

**Deviance Online:
Portrayals of Bestiality on the Internet**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the nature of deviant subcultures on the internet by examining websites dedicated to the portrayal, in some fashion, of bestiality. Bestiality was chosen due to its status as a violation of social taboos prohibiting sexual contact with members of another species. As an act of extreme deviance, bestiality has historically primarily been an individual act. With the advent of the Internet, however, networking among and marketing to a subculture of participants across time and space has become possible. This study examines the contours of this subculture.

INTRODUCTION

Since its vast expansion during the 1990s the internet has become among the most significant modes of communication in the modern world. The Internet is “the global network of computers or the physical infrastructure of interlinked computers communicating via modems” (Schuen, 2003). Originally the province of academics and the military, the internet is today a gateway for millions of users to information, advertising, and a sense of community. Over the past decade the role of the internet in forming a new type of community organization has been a fixture of the popular press. Given that such communities have had a decade to form, it is appropriate to examine the internal structure of such communities.

Following Durkheim’s (1966) method of examining the deviant in order to learn about the “normal,” the focus of this study is on the virtual community formed by those interested in bestiality. Utilizing a combination of domain analysis and content analysis, the structure of this online community is discussed with an eye toward understanding issues of importance to more conformist virtual communities.

Bestiality as a form of sexual expression has been around for thousands of years, but it is only with the advent of the internet that a subculture of zoophiles (the technical term) has developed. As discussed by one site:

Today, or more precisely, about 5 to 10 years ago we have a situation of rapidly changing culture and life with fast-paced economy and technical inventions. This is a very threatening situation for conservative people who would like to keep things the way they are or were. Just at this very moment, zoophiles start showing off their existence on the face of the earth. Not on purpose, not to provoke, but in unmindful delight of having found each other and discovering a common sexual orientation. Zoophiles start creating dozens or hundreds of good looking and well visited web pages. On these non-commercial web pages zoophiles described how harmless and how caring they and their relationships to animals are. There was no apparent reason, why society (or some parts of it - I'll come to that a little later) would lash out at them with such hatred, force and effectivity...But zoophiles were naive. They didn't look at the world around them. They screamed out their own coming-out message without thinking about how that could be received by a world or rather by some people which were just at that moment in such-and-such a personal state.
(<http://www.sexyadulthost.com/users/gridman/docs/zoo2002.pdf>)

Although conservative groups are singled out due to their opposition based on moral grounds, opposition to bestiality is found across the political spectrum, including from such liberal groups as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the United States. Nevertheless, cases occasionally come into public view, such as an Eastbank, West Virginia case in which police allege that they caught a man "in the act of raping a sheep at a live Nativity scene" (PETA, 2003). According to Pet-Abuse.com (2003), there were nine such criminal cases in the United States during 2002 involving animals as small as a poodle to as large as a horse.

LITERATURE

Prior to the popularization of the internet, a case could have been made that the social science community had the conceptual tools necessary to understand community. Erving Goffman (1959) had argued that people involved in social interaction participate in a variety of behaviors meant to encourage interaction free from embarrassment and that maintained a certain minimum respect between actors. He viewed the individual in interaction to be

motivated by a “backstage self” that was subordinated to a “frontstage self” that behaved in a manner so as not to offend, embarrass, or otherwise deplete the minimum respectability of the other. The combined effect of the actors engaging in such a ruse made it possible for the interaction to continue. The basic norms of such engagements are reinforced through the process of interaction and are thus understood as valid in later interactions.

In a similar vein, Herbert Garfinkel (1967) both expanded upon and competed with the so-called dramaturgical approach of Goffman by showing that social interaction is highly dependent upon the actors’ acceptance of common bases of knowledge. This “common sense” knowledge is similarly reinforced as valid through the process of social interaction itself. Similar work showed how the process of social interaction from an early age in fact forms the individual’s understanding of reality itself, arguing that one’s sense of reality is neither innate nor objective but rather socially constructed through interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Randall Collins (1975) expanded on this tradition by arguing that culture itself, and thus the foundation of community, is the product of social interaction. Individuals internalize the knowledge and loyalties specific to community culture and reinforce them through social interaction which functions as ritual.

