on it, even if some cases (like cybersex with bots and programs) do not.

Undoubtedly, cybersex had changed our understanding of human sexuality and the argument that it does not fit our definitions of sex should not be considered as an argument for regarding cybersex as unreal sex or as abnormal form of sex. Rather this critique should be considered as new inspiring ways in which we should clarify our understanding of sex.

## Chapter 2. The positive feature of cybersex

Human sexuality is a very broad area of life that obviously is interrelated with other spheres such as society, culture, politics, arts, etc. It is also a very gender-centric topic, not only in the sense that the way in which man and woman have sex is biologically different but also in the way that our society defines man and woman, how it expects them to behave, what sexual practices to have, etc. That is why there is a difference between biological sex that defines males and females based on their biological characteristics such as chromosomes, sex organs, hormones and other physical features and social gender that differentiates women and men depending on social factors such as social role and position, allowed behavior, identity, etc. Feminists have done a lot of work on these topics and they are continuing to investigate this, as well as they try to change our social norms.

No doubt, contemporary feminism and feminist philosophy are very broad terms that could be a problem to define. Feminist philosophy can be defined as "both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms" (Haslanger, Tuana, O'Connor, 2012). However, the feminist views on one or another phenomenon can vary and sometimes feminists do not have an agreement on how to treat this phenomenon. In my thesis, I will look on cybersex through feminist lenses and describe this phenomenon from different perspectives.

Moreover, I chose a feminist perspective as my focus because, according to empirical data (Daneback, Cooper, Mansson, 2005), women are more engaging in cybersex than men, they do it more often and due to their relatively disadvantaged position in society, they can have more benefits from cybersex than men. They are also more influenced by all negatives effects that cybersex may have on them, that is why the benefits and limitations of cybersex will become more clear when we look at it through the feminist optics.

In this chapter, I will focus on the so-called "liberation" model and describe why some feminists think that cybersex is mostly a positive phenomenon. According to them, there are a variety of positive features that the virtual space in general and cybersex, in particular, bring to women: a provision of safe space for sex, a decreasing the role of shame and social pressure on women, the possibility to safely try different sexual practices and, thus, explore own sexuality, etc. But I think that all these positive features of cybersex can be summarized as one argument - the expansion of women's sexual autonomy. That is why I will first give the definition of sexual autonomy and then I will show how all these positive features contribute to it.

## 2.1 The definition of sexual autonomy in feminist philosophy

The discussion of autonomy in general and sexual autonomy, in particular, is one of the basic topics in feminist philosophy. Usually by autonomy philosophers understand self-governance and ability to act according to person's own choices, values, principles, etc. (Stoljar, 2013).

In philosophy, there is a long tradition in defining autonomy. One of the most famous definitions is Kant's definition, in which he defines autonomy as "the property the will has of being a law unto itself (independently of every property belonging to the objects of volition)" (Kant 1785: 108). Only an autonomous person can freely impose herself a universal law and act according to it. In simpler words, the autonomous person is not the one who does not accept any laws and acts spontaneously based on no principles and only indulging her desires, but the one who independently chooses her own moral rules and values and decides to act according to them. The notion of autonomy for Kant is also closely connected to the categorical imperative according to which the autonomous and rational agent must respect other human beings (more precisely, their "humanity") and treat them always as ends, and not only as means for her own purposes. Thus, the human dignity and respect of every human being are the central concepts of Kantian understanding of autonomy, and, obviously, they lead to some problematic cases when we apply it to sex.

Sexual autonomy is highly problematic for Kant because it seems that people who are having sex treat each other not as ends, but as means to satisfy their sexual desires, so they violate each other's autonomy and objectify each other. "The desire of a man for a woman is not directed to her as a human being; on the contrary, the woman's humanity is of no concern to him, and the only object of his desire is her sex" (Kant, 2002: 156). The only case when people can exercise their sexual autonomy is the marriage where they transfer their entire personality to the other so that each has a complete right to the other's whole person. Therefore, when a man has sex with his wife, he gives himself back because when he agreed to marry her he gives himself to her. The same happens with his wife. Surely, such solution seems unacceptable for the contemporary researchers and many feminist philosophers criticize the Kantian tradition of autonomy.

These feminists (Mackenzie, Stoljar, Jaggar, Code, etc.) argued that such position is abstract and does not fit the existing social norms in which agents live, so they denied the self-sufficiency as an ideal and a necessary condition of autonomy. Instead, they propose to regard psychological health and absence of external coercion as the main conditions of autonomy and call such position as a "minimalist" conception of autonomy. "A person's

choice should be considered autonomous as long as the person was a 'normal adult' with no serious cognitive or emotional impairments and was not subject to literal outright coercion by others" (Narayan 2002: 429).

But other feminists (Westlund, Oshana, Elster, Superson, etc.) argue that this "minimalist" conception of autonomy does not cover hard cases such as self-abnegation and adaptive preferences. In the first case women are psychologically healthy, but because of their culture or education, they feel that they should deny their own desires in order to make others happy: for example, a wife who buys new clothes that her husband likes, cooks only his favorite dishes, support his views, etc. and honestly believes that she autonomously decided to deny her own desires in order to please her husband, because it is the highest priority desire for her (Stoljar, 2013). The second case is even more frequent, because all over the world a lot of women adopt existing social norms and values even if these values are dangerous and harmful: e.g., women who have to lose or gain weight, to wear veil in countries where there is no law to do this but there are dangers and social non-acceptance, to straighten or curl their hair, to refine their cosmetic technique, to harden or soften their body, etc. because the society has the beauty standards and demand women to fit them, otherwise the society does not accept and blame them (Stoljar, 2013).

