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It's about Bang for your Buck, Bro:

Singaporean men's online conversations about sex in Batam, Indonesia

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Abstract

Studies of sexuality and the Internet have focused on how the web provides individuals with opportunities to perform new sexual acts and establish new sexual communities, thus challenging heteronormative models of sexuality. But Internet bulletin boards and chat rooms can also provide a medium for the recuperation and performance of forms of hetereosexual masculinity that have become marginalised and rendered unacceptable in the offline world. Faced with the challenges of the globalised economy and changing expectations about gender roles in the public and private spheres, some men seek to reclaim power over women through the performance of a hyper-sexualised subjectivity in a homosocial online space. The Sammyboy Times – a commercial sex information site aimed primarily at a Singaporean male audience – is such a space. In its members-only forum about sex tourism to the Indonesian island of Batam, Singaporean men escape from the demands of a heteronormative expression of masculinity predicated on the reproduction of the Singaporean state. But Sammyboy provides much more than a space for the expression of an alternative, transgressive masculinity; it also allows the men to produce a localised form of brotherhood in which the men share information and look out for each other's welfare in their encounters with Batam's sex workers. While descriptions of sex acts are ever present in the forum's 'international field reports', we argue that they are a vehicle for fraternity rather than eroticism or competitiveness.

Bio-notes

Sophie Williams is a PhD candidate in the Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS) at the University of Wollongong. Her doctorate, entitled *Space, Place and Masculinity: Chinese Singaporean Men's Practices of Sex Tourism in the Indonesian Borderlands,* is concerned with the ways in which discursive practices of masculinity shape the reading of (sex) tourist spaces. She has presented papers at the 2006 Asia Pacific Futures Research Network's Signature Conference: 'Media: Policies, Cultures and Futures in the Asia Pacific Region,' and at the Fifth International Convention of Asia Scholars in 2007, and is currently completing fieldwork in Singapore and Batam, Riau Islands.

Lenore Lyons is Director of the Australian Research Council Key Centre for Asia-Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS) and Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences, Media, and Communications at the University of Wollongong, Australia. She is recognised as the leading scholar on the feminist movement in Singapore. Her book on this research, *A State of Ambivalence: The Feminist Movement in Singapore*, was published by Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden in 2004. She is currently working on two Australian Research Council funded projects – one examines migrant worker activism in support of female domestic workers in Malaysia and Singapore; and the other on skilled migrant women in Australia.

Michele Ford chairs the Department of Indonesian Studies at the University of Sydney, where she coordinates and contributes to the Indonesian language program and teaches about social activism and human rights in the Southeast Asian region. Her research is focused on the Indonesian labour movement, labour migration, and transnationalism. She is currently working on an Australian Research Council funded project that examines union-NGO collaboration on migrant labour issues in five Asian destination countries. Michele has published widely on labour activism and labour migration, and on the Indonesian province of Kepuluan Riau. She is co-editor of *Women and Work in Indonesia* (with Lyn Parker) and *Women and Labour Organizing in Asia: Diversity, Autonomy and Activism* (with Kaye Broadbent), both published by Routledge.

It's about Bang for your Buck, Bro:

Singaporean men's online conversations about sex in Batam, Indonesia

Questions pertaining to heterosexual men's consumption of sex tourism have only recently come into focus in a literature that engages primarily with the narratives and experiences of Western male sex tourists (cf Kruhse-MountBurton, 1995; O'Connell Davidson, 1995; Frank, 2003). A glaring problem in much of this literature is the use of an almost universal categorization of 'man'; a categorization that leaves little room for cultural and locational specificity. In the rush to study the global dimensions of masculinity, the importance of local factors and interactions at the local level can thus be overlooked. This has led Louie (2003, p.1) to argue that the move towards a global analysis is premature, especially in terms of the lack of understanding of Asian masculinities. For example, sexual potency has been a benchmark of hegemonic masculinity within Western socio-cultural settings, and as a symbol of success and pleasure for Western male sex tourists (Connell and Dowsett, 1992; Connell, 1995; Kruhse-MountBurton, 1995; O'Connell Davidson, 1995; Ramazanoglu, 1995). The tendency to focus on sexual potency as a defining feature of sex tourism is present in Chow-White's (2006) study of international sex tourism websites aimed primarily at Western sex tourists. Arguing that the act of racialising and sexualising non-Western women through the sites serves to reinforce men's 'proper' place within the social order, Chow-White fails to situate sex clients within those same racialised and sexualised contexts. We argue, following Kempadoo (1999), that locally-specific structures of sex work are determined by patterns of economic development, histories of colonialism, and normative constructions of sexuality and gender. Attention to these specificities allows us to see that neither 'sex workers' nor 'clients' are fixed, universal or transhistorical; in other words, "prostitution is not a single thing" (Nussbaum cited in Schotten, 2005, p.212). Such an approach allows us to pay attention to the culturally embedded meanings associated with commercialized sexual behaviour in particular local settings, and to recognize that not all sex workers or their clients are 'the same'.

In this paper, we examine the interrelationship between hegemonic masculinities (cf Connell, 1995), which are always at once both culturally and historically contingent, and Singaporean men's localized practices in a sex tourist space spanning the online and offline worlds. Our focus in on Singaporean men who visit the island of Batam, located in the Riau Archipelago of Indonesia, just kilometres south of Singapore.[1] Middle-class tourism has been targeted as a key growth industry for the island. The journey by high-speed ferry takes less than one hour, and Singaporean passport holders can stay for up to 30 days without a visa. But although some parts of Batam attract middle-class Singaporeans in search of sun, sand and pampering, most Singaporean tourists who come to the islands are working-class men in search of sex.[2] Our previous research on the sex industry in the Riau Islands shows that these Singaporean sex clients are typically identified as 'old men' (*apek-apek*) and 'uncles' (Williams, 2007; Ford and Lyons, 2008).[3] However, observation conducted within sex tourism venues (particularly discos and KTV lounges) in Batam supports the results of a survey conducted by the Singaporean NGO Action for AIDS which showed that 35 per cent of sex clients interviewed at the ferry terminal to Batam were under the age of 40 (Action for AIDS Singapore, 2006). Demand for the sex industry is fuelled by comparative cost,[4] but men visiting Batam enjoy the added benefits of cheap food, gambling, shopping, and other forms of entertainment during their visits (Ford and Lyons, 2008). Some of these men also form long-term relationships or marry Indonesian sex workers (Lyons and Ford, 2008).