Such a model of community has been shown to be highly related with the frequency and setting of such interaction. For instance, Thomas (1999) showed how residents’ ideas about community were altered as the space in which interactions were likely to occur changed over time. As community residents became more likely to shop and interact in other communities, the perception of and identification with their home community was altered to

reflect the new locus of community. The weakness of such a model of community is its assumption that community members will be in regular face-to-face social interaction.

A virtual community as found on the internet cannot be in face to face contact. Although there is the possibility of instant communication through instant messaging clients, chat rooms, and similar technologies, much if not most of the contact between community members occur by way of disjointed communications. A message is posted to a bulletin board, and at a later time one or many individuals read the post, take the amount of time they feel appropriate to cognitively process the communication (or not), and respond. The response itself may be directed to the individual or to all who care to read it; it may be carefully considered or impulsive. It is at any rate social interaction on one's own terms; it lacks the spontaneity and vitality of real-time social interaction. Even an offhand remark may be quickly reconsidered, rewritten, or withheld. As a result, a virtual community has more in common with a movie-going audience who shares the experience but may or may not choose to discuss it. Not surprisingly, this sterile interactional environment influences the culture that is generated of the members and thus the community as a whole. This works well for marketing products and imagery.

The internet makes possible communities that would have extreme difficulty in forming and surviving in physical space. Just as certain (deviant) behavioral patterns have historically found community possible in large urban settings where the economies of scale made the finding of a group of like-minded individuals more possible (e.g., homosexual subcultures prior to the gay Rights Movement, the Gender [Transvestism] Movement of the early 21st century), the internet functions as an ultimate urban environment by bringing together hundreds of millions of people into a common environment for social interaction.

Not surprisingly, communities have formed around behaviors and practices that are so objectively deviant from the standpoint of the numbers involved in them that the likelihood of a subculture developing in physical space is very nearly nil. From this perspective, bestiality offers an intriguing study of a virtual community because, in terms of the numbers involved in such behavior and the high degree of stigma attached to such practices, the likelihood of significant numbers of people meeting in physical space and interacting in real time is extremely low. Although some may consider sexual deviance a deeply personal act, there has been a record of communities of practitioners coming together to create political movements in order to advocate for their perspective. For example, after a number of prominent community members in Revere, Massachusetts were arrested on charges of pedophilia in 1978, the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) was formed to advocate for the rights of men to pursue sexual relationships with boys who have not yet reached the age of consent (De Young, 1989).

Sexual deviance as a whole tends to encompass a variety of behaviors. Some behaviors, such as prostitution and stripping, have a profit motive and thus the practitioners often participate in the behavior for economic rather than personal motivations (Miller, 1993; Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000; Dalla, 2000). In other cases, sexual deviance is the outgrowth of personal motivations and the desire to maintain power over the victim, such as in rape (Scully & Marolla, 1984; Hale, 1997) and even in some cases of serial murder (Levin & Fox, 1985). Still others, however, are primarily individual acts carried out in order to satisfy personal desire. In some cases, sexual desires require the participation of others but, due to social considerations, overt participation is deemed unacceptable, leading to anonymous sex (Humphries, 1970). In other cases, however, desires are acted out as an individual act, such

as masturbation (Hensley et al, 2001) and the more extreme autoerotic sexual asphyxiation (Lowery & Wetli, 1982). Bestiality falls into this latter category in that it is predominantly an individual act propagated against an animal.