In both these cases women are mentally healthy and even may think that making their partners happy or doing all beauty procedures are their own choices, but it is questionable whether they truly choose to deny their own desires and fit social norms independently and autonomously or they were oppressed by existing patriarchal culture and just do not have other options. However, even if some feminists claim that such "minimalist" position has its theoretical advantages in questions of state paternalism, minimalism is not very popular within the feminist philosophers because it overlooks the potential impact of oppressive social and cultural norms on agents' motivations and these hard cases show specifically that these oppressive norms and social conditions can potentially undermine or erode agents' autonomy. That is why other different conceptions of autonomy have been created.

These conceptions can be called as relational theories of autonomy meaning that the agent's autonomy is based not only on the self-governance but also on the social relations, institutions and culture in which agents live and all these help to promote or undermine agents' autonomy (Stoljar, 2013). Therefore, not only the person's mental health play the crucial role in accepting or rejecting some social practice but also how society defines these practices, normalizes or stigmatizes them. According to these relational conceptions, these hard cases would be considered as such that demolish female autonomy because

society promotes practices that prevent women from autonomously forming desires.

Such understanding of autonomy also brings with itself a specific conception of sexual autonomy. There are attempts to define sexual autonomy as the simple ability to consent to have sex or reject to any partner at any time and to any sexual practice. But such understanding is too solipsist, as well as does not see any lack of autonomy in those cases when women agree to have sex just because the society requires them to do so, etc. Instead, I support Fischell and O'Connell's views on sexual autonomy: "As a human capability, and not simply human choice, sexual autonomy so conceived encourages us to examine not only first person present active (or passive) consent but also institutions, policies, and norms that foster or impede erotic creativity, co-participation, and flourishing" (Fischell, O'Connell, 2015: 524). Thus, feminists fight not only for the individual female freedom to independently decide with whom, when and how they want to have sex, but also to change the existing social practices in order to make them such as to promote trustful atmosphere in which anyone can explore and develop her own sexuality without shame and social pressure.

## 2.2 Two ways in which cybersex promotes female autonomy

I believe that all positive features that feminists who support the "liberation" model tend to attribute to cybersex can be generalized as the expansion of women's sexual autonomy. However, I believe that cybersex does this in two ways: by using methods that do not exclusively belong to it and by using its own specific features that can be found only in cybersex.

According to the first way, cybersex promotes sexual autonomy because it happens in a safe space, where the level of shame is decreased and there is less social pressure, it is impossible to be pregnant or to have sexual diseases. All these features can be found not only in cybersex but in other social practices: e.g. the real-life partners in loving relationships can reach an agreement to be honest and not to judge each other even if they share not socially accepted desires and sexual fantasies, etc. Such trustful atmosphere creates a safe space in which women can exercise their sexual autonomy and understand their real desires, as well as refuse to practice something that they do not like.

In the same manner, some authors (Benedikt, 1995; Levine, 1998; Semans and Winks (1999)) claim that cyberspace provides women with such safe space where there is a possibility to share their sexual fantasies with others in a supportive atmosphere. However, this atmosphere is created by other tools than in the real world such as anonymity and higher control that users have in virtual space: it is easy to find partners

with the same sexual desires by searching on different websites and using different programs; to feel less shame because it is possible to stay completely anonymous; to escape if you do not like something just by clicking the [x] icon in the browser or closing the program. Obviously, all these features of virtual space help women to explore their own sexuality and autonomously decide with whom, when and how they would like to have cybersex while in real life there is more social pressure on female sexuality and how they can use it. In the virtual space women have a possibility to pretend to be whoever they want, they even have a possibility try to be on the other side of power relationships.

I believe that this possibility to "wear" different identities in cybersex is the second way in which cybersex promotes women's autonomy and this second way exclusively belongs to the virtual space. Obviously, someone may argue that there are sexual role plays in offline sex but the person will still be the same age and gender, even if she tries to pretend to be someone else, others will always know the truth, it will be still only a sexual game. Thus, the dependence of offline sex on the body always limits the abilities to explore sexuality while in cybersex a person can not only pretend to be someone else, but also others will perceive her in the way in which she presents herself knowing nothing about offline her (Daniels, 2009; Kibby, Costello, 2001). It will not be just a role play game, others will treat her in the way as she presents herself. This cannot be recreated in real life and that is why I think it can be classified as the second way in which cybersex promotes women's autonomy.

Thus, due to the "identity tourism" women can pretend to be another person with a different life, gender, age, etc. or even not a human at all, to try some sexual practices that they would never like or cannot do in real life but they are curious about them for some reasons. They can even "wear" a male personality and try sexual practice from the other side of power relationships. Clearly, nowadays all these benefits of "identity tourism" are easy to achieve in a text-based cybersex where a person may write anything she likes by using words, while in video-based cybersex it is much harder to fake the identity. However, with the development of artificial neural networks and virtual reality technologies, it is becoming easier to do this and I think it is just a matter of time.