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[2] The sex industry in the Riau Islands relies heavily on its Singaporean clients, over a million of whom visited in 2003 (BPS Kota Batam, 2004). According to an NGO survey, almost half of all sex workers' clients are from Singapore, and in 2004 one NGO in Batam had over 3500 sex workers on its books (Interview by Ford and Lyons, December 2004).

[3] The term 'uncle' is commonly used in the Singaporean popular vernacular to refer to a middle-aged and older generation of working class Singaporean men, and as a term of respectful address to an older male.

[4] Most sex workers in Batam charge between S$50 and S$100 per night, depending on their location within the industry and other factors like ethnicity. Singaporean prostitutes may charge the same amount for one hour.

Although we know that Singaporean men constitute the overwhelming majority of sex tourists to Batam and neighbouring islands, we know very little about their motivations and understandings of sex tourism. Clients are notoriously difficult to contact and our knowledge of the behaviours and practices of male clients globally are often inferred from the statements of sex workers rather than from the men themselves (cf Perkins, 1994; McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Law, 2000; Sanders, 2005b). Observation of online sexual communities can provide one means for researchers to directly access sex client communities. As Sanders (2005a, p.70) argues:

> Previously, buyers and sellers of sex communicated only a private and individual basis whereas now, through CMC [computer mediated communication], these interactions have entered the public domain. Observing relationships between those who buy and those who sell sex has been practically impossible before the advent of CMC … Through the Internet the researcher can now be privy to other aspects of sexual behaviour that have been hidden and largely clandestine.

Scholarly recognition of the research potentials of the Internet has resulted in a growing interest in the use of bulletin boards and Internet forums as sites for information sharing about safety, sexual services and opportunities for exchange in the offline world (Tikkanen and Ross, 2003; Sanders, 2005a; Chow-White, 2006). Arguing that the Internet has the potential to open up freer spaces for the formation of gendered subjectivities and allows for a more fluid construction of gender to occur, many of these studies focus their attention on the performance of new sexual acts and the creation of new sexual communities that challenge heteronormative models of sexuality (Mills, 1998; Toomey and Rothenberg, 2000; Griffiths, 2001; Daneback et al., 2005). Although virtual communities have the potential to (re)configure themselves in a radical and transformative manner, they are also just another form of spatialised social relations that are embedded within existing normative discourses. In other words, online communities are constituted in a manner similar to

communities in the offline world (Kendall, 1999; Guimaraes, 2005) and can contain a "richness equivalent to that of a 'traditional' social grouping" (Fox and Roberts, 1999, p.647).

As cyberspace interactions are embedded within normative discourses of gender, race and sexuality, we should expect that sex tourism websites reflect (and contribute to) wider networks of meaning that intersect with discourses about male dominance and solidarity, as well as female sexuality. A number of scholars therefore refute claims of a cyber utopia which acts as a liberating force outside of the social order (Balsamo, 1996; Slater, 2002). This is not to deny the greater potential for more fluid constructions of identity within cyberspace, especially in the realm of gendered and sexualised identity. The disembodied nature of performativity within cyberspace opens up a potential space within which transgressions of normative identity are enabled by "reworking one's self" (Turkle, 1995; Danet, 1998). For example, in the Singaporean context, Ho, Baber and Khondker (2002) have written about the use of the Internet as a site of resistance to normative state–society relations through the production of non state-friendly sexualities.

However, as Slater (2002) points out, these are not the only forms of sexuality to be performed online. Within the online world of Singaporean sex tourists we witness both a re-inscription of normative constructions of masculinity, and some potential for transgression to be realised. Williams' (2006) work on constructions of hegemonic Chinese Singaporean masculinity demonstrates that career, and marital, reproductive and financial success are key elements of what it means to be 'a man' in contemporary Singapore. Many working class men fail to meet these social expectations about employment and income,[5] and some face difficulties in finding marriage partners (Lyons and Ford, 2008). We argue that men's conversations about their plans for and experiences of sex tourism in Batam provides one means to examine how such Singaporean men

[5] In her focus group research with different groups of Singaporean Chinese men, Williams notes that "Having the five Cs – car, condo, credit card, cash, career" is often used as a trope to describe what it means to be 'a successful man'. In contrast, middle-aged unmarried working-class men were described as "having a character flaw".

engage with and negotiate hegemonic masculinities. Through the analysis of such sites we are able to better articulate both normative and potentially idealised notions of masculinity and heterosexuality, regardless of whether or not they are materially practiced and thus representative of the 'truth' of men's experiences.

Sex, Lies and the Ethics of Internet Research

In this article we focus on the Batam thread of The Sammyboy Times members-only 'Talk Sex' forum.[6] Although a number of online forums have been created to meet the needs of sex tourists, The Sammyboy Times is the only site that currently identifies itself as a Singaporean site catering to the interests of Singaporean men.[7] It therefore provides an important space to examine the performance of online 'Singaporean' sex tourist masculinities. We acknowledge, however, that as with other online spaces it is not always possible to 'know' the identities of online contributors – they may not be Singaporean, they may not be men, and they may not be sex tourists. While some scholars raise questions about the veracity of CMC because it is impossible to know who the subjects of research actually are, we would argue that issues of 'truthfulness' equally apply in the offline world. While we acknowledge that not all members of the Batam Info Thread may be Singaporean men, the issue is not whether they are male Singaporeans but how the postings together inscribe a localised form of Singaporean heterosexual masculinity. As we argue below, the 'Singaporean-ness' of the site is inscribed through language and cultural references that simultaneously act as barriers to 'outsiders' and reinforce a particularised performance of sex

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[6] The Sammyboy Times is available at: http://www.sammboy.com. The postings used in this article are all taken from the publicly accessible pages of the January to October 2007 postings on the Batam Info Thread

[7] There are two other sites designed specifically for a resident Singaporean audience - nedbatam forum, and the warrenssingapore.com forum. These cater primarily to the needs and interests of expatriates living in Singapore. The blogging space, www.tomorrow.sg, contains information about commercial sex in Singapore and abroad in Batam, but is not solely devoted to this topic, and functions as a space for Singaporean bloggers to come together to discuss a variety of issues, both sexual and non-sexual.

tourism. Ultimately, the issue is not whether the men are Singaporean nationals, but whether they are able to perform a successful version of Singaporean masculinity and therefore be accepted as fully-fledged members of the Sammyboy site.