In popular discourse, bestiality is the practice of sexual contact with non-human partners. In a more technical sense, a distinction is made between bestiality and zoophilia both among professionals (e.g., psychologists, criminal justice authorities, animal rights groups, etc.) and practitioners (those involved in the behavior). In this instance, bestiality may be considered to be the behavior associated with zoophilia. Zoophilia is classified as a paraphilia, a type of sexual disorder that features “recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving 1) nonhuman objects, 2) the suffering or humiliation of oneself or one’s partner, or 3) children or other nonconsenting persons” (DSM-IV, 1994, 522-523). Zoophilia is considered exceedingly rare, and thus classified as “Paraphilia Not Otherwise Specified” along with other such behaviors as necrophilia (sex with the dead), coprophilia (fetish with feces), and klismaphilia (fetish with enemas). As Alvarez & Freinhar (1991) commented:

The zoophile's world view is similar to the rapist's and child sexual abuser's. They all view the physical gratifications they have with their victims as consensual, and they believe it benefits their partners as well as themselves. Just as pedophiles differentiate between those who abuse children and those who love children-placing themselves, of course, in the latter group-zoophiles distinguish between animal abusers (bestialists) and those who are zoophiles. (45)

In addition, there is evidence that those involved in bestiality are more likely to commit similar crimes against human victims (Fleming et al, 2002).

The frequency of bestiality and zoophilia is uncertain, but is known to be rare. In order to find any large-scale general population survey that has specifically enquired into sexual contact with animals, one has to go back to Kinsey et.al. (1948, 1953). Kinsey found

that approximately 8 percent of men and 3.5 percent of women had had some sexual experience with a non-human. One might expect that, given the preponderance of male practitioners and the element of sexual fantasy involved that an inordinate emphasis on human women will be present so as to be attractive to male consumers of the material. More recently, Zolondek et al (1996) found that five percent of juvenile sex offenders – a non-generalizable sample – reported zoophile behavior with an average age of onset at 10.8 years. The average number of acts reported was 11.6.

The above figures are problematic as there is a high probability of selection bias in finding someone willing to even answer such a survey. In addition, changes in sexual mores since the late 1940s and early 1950s and a general decline in farming have likely translated into a very low percentage today. Given such issues, the incidence of bestiality and zoophilia remains difficult to measure, although it is considered exceedingly rare (Cerrone, 1991; Duffield et al, 1998). Indeed, the very definition of “lifetime incidence” of bestiality is problematic as some would argue for the need to differentiate among experimentation, occasional sexual relations, and a dedicated lifestyle and/or preference for non-human sexual partners. As Midas Dekkers (2000) summarized:

If you include in bestiality only the people who have sex exclusively with animals then the percentage falls far below one percent...On the other hand, if you drop the requirement that for sexual contact something has to be inserted somewhere and that something has to be fiddled with and it is sufficient simply to cuddle, to derive a warm feeling from each other, to kiss perhaps at times, in brief to love, then bestiality is not a deviation but the general rule, not even shameful but the done thing. After all, who does not wish to be called an animal lover? (149)

Other variations include the choice of animal, which is overwhelmingly the cow, particularly among rural men, and the dog among urban women (Dekkers, 2000). It is worth noting, however, that women are about half as likely to be involved in bestiality as men,

which confirms “the impression that bestiality is what men think women do” (137). Based on the rare nature of the behavior, it may be expected that much of the material will be oriented toward an audience that stresses, even judges, the deviant nature of the activity.

METHOD

In order to understand the nature of the bestiality subculture online, 100 websites dedicated to the portrayal of bestiality were selected and coded. The sites were selected by typing sub-cultural “keywords” into the Google Search Engine (<http://www.google.com>) and the first 100 returns discussing bestiality formed the basis of our comparison. The data was collected in during the spring of 2003. The selected sites fell into the following categories:

Pornography: Sites oriented toward those who apparently enjoy viewing or participating in bestiality. Such sites are typically characterized by a focus on sexual fantasy and explicit photographs (or other artwork) of a serious nature.

Community Building: Sites oriented toward providing news or encouraging communication among fellow bestiality practitioners and sympathizers. Such sites had as an orientation networking and an emphasis on portraying bestiality as essentially normal.