However, pro-cybersex feminists are not blind to the possibility that this "identity tourism" may bring also negative effects because it is lying and manipulation if partners pretend to be someone else and never tell their true gender, age, appearance, etc. Cybersex partners also can use it for getting some benefits from the person by manipulating her to believe that their fake identity is real. Feminists who support cybersex do not deny this, but I think the only answer that can be given for such worries is that we should simply accept

these risks of the virtual society. It has been a problem twenty or even ten years ago when fewer people knew what to expect from the virtual space, so they were easy to deceive. But nowadays people as more advanced users of the virtual world know about these risks and when they are going to have cybersex they accept these rules. I also think that the possibility to try completely another role and identity in sex outweighs all risks related to the possible lying and manipulation because it helps women to see the variety of ways in which a person can exercise her sexuality and, as a result, her choice will be more deliberated and autonomous.

To sum up, it may seem from the first sight that cybersex has a lot of benefits for women as feminists of the "liberation" model insist: it is easier to find a suitable partner for any sexual practices that women like, to escape rape and unwanted practices just by closing websites and programs or banning people, to try different identities and sexual practices which women cannot try in real life for some reasons. But I think that all these benefits of cybersex should be summarized as the expansion of women's sexual autonomy because all of them, in the end, are working for this goal. Cybersex gives women more freedom from consent-impairing influence and social practices of patriarchal culture and more tools for discovering their true sexual desires in a trustful atmosphere that contributes positively to their sexual autonomy.

### Chapter 3. The negative effects of cybersex

I agree that the expansion of women's sexual autonomy is a positive feature that cybersex bring to some women, but I think that the feminists who support the "liberation" model overestimate its positive effects and underestimate all risks that it brings.

In this chapter, I will show that cyberspace is not a safe space which develops trustful atmosphere, as was stated by pro-cybersex feminists. I will show how most of the negative phenomena that, as it may seem, cannot exist in the virtual world such as rape, objectification, coerced prostitution actually do not disappear and continue to function online undermining women's sexual autonomy and also affecting back the offline world. That is why I believe that a so-called "vicious" loop (bad offline comes to online and from there comes back to offline) exists, while there is no "virtuous" loop (all positive phenomena that cybersex brings to women remain in cyberworld only). By doing this I am supporting the so-called "victimization" model of cybersex (the term proposed by Döring, 2000).

#### 3.1 Rape in cyberspace

One of the main arguments of those feminists who think that cybersex promotes women's autonomy is that it happens in a safe space where it is easier to escape rape by closing the window or block the user. There is also another view according to which only physical bodies can be raped and, therefore, it cannot happen in the virtual space where there is no physical body. Therefore, such negative phenomenon that can undermine women's sexual autonomy as rape does not exist in the virtual world.

However, our practice says the opposite and there have been people who consider themselves to be victims of online rape and the amount of them will be more with the development of our technologies. That is why I believe that the concept of rape should be revised because the appearance of cybersex has not only changed our understanding of what is sex but also our definition of rape. If people can have sex online, then they can also be raped online in principle. But for the clarification of terms, I propose to use the word "cyberrape" instead of "rape" in order to underline all specific features that online rape has.

It is also important to underline here that I analyze cyberrape as a philosopher and not as a legal practitioner, so I will not propose for now any legal definitions that may then be applied to the juridical practice as they are. But I will argue that cyberrape should be defined as the harm done by intentionally depriving someone of control over the expression and representation of their sexual personality in cyberspace without their consent.

According to one empirical research, so defined cyberrape has appeared from the beginning of the existence of cyberspace even with such a lot of possibilities to escape and it can emotionally hurt the same way for its victims as offline rape (Lynn, 2007). One of the first researchers who started to talk about this was Dibbel who explored how cyberrape can happen in a multi-player computer game (MUD) called LambdaMOO. Thus, he illustrated a real situation when the user *Mr. Bungle* used a subprogram that described the sexual actions between other users' characters without their permission. Users lost control of their own characters and were forced to see that their characters have sexual contacts that they do not want them to have without the possibility to cancel this or escape (Dibbel, 1993). Because of high emotional connections to these characters and also believing that their characters are the online representation of them, users felt raped when this happened.

Obviously, this case attracted attention to such questions as: is the physical body violation is a necessary condition for rape? Is cyberrape as bad as the physical rape? And what is the difference then between rape and cyberrape?

I will try to answer these questions now. In feminist philosophy there is no agreement even on the definition of rape itself, but all of them agree that this phenomenon is too often ignored, mischaracterized, and legitimized. Feminist philosophers have done a lot of work in order to expand the definition of rape by showing that certain kinds of sexual encounters that have previously not been socially or legally recognized as rape should be recognized as such: rape is not only vaginal penetration by penis; victims can also be raped orally, anally, with fingers and/or objects; victims should not necessarily show the physical resistance; rape can happen in marriage and between two loving people, etc. (Whisnant, 2017). Feminists also showed that rape is not only about sex, but also about the power. The act of rape is an extreme form of violence, when the perpetrator affirms his domination and subjugates a victim in order to underline her weak position in a specific sexual way. Therefore, rape is also a powerful social and political instrument that supports patriarchal culture (Cooper-White, 2014).

In general terms, rape can be defined as a non-consensual loss of sexual autonomy that perpetrator intentionally causes to his victim by actually violating her sexually. By the loss of sexual autonomy I mean the loss of the ability to decide with whom, when and how a person wants to have sex. As stated above, because a person can have cybersex, having the body and abilities to use it in ways that person likes in order to receive sexual satisfaction is not a necessary condition for sexual autonomy, so someone may take your sexual autonomy even without taking the control over your physical body. Therefore, to state that the cyberspace is a safe (in the sense of "rape-free") space just because there are

no physical bodies looks ungrounded.