Within the field of Internet studies, scholars continue to discuss the ethical issues associated with naming and identifying online communities. These concerns centre on the public versus private nature of online communications (Sharf, 1999; Hewson et al., 2003; Hine, 2005). Anderson and Kanuka (2003, p.68) argue that while it might be possible to argue that publicly accessible newsgroups, mail lists, chat rooms or virtual reality environments are public spaces, this interpretation is not straightforward. They state that "what is public or private is defined not by the technology, but by the perception of privacy and inclusion that is maintained by the participants" (Anderson and Kanuka, 2003, p.68). Even though some groups may be publicly accessible, some or all members of the group may hold the expectation that their messages will only be read by those who are supportive of their situation (King, 1996, p.126). Drawing on King, we acknowledge the difference between information that is "publicly *accessible* and that which is publicly *disseminated*" (Sanders, 2005a, emphasis in original), but argue that Sammyboy members are aware that the site is regularly accessed by non-members and therefore have a relatively low level of perceived privacy (see below).

For Hewson et al. (2003) the issue is not about perceived privacy but about the maintenance of anonymity. To ensure anonymity, King (1996, p.124) advocates changing the name of the site and its members. In the case of our research, changing the name of the Internet forum to ensure anonymity is not feasible – Singapore's Internet community is densely connected (reflecting the size of the city-state's population) and the site is generally well-known.[8] In making a decision not to

[8] A study by the Singapore Internet Project in 2002 reported that 46 per cent of adults (18+) and 71 per cent of students (under 18) were regular users of the Internet. By the year 2000, 61 per cent of homes had a computer and 50 per cent of

hide the identity of the site or its members' screen names, we have made an ethical assessment of the harm associated with publishing the research results. When dealing with topics that relate to potentially illegal activities it is important to exercise a higher degree of sensitivity in relation to the anonymity of online subjects. The purchase of commercial sex is not illegal in either Indonesia or Singapore. Although some postings relate to the possibility of sex with minors, currently neither Singapore nor Indonesia has child sex extraterritorial legislation in place to prosecute child sex offenders for crimes committed overseas.[9]

Another important ethical issue facing Internet studies scholars is whether online communities should be informed that they are the object of social research. Obtaining informed consent from all members of an online community is difficult to achieve (King, 1996, p.123). A further issue that must be taken into consideration when seeking consent is the potential for the researcher to disrupt the group's interactions (Sanders, 2005a). Following Sanders, we too have chosen to 'lurk' on the Sammyboy site. As we argue below, Sammyboy members speak to an imagined male audience and reinforce fraternal ties by sharing explicit details of their 'Batam exploits'. The misogynist content of the site is extremely confronting and to participate as members of the site without disrupting group dynamics would require us to perpetuate these constructions of women, a task that we were unwilling to undertake.[10]

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homes were connected to the Internet. By 2003, almost one million homes had access to broadband. Singapore has the highest density of Internet users in the world, and has the largest number of Internet messages and chat groups within south East Asia (Lee, 2003, p.76). For a discussion on the place of the Internet within Singaporean culture see Lim (2005) and Goby (2000).

[9] There are a range of legal issues associated with accessing, downloading, and storing online sexual content, particularly where it relates to minors. The legal responses to these issues vary from country to country. For the purposes of our research, we were required to obtain approval from the Australian Minister for Justice and Customs prior to using an Australian Internet Service Provider (ISP) to conduct this research. For a discussion of the legal issues associated with this project refer to Lyons and Ford (2006).

[10] As feminist scholars, our readings of The Sammyboy Times Talk Sex Forum are informed by Third World Feminism (cf Mohanty, 1991), critical race theory, and queer theory. Many masculinity scholars have noted the ethical and political dilemmas associated with studying the behaviour of men whose behaviours and views one does not share (cf Connell, 1995; Flood, 2007).

The Sammyboy Times

"Women need a reason to have sex. Men just need a Place."[11] The Sammyboy Times, self-proclaimed as Singapore's "premier sex site", provides a virtual space within which Singaporean men are able to discuss the finer details of commercial sexual relations. The site's homepage banner proclaims that Sammyboy publishes "Real Singapore News – Warts and All. We publish what the Straits Times [Singapore's main English daily newspaper] leaves out." As this suggests, the site caters for a variety of discussion topics, ranging from local politics to press censorship to racism to public housing. For example, the Coffeeshop provides a space dedicated to the discussion of Singaporean politics. However, Singapore's self-declared 'virtual sex hub' is primarily a site about sex. As its forum page declares, "Sam's Sex Forum IS the definitive guide for those who want to get more bang for their buck in the Commercial Sex Scene around the World!"[12]

Most of the Sammyboy site is publicly accessible but individuals must become members to post text and upload pictures. Thus, although membership is the preferred way to become a fully-fledged Sammyboy netizen it is by no means essential in order to participate in the Sammyboy online community. The multiple spaces contained within the website indicate also that the wider Sammyboy cybercommunity is not an exclusively male one, although graphic, sexualised photographs of Asian women on its home page mark it as a primarily male space. Although there is no way to restrict access to the Sex Forum to men only, the sexualised and gendered nature of the forum pages are one way in which a preferred male audience is constructed. Visual and textual clues clearly signal that men are the perceived, and intended, audience. At the top of each page of