However, it may still seem that the virtual space is a safe space because you have a total control over your own character or profile, so your sexual autonomy cannot be undermined. But the use of different programs, hacking techniques, etc., that help to take control over other people's cyberpersonalities makes it not so safe anymore. Women are raped in cyberspace by losing the control of their virtual representations by someone else who intentionally forces them to do something sexual that they do not consent to.

Moreover, supposedly positive features of cyberspace as the higher anonymity and the ability easier to escape can even play a negative role for women because cyberrapists can use it for their good and, as a result, cyberrape is almost never punished. The common feeling that cyberrape is not real or at least less morally bad also increases the chances to be cyberraped. There is still a stigma in our society about cyberrape, almost nobody talks about it and victims of cyberrape usually remain silent because they are scared to talk and ashamed of victim-blaming (Whisnant, 2017). A lot of people will dismiss victim's experience and tell that it was not a real rape because nobody violates their bodies, thus, they should not complain.

There is no empirical data how many users were raped in the virtual space but it does not make this phenomenon less real. However, the risks to be cyberraped could be even higher because it is easier to find a person online simply by writing her name in *Google* or *Facebook* search than to find this person in real life on the streets. And the harms of cyberrape can be even more dangerous for victims because you will never receive thousands of angry comments in real life while you can easily have them on your personal page. So the emotional pain that victims could have should not be underestimated.

But what are the ways of cyberrape and how it differentiates from other negative virtual phenomena such as hate speech or stealing your personal information?

Undoubtedly, cyberrape is a part of the phenomenon of cybersex. So let's use its definition in order to understand what is cyberrape. As I underlined in chapter 1, not all participants who are having cybersex should be necessarily sexually motivated. If only one of the participants is seeking sexual arousal and satisfaction, while the other is not and does not give consent to have cybersex, then this case could be classified as a case of cyberrape. Moreover, the cyberrapist should intentionally want to take away the ability of his partner to decide whether she wants cybersex or not and in what way, so he demolishes her sexual autonomy.

Obviously, this definition needs further clarifications on practice, so here I will illustrate different ways in which someone can be cyberraped, as well as I will discuss why

it is so morally wrong. I do not consider here the virtual reality technologies because it is a matter of future, so it makes no sense to discuss it now unless we have a particular technology and know the ways how it works.

Firstly, cyberrape can happen in a game-based cybersex, as it was stated above in Dibbel's case. It happens when the user loses the ability to control her character and, more precisely, the sexual actions that this character can perform intentionally because of another user and without giving her consent to. It does not matter whether cyberrapist uses some special hacking techniques for doing this like in Dibbel's case or the game is designed in the way that allows users to rape each other without their permission for that. However, in the last case someone may argue that cyberrape should be compared with cybermurder or cyberfight. Thus, we allow people to beat and even kill each other in online space, so why should not we allow them to rape each other? I think that the main difference between cyberrape and cybermurder lies in social and psychological effects on a person. When a person is killed online, she just starts her character from the beginning or creates a new one. Obviously, she can have some negative feelings about that, but online killing never has a lot of social tensions between players. "A lot of the feelings that are attached to rape come through strongly even during a "virtual" rape, because they're a lot more mental and social, whereas there are almost never the same effects attached to a death or injury" (Shataina, 2005). Most of the players agree that they can always choose to play again or to create completely new characters when they were killed, but when they are raped, they do not have such choice (Shataina, 2005). They feel humiliated and embarrassed, also they can just leave their character and create a new one, but interestingly, "I'd probably rather be raped than die ... but in a game? I'd far rather have my character die than be raped" (Shataina, 2005). I believe that more research in psychology and philosophy should be done in order to understand why this is happening but it seems plausible that in this type of game-based cyberrape the user, the offline person, can be harmed in a way that it is less plausible for cybermurders.

Secondly, video-based cybersex also is not so safe from cyberrape. I think that a person can be cyberraped in this way when someone posts publicly without other person's consent sexual pictures or videos that are an expression or representation of one's sexual personality and autonomy (so called *revenge porn*). When this happens, person loses the control over her sexuality, as well as the cyberrapist receives from this action some kind of sexual satisfaction. He also shows his power position and humiliates his victim.

Moreover, with the rise of artificial reality technologies there can be also an interesting case when someone uses photos of a person in order to photoshop them to some

other's naked bodies and then post this newly created fake pictures or videos online without her consent. I believe that it will be also another example of cyberrape even if a cyberrapist uses fake images of a person, but he intentionally humiliates other person and try to control her sexual representation.

I do not count as video-based cyberrape an aggressive bombarding of different advertisement images that may suddenly appear on the screen if a person is browsing in the web. Such advertisement is posted there by the owners of the website mostly with a desire to have money benefits and not to be sexually aroused which is a necessary condition for the recognizing the act as cybersex. Also, they do this without the desire to affirm their power and humiliate exactly this user who will see these explicit materials<sup>2</sup>.

Thirdly, I believe that cyberrape can be performed also through words. In the same manner, as people can have textual cybersex, they can be textually cyberraped, when someone starts to describe sexual actions that another person does not want to read. Such cases were described and analyzed by different researchers (Michaels, 1997; Shrage, Stewart, 2015). All of them agree that textual cyberrape can be as serious as hate speech or bullying.

Cyberrape is directed exactly on deprivation of person's sexual autonomy and the descriptions of sexual violence feel like actions for victims. These words are actions. Thus, according to Austin's theory, our language has a performative function, so we can act with using only words, e.g. we can marry with saying "yes" at a wedding ceremony, the judge can punish someone with the words used in his verdict, we can make a promise with saying "I will...", and so on. He calls all these examples as direct speech acts because it is clear that by saying these phrases, the world is changed, some action has happened. I think that cybersex in general and cyberrape, in particular, should be considered as such direct speech act because when people are having sex through words and believe in what is happening as real, they act with each other and they do change the world. After the sexual act has happened, their relationships are changed, they have become closer, etc. However, it is not within the scope of this thesis to research how exactly this is happening, as well as better to research how philosophy of language can examine textual cybersexual acts but here I want to underline that the main difference between hate speech and cyberrape lies in

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2 Anyway, the further more detailed research is needed in order to describe and analyze all other forms of cyberrape that could be done in visual form. Now it is not clear whether the case when a person receives nude or explicit adult visual materials that she does not expect and want to see by another user who is doing this intentionally in order to humiliate her or/and has sexual satisfaction for that. It seems that this case is a sexual harassment and not a cyberrape because in the real life when someone is showing his naked body to another person when she does not give her consent to such action will be considered only as a harassment. But as I underlined, feminists have expanded our understanding of rape, e.g. rape in marriage relationships do consider now as rape while earlier it is not. So maybe we should also revise our views on this case or at least do more attentive research.

this performative feature, and as a result higher emotional engagement. This happens because, as Shrage and Stewart argue, cyberrape violates who a person is and not the things that belong to her or she produces such as books, articles, etc. "It is not just a crime against the mind but also a crime against the self. Maintaining control over our bodies and their sexual expressions, including our avatar bodies, is crucial for maintaining a healthy self-image and self-respect. This is different from maintaining control over the products of our bodies and minds such as books" (Shrage, Stewart, 2015)<sup>3</sup>. Cyberrape harms the whole personality of the victim and not just the products that she creates in the online world. The consequences of cyberrape should not be underestimated just because it happens in a written form.

To conclude, cyberrape exists and should not be underestimated because it takes away person's sexual autonomy and in doing so, it harms her. Because cyberrape is already happening in cyberspace, the virtual world should not be considered as the safe space that develops trustful atmosphere and favorable conditions for women to exercise their sexual autonomy.

Another negative phenomenon that is pointed out by feminists is that cyberrape normalizes the violence against women in the offline world, it makes rape as something usual and creates the fake picture that women want to be raped. When people play the rape scenarios by the mutual consent in the virtual world or even approve cyberrape because it does not do real harm, as well as when they watch pornography with rape scenes, they promote violent scenarios, they promote a sexist image of women that want to be raped (MacKinnon, 1993). So even if someone will not support all stated above arguments against cyberrape such as it damages the personality and it involves higher emotional engagement because of its social nature, cyberrape undermines female sexual autonomy because it promotes sexist and patriarchal scenarios that influence the position of women in the offline and online world. This is one illustration of the vicious loop thesis: offline rape and rape culture influence online rape, and in turn online rape promotes offline rape and rape culture.

### 3.2. Sexual objectification in cyberspace

Sexual objectification is another serious phenomenon that undermines female sexual autonomy and it also can happen in virtual space making it not so safe anymore.

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<sup>3</sup> However, this definition by Shrage and Stewart can be used for the defending other definition of cyberrape as the intentional violation of other persons' extended (or imagine) bodies. However, I will not consider this view here because I was arguing for another definition of cybersex and for the view that body is not a necessary condition to have sex. But the further research is definitely should be done and such understanding of cyberrape could be productive.

However, there are views that sexual objectification may happen only in offline world because in virtual reality there are no bodies, so nobody judges based on the way a person looks. Moreover, sometimes we even do not see any photos of the person, because she hides behind the avatars and fake images. She can also pretend to be a male and vice versa, hide the age, her true body characteristics, etc. So, it seems that she can be saved from sexual objectification. But I believe that sexual objectification continues to function in the virtual world and hurts women not as a group defined by biological sex but by social gender. This leads to the revisiting of the definition of sexual objectification that should not be concentrated so much on the body but on the appearance of it to the objectifier.

The concept of sexual objectification also has a long history starting from Kant. For him, in simple words, to objectify someone means to treat a person as an object, or specifically, to lower the status of a person to the status of an object. This makes sex highly morally problematic for Kant, since he argued that to desire someone sexually is already to treat them as a tool for our own sexual satisfaction (as discussed in chapter 2, only within marriage this desire is legitimate for Kant).

Feminists not only adopted and changed the notion of autonomy given by Kant but also they worked a lot on objectification expanding and clarifying it. Thus, Nussbaum distinguishes seven different ways in which we can treat another person as an object:

- 1) we can treat a person as a tool for our purposes (instrumentality);
- 2) we can treat a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination (denial of autonomy);
- 3) we can treat a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity (inertness);
- 4) we can treat a person as interchangeable with other objects (fungibility);
- 5) we can treat a person as lacking in boundary-integrity (violability);
- 6) we can treat a person as something that is owned by another and, therefore, can be bought or sold (ownership);
- 7) we can treat a person as something whose experiences and feelings need not be taken into account (denial of subjectivity) (Nussbaum, 1995: 257).

She has accurately considered many ways of objectification in order also to show why objectification can be a good thing too, but because I am interested specifically in sexual objectification in which someone sees the other only in a sexual way as a possible and desirable partner for sex, I will not analyze her view here. However, I agree that objectification may happen in any other spheres and it is a broader term that includes a lot of different practices.