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[11] Quotation taken from the top banner of The Sammyboy Times, Singapore Asian Values Forum pages http://www.sammyboyforum.com/

[12] The Singapore government has sought to regulate Internet content through a range of measures, including censorship of websites and the introduction of rules pertaining to the publication of pornographic and violent material. Lee (2001; 2003) suggests that auto-regulation of Internet use is the most active and effective form of censorship operative in Singapore at present.

each thread is banner incorporating a picture of an opened mangosteen, the 'queen of fruits', suggesting eroticism and bodily flesh. Underneath this, images of partially undressed women sit alongside written text that provides phone-sex numbers and other websites offering online sex. However, these advertisements play a secondary role to the primary function of this space, which is to provide a place where "experienced fornicators" can come together as a community to discuss their sexual experiences at home and abroad.[13]

The most active thread within the Talk Sex forum is the International Field Report thread which contains sub-threads related to different sex tourism destinations. Some Internet scholars suggest that cyberspace is situated in a physically 'spaceless' context "where the social production of space, place, and self is not dependent or contingent on what is 'physically real', nor are such productions necessarily grounded in that which is empirically veritable" (Waskul and Douglass, 1997, p.381). This assertion not only overlooks the diverse forms of CMC but also the ways in which cyberspaces emerge in particular localized forms. The Sammyboy forum is not a "geographic location without physical presence" (i.e. a 'place' without a 'space') (Waskul and Douglass, 1997, p.394), but a space within which place is constantly inscribed. The nature and content of the communication within the forum is entirely dependent on place and space; sex tourism destinations provide the *raison d'être* for Sammyboy. In the context of Sammyboy members, the online and offline worlds are not separate spaces detached from each other, but rather dialectically defined by their rich and complex connections. This is apparent in the ways in which the content of the forum postings is structured – members are able to pose questions before they travel overseas and to post detailed 'field reports' on their return, creating a constant process of exchange between the online and offline worlds.

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[13] The FAQs on the site state that, although welcome elsewhere on the site, "Non sexual topics are **NOT** to be discussed at Sam's sex forum".

The Batam Info Thread sits within the International Field Reports. Its stated purpose is to share information about the structure of the sex industry on the island in order to assist 'newbies' (men who have yet to visit Batam for sex and/or those men with limited experience as sex clients) and provide 'old hands' with the latest up-to-date information on events, prices, and venues. In this way, the site functions as an arena for social experience, a space where men can lurk to find out more about language, culture, and behaviour. Ross (2005, p.344), who looks at cybersex, describes the Internet as "a space between fantasy and action" and argues that the "importance of the Internet as a sexual medium is its placement as an intermediate step between private fantasy and actual behaviour. It provides a gap between thinking, doing and being – and especially, an opportunity to do and not be, or to type and not do." The Sammyboy site certainly performs such a role – men who have never engaged the services of a sex worker as well as men who have never been to Batam can learn 'how' to be a sex client.

However, Sammyboy's role in the performance of sex tourism is not limited to participants' discursive strategies in cyberspace. The site enables more than simply the creation of fantasies or the exchange of information between these two worlds – it is a forum which facilitates sex travel through organized trips involving members. Members use the space to contact each other much like email or Internet Relay Chat (IRC) – posting short questions and responses about dates and times of meetings. While not all members participate in these organized groups, and some express an aversion to travelling together, the forum functions as a space whereby fraternal relations can be both imagined and extended from the offline to the online world and back again: even where they go alone, members clearly compile their sex tourism field reports with their virtual community in mind.

Sammyboy as a Fraternal Space

The Sammyboy website is decidedly Singaporean in its visual and textual constructions, something that is accentuated by the use of the term 'hub' in the banner that flies across the top of each thread, and the visual representation of a durian on the homepage.[14] Members have developed their own unique terms and phrases that emphasise their exclusive character. Their use of language also works to designate the thread as a 'Singaporean space'. The men use a combination of English, Singlish,[15] Malay, Chinese pinyin, and transliterated Chinese dialect and local references (e.g. locations and cultural events) in their postings. The most notable of the new words developed by members is "cheong", a term that means "to charge, or go out for happening stuff".[16] In the context of the Batam thread it refers to the practice of travelling to Batam for commercial sex. Although this term is defined in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) glossary, provided to assist newcomers with the process of translating postings into colloquial English, there is a tacit understanding that the members of the forum will have knowledge of both the term and the practices it signifies. The term varies in its usage throughout the forum for both the act of sex and the act of going to Batam.

Kiesling (2005, p.721) notes North American use of the term 'dude' amongst members of a college fraternity (and men in general) as a 'cool' stance that allows for the "expression of homosocial desire without the speaker's coming across as 'too earnest' in his desire". This male form of familial address works to exclude women at the same time that it inscribes fraternal bonds between the men. Members of the forum refer to themselves as "cheongsters" or "samsters" (after Sammboy) – terms that create a similar community of belonging amongst members. The language of fraternity is also present in the use of the term 'bro' (brother) to address each other. The site is

[14] The term 'hub' has become a buzzword in Singapore in recent years. The term is used to designate spatial areas within the city which the government seeks to develop for particular purposes – education hub, arts hub, science hub. Sammyboy's status as 'Singapore Virtual Sex Hub' is a tongue-in-cheek reference to these developments.
[15] Singapore-English – a local creole.
[16] Sammyboy Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ).

also infused with militaristic language that resonates with the men's experiences of national service.[17] The language of 'field report' and the structure of many of the postings, which often use 24 hour time to report on the sequence of events in 15-30 minute intervals, are suggestive of military briefings. Many of the terms and phrases used by the men make reference to military spaces, or at least military language and sexual innuendo, as the following glossary suggests:

Phrase	**Meaning**
I salute you	To be commended for a particularly unusual sex act
Will not fight war without a helmet	Will not have sex without a condom
Shots	Orgasm
Loaded	Cum/ejaculation
SOP (Standard Operating Procedure)	Standard Orgasm Procedure
Fire hand gun	Masturbation
Go on tour	Denotes tourism, but also 'tour of duty'
Happy hunting	Looking for girls

Previous research demonstrates the ways in which masculinity and femininity are inscribed in patriarchal militarism (Enloe, 2000). Female subordination is central to the functioning of male domination within the military, which actively uses sexualised gender stereotypes to describe women and a range of male 'others', including ethnic and sexual minorities (D'Amico and Weinstein, 1999). The use of sexualised and gendered language is one element of this performance of hegemonic masculinity within military and non-military contexts.

[17] National Service of two years is compulsory for all male citizens and permanent residents of Singapore upon reaching the age of sixteen and a half years, and men continue to be called up for active reservist training until the age of 40 or 50 depending on rank.

Members of the Batam Info Thread actively inscribe a militarised masculinity into their online personas. Without physical presence, screen names are an important means of communicating qualities of selfhood; they are an essential means of establishing a 'cyberself' (Waskul and Douglass, 1997). Although names can change over time, individuals usually choose their screen name carefully and continue to use it over time. In her discussion of chat rooms, Danet (1996) describes nicks (online nicknames) as masks that serve two purposes – they provide camouflage on the one hand and are a form of conspicuous marking on the other. The screen names chosen by members of the Batam Info Thread reinforce that this is a sexualised, masculine space. Members use names that reflect a debasing of women's bodies (Meatlover); a reference to the link between sex and the night (Nightcrawllerr); sex and violence (Bangbangman; v.killers [virgin killers]); terms which link sexual prowess and military armaments (Snipeshot08); cheating (Xdeception); and masculine control of technology (Logitek).

Members of the Sammyboy Talk Sex forum can also attach a visual icon next to their name, and a signature that is included at the bottom of each posting. Visual icons and signatures, when combined with a screen name, allow members to disseminate as much information as possible about themselves to transient audiences. The specificities of the visual icons and signatures used in the Batam Info Thread are also noteworthy in what they reveal about the localised production of masculinity and fraternity in the Sammy Boy site. Snipeshot08 has a picture of a target next to his name; Ronsee is an innocent looking toy holding a gun; and technofreak is the face of a woman's corpse with blood streaming from her eyes and mouth. Such visual clues point to the way in which the Batam Info space is constructed as a masculine space, with the fraternal bonds of National Service being replicated online through the use of militaristic visual imagery.

The link between the construction of a cyberidentity and militarized violence, however, should not be overemphasised in the case of the Batam Info Thread. In addition to screen names that reflect

this link, members also use names associated with geographical places (Btm man [Batam Man]); hobbies (Blackjack_king); and ethnic identifiers (Vincentlim81). Although it is difficult to determine whether Sammyboy is an ethnically exclusive space, members use other textual clues to their ethnicity, including the use of Chinese characters in signature files and the frequent use of Chinese pinyin or dialect in postings. These signifiers of gender and ethnicity serve to demarcate the boundaries between members and non-members, and thus mark out the space of fraternity. Members also declare their allegiance to the brotherhood of samsters through their signature files. Popiah signs off by declaring he is "a member of BOSS Club (Bros of Share Share)" and the member known as 'no-go' states: "'if I have a million dollars…then I will cheong, cheong, cheong". While Internet studies scholars have pointed to the potential for gender and ethnic identities to be obscured through the anonymity of the web, these examples demonstrate the ways in which individuals can also work to inscribe gender and ethnicity through a range of textual and visual clues.

The combination of icon, screen name and signature allows members to produce a consistent cyberself to non-members and members who enter different threads and shift between different parts of the site over time. As in everyday life, however, this cyberself is "continually presented, negotiated, and validated through interaction with others" (Waskul and Douglass, 1997, p.387). Members who post more frequently establish their online presence in a number of ways: they reveal information about their personal preferences and 'sexploits', as well as potentially more revealing information about age, marital status, employment, and education. Significantly for the study of fraternity, each member is provided with an online 'reputation' made up of 'power' and 'points' that establishes their position within a hierarchy of brothers, as described in the discussion below.

Performance of Fraternity in the Batam Info Thread

The Batam Info Thread provides the latest information about various tourist commodities in Batam, ranging from an overnight booking with a girl to a taxi ride from the ferry terminal to the hotel.[18] A key element of this information sharing involves detailed accounts of the different types of women available, including physical characteristics such as skin colour, breast size and appearance, as well as other attributes such as hygiene, attitude, experience and performance. But above all, the site is a means for men to ensure that they receive value for money during their visits to Batam. A typical posting at the end of a field report reflects both these elements:

> Damages:
>
> Ferry: $34
>
> Taxi: $2.50-$3.30 (Rp.15,000-20,000 the most)
>
> Hotel: $45 or (Rp. 275,000)
>
> Ger [Girl]: $42 (Rp.250,000)
>
> Makan [Food]: Ard [Around] $80 (total 12 persons) + beer & drinks
>
> * beer there is only ard S$1.00 , damn cheap sia.
>
> Total damages ard $180-200
>
> Ger Looks: 7/10
>
> Age: 25
>
> Body: 6.5/10
>
> BBBJ [Bareback Barrel Blow Job]: 8.5/10 (mind blowing & hardworking)
>
> Fuck: 9/10 (damn responsive & wet especially doggy)
>
> Gf [Girlfriend]: 8.5/10 (treat u well & very gf feelings, shower for u etc) Shiok [great]
>
> Total Shots [orgasms]: 2 nia.
>
> RTF [return to fuck]: sure , y not, kinda of miss her rite nw.

[18] The postings contained within the Batam Info thread vary in length from short questions (1-2 sentences in length) to detailed field reports (FR) that last for several pages.

SonicGear 18.04.2007, 10:42am.