To clarify the concept of sexual objectification, Langton has added three more ways of objectification to Nussbaum's list:

1) we can treat a person as identified with her body, or body parts (reduction to the body);

2) we can treat a person primarily in terms of how she looks, or how she appears to the senses (reduction to appearance);

3) we can treat a person as if she is silent, lacking the capacity to speak (silencing) (Langton, 2009).

These ways seem more closely connected with the sexual objectification. But all of them still underline the role of the body that plays a crucial role in this process: if someone reduces a person to the appearance, he treats a person in terms of how she looks for him, how her body appears to him. "It has been pointed out by some feminist thinkers that women in our society are more identified and associated with their bodies than are men, and, to a greater extent than men, they are valued for how they look" (Papadaki, 2015). However, I believe that sexual objectification may also occur even if there is no body or any other visual appearance of it in online space and that also this hurts mostly women. It may happen if a person sees only a female nickname and, thus, treats her as sexual object imagining how she looks like and how she behaves, i. e. judging her only on the basis that she has a female social gender.

I think that this big attention to the notion of the body in sexual objectification comes from our understanding of sex. We tend to think that body plays an important role in sex, so sexual objectification is about bodies and how we can use them. However, as it was argued earlier, cybersex brings out that the mind with all emotions, feelings, and thoughts plays even a bigger role in human sexuality. So, I argue that what is more important in sexual objectification is not the physical body but what are the social stereotypes over this body, what people usually think about how the sexual body should look like and behave. For example, the girl in a short dress is not perceived as sexual for someone in one society, but she can be still objectified by another person just because he wants to perceive her in such way and her body and its appearance fits his stereotypes about the sexual body.

This notion of the appearance of the body in the eyes of the objectifier can become even more clear when we consider how sexual objectification may be happening in the virtual reality where there is no physical body. Objectification may happen even if the objectifier has never seen the real body, but he can still create his own image of the objectified person in his mind and, thus, objectify her even if he does not see her and will

never see her. He just interprets her behavior accordingly to his own desires and does not take into account her true wishes and motives. So he conforms the world to his mind and never checks whether his mind conforms to the world. "Objectification, then, is a process in which the social world comes to be shaped by desire and belief. An objectifier thinks that her or his beliefs have come to fit the world, where in fact the world has come to fit her or his beliefs" (Papadaki, 2015). Langton has applied this to sexual objectification and claims that when it is happening, men see women as sexual objects and because they have a power position in society, they force women to become in this way taking away their sexual autonomy (Langton 2000: 138-142).

Sometimes only a female nickname is enough to be sexually objectified online because society promotes treating women as sexual objects in the offline world. "Women often experience online situations in which they are degraded to sex objects by men interested in cybersex. Not only is their personal dignity attacked, but they also learn that the Net is a male world in which they do not have a say. Female Net users are regarded as "cyberbabes", with whom one can have cybersex" (Döring, 2000: 869). Therefore, despite the specific feature of cybersex and cyberlove according to which partners tend more to truly listen to each other and value each other personalities more than physical appearance, it still does not safe from sexual objectification. This is because the online world inevitably depends on social conditions and stereotypes that function in real world. If in the offline world women are mostly treated as sexual objects, then in the online world it will be even worse: de Vries argued that the sexual objectification has even increased online because people do not feel shame and behave freely (de Vries, 2014). It is easier for them to objectify someone online because of the anonymity that cyberspace provides and the feeling that it is not the real world, it does not exist, so it will be morally less bad.

Online sexual objectification shows that this phenomenon is focused more on social female gender and cultural position of women. It is also confirmed by an interesting phenomenon that men who pretend to be women in a virtual space receive more sexually explicit messages than in real life when everybody sees their biological sex and, thus, women are more often objectified (Döring, 2000: 869). This hard case shows that women as a social group is objectified even if there is no existing woman behind the screen. Obviously, man who is pretending to be a woman may have negative feelings because of that, but it is not his true physical appearance to be objectified (male appearance) but the way of how he presents himself online (like a woman), so this case underlines once more that sexual objectification depends a lot on our social stereotypes about the gender roles. Therefore, we tend to objectify another person not because of some objective reasons (e.g.,

all men always objectify women in a short dress), but it varies based on our own subjective preferences that are formed by our culture (e.g., if woman wears short dress, then she wants to have sex in Western culture. But if we break this stereotype, then nobody will objectify women in short dress).

Summing up, cyberspace does not solve the problem of sexual objectification because virtual partners can still objectify each other without seeing each other bodies but just imagining them and by applying all social stereotypes of genders that function in the offline world. Moreover, sexual objectification can happen even more frequently in cyberspace because people feel less shame and behave more freely.

### 3.3. Cyberprostitution

The feminist philosophy also has a wide debate whether prostitution is morally wrong and whether it oppresses women. However, it is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss all possible answers to this problem and argue for a particular position. I just clarify that I support the view according to which coerced prostitution promotes the relation to women as sexual object and sexual servants of men who can easily buy women across the society. That is why I think that all feminist views that argue for the legalization of prostitution on the basis that it will empower women who have already participated in it can be regarded as only temporary solutions of the problem, while it is highly important to change the social order in which women are treated as sexual objects that men can easily buy.