As this posting indicates, it is possible to construct a very detailed account of Singaporean male sex tourism to Batam from the reports and conversations contained in the Batam Info Thread. But since "men's sexual storytelling is shaped by homosocial masculine cultures" (Flood, 2007, p.4), their conversations also provide us with insights into the ways in which this particular group of Singaporean men establish and perform fraternity through their experiences of sex outside Singapore.

Bonding through sex

Studies of homosociality in Western contexts draw our attention to the 'male homosocial double bind' born of the tension between male solidarity and compulsory/requisite heterosexuality:

> In the former men are supposed to form a close bond, but in the latter they are supposed to refrain from intimacy … Because heterosexuality is such a strong discourse, the men must present their emotional intimacy as clearly nonsexual, since sexual and emotional intimacy are often bound up with each other (Kiesling, 2005, p.711).

In other words, men seek to establish connections amongst each other (i.e. express homosocial desire) without direct expressions of homosocial feelings. In his study of an American college fraternity, Kiesling (2005) argues that men adopt linguistic and social strategies of indirectness to create and display homosocial desire. This desire is not expressed individually but it is effectively created and communicated through their language and behaviour. Kiesling identifies three kinds of indirectness through which men seek to achieve intimacy in the North American context. Social

indirectness refers to situations in which men perform conflict to form connections, while addressee indirectness involves conversations in which the real target is within earshot but is not the interlocutor. A third kind of indirectness is topic indirectness, which refers to the development of intimacy through discussions of topics not related to self (Kiesling, 2005, pp.696, 703). The role of indirectness in the construction of homosociality is supported by Flood's (2007, p.10) study of an Australian military academy, where 'the boys' constitute "an imagined audience for [a] man's sexual achievements, their collective male gaze informing the meaning of his sexual relations".

Like Flood's (2007) Australian military academy students, the participants in the Batam Info Thread use talk about sex as a means through which to deflect desirability "to a non personal domain" (Kiesling, 2005, p.711). Flood notes that, like the American subjects of research by Bird (1996) and Boswell and Spade (1996), Australian students' stories of their sexual exploits are "an important part of homosocial male banter and represent competition in internal 'pecking orders'" (Flood, 2007, p.15). In contrast, the conversations that men have in the explicitly sexual domain of the Batam Info Thread are remarkably devoid of boasting about their sexual exploits or explicit competition. As discussed below, the Batam cheongsters use strategies of addressee indirectness and social indirectness to create hierarchies of fraternity within the thread's homosocial space. But while they build fraternal relationships through their talk about sex and sex tourism, they are almost completely silent on their own – or others' – performance of heterosexual sex.

This silence is most glaringly evident in the substantial field reports that comprise a significant proportion of the postings. These reports, which as noted earlier provide a blow-by-blow account of men's visits to Batam with often military precision, include little or no information about the sex act itself. For example, in a 334-word field report contributed by Nitecrawllerr on 27 July 2007, only 34 words described the time he spent in his room with the sex worker:

> Very friendly GF [girlfriend] feeling and very horny too. Sleeping time would hug u till next morning. Middle of the nite woke her up for kongkek [fuck] and she obliged. Not many cewek [girls] would do that.
>
> *Nitecrawllerr, 27.07.2007,8:37pm.*

Nitecrawller's final assessment of the performance this 30-year-old 'mother you'd like to fuck' (milf) at the bottom of his report provides us with a few more hints concerning the technical details of their sexual encounter. The sex worker, called 'Angel', scored 7/10 for her all-over 'catbath'; 8/10 for the 'bareback barrel blow job' (BBBJ), and 8/10 for her 'fuck job' (FJ), which took place with a condom. He did not ask for an 'ass rim' (AR), and suggests that that an ordinary blow job (BJ) would have been a better option than the BBBJ. There is no suggestion at all in the account of how he himself performed.

In DexDJ's 827-word field report of 5 May 2007, only 24 words describe the two incidences of sexual 'action' that took place during his 3 day 2 night trip. During the first:

> Action was ok only but she wasn't like a dead fish or giving me a 'when-the-fuck-are-you-cumming???' kinda look.. no rush.. 7/10
>
> *DexDJ, 05.05.2007, 5:26pm.*

His description of the second sexual encounter is limited to noting that he went back to the hotel to 'bang again'. At the end of his report, DexDJ provides a detailed summary of the costs of the trip, but the report contains no additional assessment of the appearance or sexual prowess of his 'girl', beyond noting the fact that she was 'short, cute and looks chinese'. What he does provide is a more lengthy description of the sex worker's treatment of him before 'the action began', suggesting that like many of his comrades, DexDJ values the 'girlfriend experience':

> Went back to hotel and my girl literally treated my like a KING lah.. gave me a massage, brought me the hotel's slippers, pour me water, wet a face towel to wipe my face and hands.. then we **watched** the tele abit then we went shower together. Again, she washed every part of me cleanly.. with a scrub too..
>
> *DexDJ, 05.05.2007, 5:26pm.*

Like the vast majority of other field reports written during the period examined, there is no mention of DexDJ's own performance or prowess.

These narratives suggest that for this group of Singaporean sex tourists topic indirectness emphasises comradeship rather than the competition generated around sexual prowess and boasting more generally associated with men's talk about sex. However, this should not be confused with a sense of egalitarianism between members, as there is a definite hierarchy involved in the organization of the Batam Info community, which seeks to strengthen the fraternal paradigm within which it is located.

Hierarchy and desire

Many scholars have noted the centrality of hierarchy to the construction of heteronormative masculinities. Campbell's work on 'pub(lic) masculinity' in a New Zealand pub demonstrates that the public performance of drinking was intensely competitive and created distinct hierarchies amongst the men. These hierarchies were created and re-inscribed through "continual conversational cockfighting, during which other drinkers scrutinized men's performance. At these times, hierarchies of knowledge, historical embeddedness, and legitimacy were established"

(Campbell, 2000, p.569). Sammyboy's sex forum explicitly establishes hierarchy through two means: induction processes for 'newbies' (newly joined thread members) and rankings of members. Traditionally fraternities have operated as a site of education and initiation rites into manhood for young men, with sexuality playing a pivotal role. The initiation rite within the Batam Info Thread of Sammyboy is set up explicitly by the structure of the site (in which newbie's postings are initially monitored for a time and a member's length of affiliation with the site is reflected in their 'power' rating) and by the internal structure of members' interactions. The forum inducts newbies in the sense of providing them with information about Batam, but also through the more subtle process of initiating them into the cultural mores and language of the Singapore sex client community. More established members improve their reputation by providing the knowledge that allows newbies to leave Singapore on future visits with a keen sense of knowledge of the island's physical and sexual geography.

Homosocial desire is created in American 'rushes' in the process of being recruited into fraternities through "a kind of addressee indirectness in which a desirable camaraderie was displayed among the members of the fraternity but excluded a rush" (Kiesling, 2005, p.695). In the same way, Batam Info Thread newbies are the targets of addressee indirectness, where the more established members engage in banter between themselves in a way which signals that while newbies have entered the fraternal (homosocial) space of the forum, they are not yet part of the fraternity proper. Individual members' standing within the fraternal space of the Batam Info Thread depends on their 'reputation'. This measure of one's cyberself is the product of a hierarchical system of 'points' and 'power'. As suggested earlier, a member's power rating correlates closely with his length of association with the site, while points are awarded by other members on the basis of their postings. Points are not granted freely or easily, as indicated by statements like "Newbies DON'T REQUEST ME" (dreammare 06.05.2007 5:45pm).

Distinctions are created between newbies and 'bros' through this hierarchically organised system of points and power. The former are permitted into the fraternal space of the forum, but only the latter are fully-fledged members of the online fraternity. Progression to full membership of the fraternity requires a demonstration of knowledge not only of Batam, but of the culture of the thread. It also demands recognition of and respect for seniority, reflected in other forum members' reputations. Newbies are required to master a series of terms specific to Sammyboy (provided for them in a glossary) and to accept advice gratefully from more senior forum members. The different status of 'newbies' and 'bros' is reflected in the speech acts of both groups. For example, on 23 October 2007, Rub&Buah, a forum member with three years' experience congratulated the even more established Ronsee on his detailed list of 'experiences and pointers' posted on the previous day:

> Well said bro.way to go.Newbies must print this as ur 'secret little book of dos & dun abt cewek [girls]' & bring it with u when wanna go cheong batam.
>
> *Rub&Buah, 23.10.2007, 5:12am.*

This short posting, ostensibly about supporting Ronsee's effort to provide information to newbies, establishes Rub&Buah's membership of the brotherhood both through his use of the term 'bro' and his identification of the newbies as other. As Ronsee has many more points than Rub&Buah, in addition to his 11 months' seniority, Rub&Buah may also be attempting to leverage the status of Ronsee's better reputation. Batam Man, whose power and points ratings do not reflect his status since he had to rejoin the forum after his old account failed, offers us another example. He claims membership of the brotherhood through demonstration of his knowledge of both Batam and the online space of the Batam Info Thread and his implicit positioning of himself as a fully-fledged brother. These strategies are demonstrated in his posting of 27 February 2007 through his complaint about repetitiveness, his use of forum specific terms like 'cheonging' and 'FRs' [field reports], and

his claims to have the authority to direct another ‘old hand’ to post a field report on a recent visit to Batam:

> It's good to see a Batam only related thread, without mixing up with the other "wonderland" (islands) [Bintan and Karimun].
>
> But I really hope we don't get people asking questions like, where got nice n cheap CB [chee bye, lit. vagina], nice n cheap hotel, nice n cheap KTV ect ect. All those had already been answered MANY times in other Batam threads.
>
> I think all die hard Batam lau chiaoS [old hands] will try their cheonging best to answer questions related to Batam to help the newbies, and also post their juicy FRs here?
>
> First to start with, ---> MeatLover <---, your FR on last weekend cheonging session please....
>
> *BtmMan, 27.02.2007, 9:27am.*

Newbies too signal their outsider status in regard to the brotherhood, conforming to the clearly-stated expectations of the fraternity by displaying linguistic badges of newness and inferiority. For example, Bangbangman, who wrote in one of his very first postings:

> Hi guys…I’m a newbie here…Thinking of going this Thursday…Is it safe to go alone? Me small size scared kerna [get] robbed or raped leh…
>
> *Bangbangman, 04.06.2007, 10.30am.*

These linguistic badges of newbie status can be worn in a number of different ways. However, not all newbies fully perform their outsider status. Postings suggest that newbie subversion may be

ignored by the Batam Info Thread's more established brothers as a form of naïve enthusiasm, or may draw social sanction for the disruption of the thread's internal hierarchy. Sexual taunts are sometimes used to discipline newbies who have overstepped the mark. This is demonstrated in a series of postings in August 2007 that begin when taka77, a Batam Info Thread newbie, both chastises Batam Man for being impatient with newbies and claims friendship with a much more established cheongster:

> BM [Batam Man] u walking dictionary leh ..... dun get angry ..... so when my gd fren [good friend] Ah-Pui going to visit u again? haha
>
> *taka77, 24.08.2007, 9.28pm.*

Taka77's lack of respect quickly draws a flurry of postings from the brothers, which start with a friendly rejection of his claim to friendship, followed by a questioning of his geographical knowledge of Batam, and concluding with insinuations that he lacked sexual know-how. Batam Man then enters the conversation, shifting the focus of the banter from geographical taunts to sexual ones, casting aspersions on the sexuality of both apui and taka77:

> Go Batam also must need people to bring?
> Then kio kway [get a prostitute, lit. calling or getting chickens] must need people to bonk on your behalf??
> Apui can do the job anot leh???
>
> *BtmMan, 28.08.2007, 03.25pm.*

> Ya need ppl to take off pants…….hahahahaha
>
> *taka77, 28.08.2007, 005.08pm.*

Take off your own pants?

You so jia lak, tng koh also dunno meh??! [are you so stupid that you don't even know how to take off your pants?]

BtmMan, 28.08.2007, 05.17pm.