Interestingly, there are fewer voices in philosophical literature that doubt whether cyberprostitution is prostitution even if cyberprostitution does not require body and sexual encounter. It seems that economic relations between a client and a prostitute play a more important role in the definition of prostitution, that is why all ways in which women can sell their sexuality in cyberspace count as cyberprostitution. However, I would like to make the clear line between cyberprostitution when a woman has cybersex for money without any physical encounter and proposition of prostitutive services on different websites and apps in order to organize offline sex. I do not count the second case as cyberprostitution because there is no cybersex, it just shows how technologies have changed the ways in which clients and prostitute could find each other.

Because cyberprostitution, as cyberrape, is a part of the phenomenon of cybersex, in general terms, it can be defined as having cybersex for money, in which, however, only the client seeks for sexual arousal and satisfaction, while the prostitute gives her consent for cybersex and does this for economic benefits that cybersex may bring to her. As cyberrape,

cyberprostitution is not a mutual and equal relationship between cyberpartners: a client is in a position of power, while prostitute tries to satisfy all client's desires.

Cyberprostitution can take different forms: it can happen through chats and exchanging of textual messages, but nowadays the most common form of it is the webcam sex in which a girl performs sexual action behind the camera for the money and her clients are watching her and receive sexual satisfaction from this. Sometimes this type of prostitution can be regarded as a type of pornography, but I would like to underline that the difference lies in an active component of webcam prostitution: a client can directly influence on what is happening on the screen. Instead, pornography is a passive consuming of previously made pictures. Obviously, in future with the rise of different virtual technologies, there could appear new forms of cyberprostitution.

But the fact that prostitution developed in cyberspace is a sign that it is not a safe space where women can expand their sexual autonomy because they are still treated as sexual objects. "Any technology which promises to lead to an expansion of the sex industry cannot be safe for women" (Butterworth, 1996: 319, quoted by Döring, 2000: 870).

While someone may argue that cyberprostitution brings fewer damages to women because they do not truly have sex with their clients, they are in their homes and can easily escape if they do not like something, I want to remind all the arguments for the realness of cybersex, cyberrape and how they affect women that were discussed earlier. The fact that prostitution occurs in cyberspace does not make this phenomenon less real and does not decrease all negative effects that it can have on the social position of women.

To sum up, cybersex transfers all negative phenomena such as rape, sexual objectification, and prostitution that we have in the real life to the virtual community. Therefore, if we really want to fight for the women's rights we should change our community in general and not just rely on virtuality which in this case just serve as a mirror of our real-life society.

## Chapter 4. Other feminist views on cybersex

As it was said, most of the feminist views of cybersex tend to look at this phenomenon from the liberation model or from the model of victimization. But there are two other specific views by Döring and Collins that I will discuss in this chapter and draw the line between my position and theirs.

### 4.1 The empowerment approach by Döring

In her article (2009), Döring examines feminist positive and negative views on cybersex and states that both of them look on cybersex only from one particular position that lacks the opposite view. Thus, she proposes her own view on cybersex which combines both sides. She looks on cybersex from the middle what she calls empowerment approach that takes into account all negative (such as the possibility of rape, objectification, and cyberprostitution in the virtual world) and positive (such as cybersex means more, safer, better, and different sex) effects. "The empowerment approach invites you to inform yourself about the conditions, characteristics, and consequences of women's (and men's) sexually related cyberactivities, and most importantly, to learn from positive experiences" (Döring, 2000: 880).

However, someone may argue that my position is the same because I also argue for the positive (the expansion of women sexual autonomy) and negative (the existence of cyberrape, sexual objectification, and cyberprostitution) effects. But the main difference between our views lies in the dependence of positive feature on other conditions that exist in the real world is that I believe the benefits tend to be limited to the online world. Thus, Döring claims that both positive and negative effects of cybersex must be treated equally. However, I recognize the positive feature of cybersex but I claim that negative features outweigh the positive one. While the positive feature of cybersex occurs only in online world, as well as bring some positive effects only to some individual women, the negative phenomena of cybersex not only function in cyberworld, but also influence the offline world. They also affect women as a social group and, thus, the consequences are more serious in this sense, it cannot be said that cybersex empowers women. Therefore, I am on the "victimization" side with the slight modification that I allow one positive feature.

### 4.2. The relative indifference view by Collins

There is also another view by Collins who proposes to not pay a lot of attention to the virtual world and instead focus on the changing the offline situation. However, she does not say this explicitly but it follows from her argument when she researchers what is

online cheating and how it affects couple relationships, i.e. whether cheating online is as bad as cheating offline. She comes to the conclusion that emotional infidelity should not be considered as so important as "practical infidelity" which emphasizes interactions between individuals conducted in physical space. Thus, she decreases the role of virtual relationships comparing to the real-life relationships and states that feminists should be more focused on the problems of body-based relations (Collins, 1999).

For developing her argument, Collins examines two cases in which A is engaged in virtual relationships with C and B notices this. In the first case, A is having sex with C, and Collins presented a bunch of arguments for and against considering cybersex as sex and its significance for A and B's body-based relationships. She shows how these arguments for considering sex as significant part of any relationships, and, therefore, considering cybersex as adultery, contradict the feminists' philosophy.

Secondly, she investigates the case in which A is in love with C and B notices this. She also shows how the concept of love and even mental monogamy is the product of patriarchal society. What is more important for her is embodied commitment and participating in everyday routine task together, such as cleaning, cooking meals, taking care of each other, etc. She shows that the women's domestic work was underestimated in past and nowadays the situation is not also ideal, so what is more important for contemporary feminists is to insist on "practical fidelity", or for helping women with homework and equal sharing of such responsibilities. So, emotional adultery should not be focused on so much, as well as cyberrelationships should be regarded as of secondary importance for body-based relationships.

However, it might seem that I also take this position because I claim that for improving the existing situation for women we should go to the real life and firstly decrease and remove all negative phenomena there such as rape, objectification, prostitution, etc. But I would like to clarify that I do not decrease the role of virtual relationships and cybersex that may have a huge influence on women. I believe that cybersex may hurt and also help for promoting feminist values in the same manner as other practices in real life. Cybersex also has some specific features that make it a unique tool for promoting feminist values such as the "identity tourism" which help to explore human sexuality and try practices that you cannot try in the real world. However, I believe that cybersex will help in the expansion of female autonomy even more if we get rid of negative phenomena such as rape, sexual objectification, and prostitution that are transferred to cyberspace. I think that feminists should pay attention to all these new virtual practices that arise these days and critically consider them because they can cause both

positive and negative effects for women.

## Conclusion

In my thesis, I argued that cybersex does bring real and actual benefits to some individual women in terms of expansion of their sexual autonomy, but these benefits (for the moment at least) come at a very high cost, because cybersex systematically reproduces many phenomena that undermine women's sexual (and non-sexual) autonomy like rape, objectification, coerced prostitution. And if these are the costs, then the benefits are not significant enough, even if they are real for some women. In other words, the benefits are real, but accidental, not reliable, not systematic enough and concern only women as individuals, while the costs are real and non-accidental, systematic and concern women as a group because they are supported by offline oppression. Moreover, the online benefits do not spill into the offline world - they do not become also benefits for women in their offline lives, or at least very rarely they do so - whereas the online costs are also costs at the offline level – they affect women's real lives. There is a "vicious" loop (bad offline => bad online => bad offline again) but not a "virtuous" loop (good online, and that's it).

I developed my argument in such way: firstly, I define cybersex by using and developing the definition by Döring. Thus, cybersex is "a computer-mediated interpersonal interaction in which the participants are sexually motivated, meaning they are seeking sexual arousal and satisfaction". In this definition, it is important to underline the social nature of this action meaning that it should be two or more participants and that participants are not necessarily human beings but it still excludes sex with robots because cybersex happens in the virtual space. I also underline that it is not a necessary condition that all partners of cybersex should be sexually motivated (it should be only in an ideal case), but cybersex can happen even if only one partner is seeking sexual arousal and satisfaction. After this, I outlined how cybersex challenges the already existing definitions of sex and that our views on human sexuality should be revisited.

Secondly, I showed that all positive features that are ascribed to the cybersex by feminist philosophers can be summed up as one positive feature - the expansion of female sexual autonomy. Thus, the safety of space, the higher control of the act, the possibility to "wear" different identities help women to explore their sexuality without feeling shame and social pressure.

Thirdly, I defended that this positive feature does not solve the patriarchal problems of our society and that cyberspace also has the same negative phenomena such as rape, sexual objectification, and prostitution as we have in real world. All of them limit female sexual autonomy and, therefore, cyberspace should not be considered as a completely safe space for women.

I also discussed other feminist views on cybersex and showed that my position is different from Döring's position because I do not give the same weight of positive and negative features and straightly claim that positive feature is dependent on other conditions limited to the online world and give benefits only for some women, while the negative phenomena comes from offline world to the virtual one and affects women as a group. I also do not accept Collins's view and do not decrease the role of cybersex and online relations, I think that they can be the important instrument in promoting feminist values and feminists should pay their attention to them.

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## Acknowledgments

To all the minds who are seeking for the truth.

I would first like to thank my teachers, groupmates, colleagues and all academic and technical staff of the University of Tartu who helped me during my working on this thesis.

A very special gratitude to my supervisor, Francesco Orsi, for all our productive discussions, for all your work and help. It means a lot to me.

In addition, I would like to thank all other teachers and lecturers who helped me to develop my argument and made it stronger, in particular, Kadri Simm, Mats Volberg, Siobhan Ann Kattago, Roland Karo, Alex Davies.

Special gratitude to my groupmates and friends, Victoriia Rozumna, Luis Roberto Vera, Kaya York, Patrick Keenan, Ayesha Rehman, for their comments and support.

I am grateful to 15x4 Tartu team for the possibility to talk about my topic publicly and for their comments.

A huge thank you to my parents for their endless love, support and for making all this come true. Thank you to my dearest friends from Kyiv and all over the world who proved that cyberfriendship sometimes can be even more real than the offline one.

Thanks for all you!

Anastasiia Babash

Tartu, 15.05.2018

## Feminist perspectives on cybersex

### *Feministlikud vaated küberseksile*

#### Abstract

In my thesis, I am arguing that cybersex does bring real and actual benefits to some individual women in terms of expansion of their sexual autonomy, but these benefits (for the moment at least) affect only some individual women in their online life. However, the negative phenomena of cybersex such as rape, sexual objectification, and coerced prostitution systematically affect women as a social group both in their online and offline lives.

I am defending my thesis by, firstly, giving the definition of cybersex and researching how it affects our understanding of sexuality. Secondly, I am considering all positive effects that cybersex brings to women and arguing that they can be summarized as the expansion of women's sexual autonomy. Thirdly, I am researching negative phenomena of cybersex and how they are limiting women's sexual autonomy. Fourthly, I am describing other feminist views on cybersex (the empowerment approach by Döring and the relative indifference view by Collins) to show how they are different from my view.

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