A friendly tone is maintained through the use of emoticons in this exchange.[19] It is clear that taka77's subversive interjection is not considered to be too serious. At the same time, however, his newbie status is underscored: unlike the homophobic sexual banter between brothers described below, these jibes are focused at taka77's heterosexual competence – a rare target in the Batam Info Thread.

Intimacy through conflict?

Batam Info Thread members, like their western counterparts, use strategies of social indirectness in their online conversations to manage the homosocial 'double bind' (Kiesling, 2005, p.711). In the online space of the forum, social indirectness focuses almost exclusively on homophobic banter. This 'conflict' – which is initiated and managed by the forum's well-established 'old hands' – takes the form of gentle jibes rather than flaming or other techniques associated with online aggression.[20] The lack of flaming reflects the way that the brotherhood actively engages in the protection of its members. Within the fraternal space of the Batam Info Thread, individual identity is subsumed by the communal, collective sense of self, and extending from this, to flame would be to ostracise

[19] Waskul and Douglass (1997, p.384) note that emoticons provide a "mechanism for communicating contextual and emotional cues to others and hence validate them as experientially real in a social context".
[20] Danet (2002) defines flaming as "sudden, often extended flare-ups of anger, profanity and insult".

oneself from the fraternity. Individual social capital is only made possible through acceptance into the fraternity, a pursuit which is always in process rather than achieved. The example below demonstrates this process. It involves Meatlover, a long-standing member with a power rating of 6, Batam Man, whose low power rating belies his long involvement, and Apui, a member with a power rating of 4:

> NBzzzz [newbies], FR [field report] on last weekend you took your darling cewek for 2 nites wan [fun] lah.... share share abit here leh... .
>
> *BtmMan, 27.02.2007 3:59pm.*
>
> I thought we were together for 2 nights? You mean you = my darling?
>
> *meatlover, 27.02.2007, 04.10pm.*
>
> FUCK YOU ok!!!
> Any GAY kakis [buddies] got any questions can ask ML [Meatlover] the GAY ong [king].
>
> *BtmMan, 27.02.2007, 04.18pm.*
>
> wah!!
> u mean u book him for two nites arh!!
>
> *Apui, 27.02.2007, 04.30pm.*

Homophobic taunts and teasing serve to distinguish between the homosocial intimacy that operates within the fraternity from other, more sexual, forms of desire. Unlike the response to taka77

described earlier, these jibes emphasise each of these three participants' heterosexual masculinity and establish their non-sexual homosocial desire and the 'tightness' of the inner circle.

Newbies are seldom permitted to engage directly in these kinds of exchanges, although in-jokes about long-standing members' sexuality are sometimes incorporated into responses to newbies' questions. This suggests a kind of reverse audience indirectness where the ratified 'over-hearer' is the inner circle of brothers rather than the newbie to whom the response is ostensibly addressed. For example when newbie Intellkk asks:

> Where to look for lady boy [transsexual] in batam?
>
> *Intellkk, 22.08.2007, 08.27pm.*

DNAT, the forum member with the highest reputation – a power rating of six and over 1100 points – continues the in-joke about Batam Man's dubious sexuality:

> Ask **Batam** Man.
>
> *DNAT, 23.08.2007, 08.49am.*

Direct expression of homosocial intimacy is averted through the use of both homophobic joking, and the creation of hierarchy. This hierarchy is effective in its regulation of the online community, as it simultaneously constrains and permits entrée of members into the inner core of the Batam Info Thread. That is, while the use of a hierarchical membership enables newbies to identify who the core of the fraternity is, this place of strength at the centre remains an ever elusive one, as it is the members of the core alone who effectively monitor processes of exclusion and inclusion in the cyber-clique.

Conclusion

Research suggests that for many Western men, sexual performance, potency and experience principally function as a normative requirement for hegemonic masculinity. By distancing themselves from homosexual desire and from any display of homoeroticism, the members of the Batam Info Thread use their conversations about sex to textually and discursively construct a strictly heterosexual self. Current debates about the sexualities of fraternal settings suggest that the performance of (hetero)sexuality must be active and explicit (Flood, 2007). Within the Batam Info Thread, too, markers of sexual experience in Batam are crucial to the construction of hierarchy.

However, findings from our research point to the need for greater attention to be paid to the specificities of the performance of normative discourses of heterosexual masculinity in different cultural contexts. The hegemonic masculinity of this cyberspace is constructed through conversations about sex that render the sex act almost invisible. This means that Batam Info Thread members must demonstrate their sexual capability and experience – and through it, their masculinity – without actually describing their own performance. The lack of candid sexual detail does not diminish the men's respective masculinity. Rather it works to strengthen and reproduce a sense of hegemonic masculinity through the performance of fraternal bonds. These differences highlight the specific ways in which sexuality and masculinity intersect in the Singaporean context to generate an online hegemonic masculinity that is premised on common experiences of sex tourism, yet marked by fraternity rather than sex itself.

We have demonstrated in this study that the study of fraternity provides an important means to examine how cultural discourses legitimize men's privilege and dominance; in other words, it provides a means to examine how hegemony is reinforced and recreated through social practices. Our analysis of The Sammyboy times demonstrates that the Singaporean men who use this site

construct its homosocial space in a particular way. Cyberspace offers these men with a space in which to perform a particular kind of heterosexual masculinity in the (assumed) company of like-minded men, thus constituting a fraternal community in the online world.

However, fraternity is not established simply by joining or even participating in the thread. Within their online community, the men repeatedly engage in the process of 'becoming' a brother through the reproduction of the textual signifiers of the hegemonic masculinity preferred within the Batam Info Thread space. In this sense, the active engagement of gendered identity construction through CMC enables a production of gender fluidity. In some ways this construction of masculinity resists certain aspects of Singaporean normative discourses about the relationship between sexuality and masculinity, but it does not wholly transgress offline heteropatriarchal norms. Instead the possibilities of an online masculinity reaffirm spatially contingent notions of hegemonic masculinity, embedding themselves within both online and offline identities and practices.

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