Exhibitionism: Sites oriented to showing bestiality for exhibitionist purposes, either as moral judgment or for humor.

In addition, the number of sites featuring women was also noted.

Each site was deconstructed and analyzed for content.

FINDINGS

It took Google 0.06 seconds to find over 944,000 websites related to bestiality. Bestiality sites often appeared in relation to sites that featured other sexual fetishes, in particular those related to incest, urination, and enemas. However, more “conformist” fetishes, such as those related to feet and lingerie, were not normally associated with such sites. This implies a more general market of those interested in a variety of extremely deviant sexual activities. The general breakdown of website classifications is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: Websites Coded by Function

Site Function	Number (& Percent)
Pornography Provision	80
Community Building (alone)	7
Exhibitionism (alone)	7
Community Building & Pornography (combined)	4
Exhibitionism & Pornography (combined)	2
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>100</i>

Of the 100 sites examined, 80 percent of the sites were designed solely for provided pornographic material. An additional six sites were seemingly designed for other purposes as well as pornography. Four sites were designed for community building purposes and two sites were designed as pornography as well as deviant judgments. There were no sites dedicated to both community building and exhibitionism, which is not surprising given that community building sites were designed to support the subculture, whereas exhibitionist sites were designed to make a moral judgment about the subculture, often as a “freak show” (see below).

For example, in one typical pornographic site, (<http://www.barnyardsex.nu/beastialitysex/index2.html>), the site opens with a woman holding a dog’s penis in front of her face, which is supposedly covered with dog semen. The free tour

icon brings the reader to a picture of two naked women manually stimulating a horse and then turns to a billing screen for those who would like to join the site. Others were more hardcore, such as (<http://www.beastiality-files.com>) which featured women performing seemingly every kind of sexual act with a variety of animals, including a fish, dogs, horses, cows, and even a squid. Others, (e.g., <http://www.poontang.nu/NuZuReVu>), did not show full shots of individual humans but rather close-ups of specific body parts, such as a female mouth or vagina with a dog penis in it.

Although the sites contained materials obviously of interest to the zoophile subculture, it is possible that many of these sites are supported by the pornography-seeking internet community. The data collected in this study cannot address this issue.

There were only eleven sites oriented toward building a community of fellow zoophiles in this sample. Of these four also featured pornographic material as a function of the site. Although there were comparatively few such sites, they still constitute eleven percent of the total. Community building activities are not as financially lucrative as pornographic ventures. In addition, it is likely that those zoophiles interested in community or political activism will likely frequent one site on a regular basis but will pursue multiple sites for pornographic materials.

Community Building sites have a much more elaborate way of leading people into the world of bestiality. Many sites feature “real stories” about “real people.” Such sites, such as (<http://allme.com/stories/beast>), are concerned with the presentation of bestiality as “normal” behavior that is underreported in the statistics. The pornographic material is more similar to conventional pornography sites; http://k9cuties.com/beastiality_pic/indexa.html features women dressed in lingerie constructed of cut blue jeans in the midst of animals. Typically,

women are shown topless with unzipped shorts or jeans, nothing extreme at face value. Some sites, such as <<http://www.doglove.com>> advertise “hundreds of people chatting about animal sex.” However, the preoccupation of such sites is stressing the “normalcy” of the behavior, attempting to find historic examples or biological justification in order to neutralize the behavior. We quote at length from <<http://allme.com/stories/beast>>:

(The) human brain is actually made up of two animal brains and one human brain. The three brains of the human being are the result of the millions of years of the evolution of the brain. During the long process of evolution newer forms of animal brains were built on top of older forms, and the older forms were retained inside. Therefore, inside every human brain is a complete REPTILIAN BRAIN (similar to that of an alligator), an OLD MAMMAL BRAIN (like that of dogs and horses), and a NEW MAMMAL BRAIN (the thinking portion unique to humans). In all daily human activities each of these three brains continuously makes a contribution to thoughts, feelings, and emotions...When humans have sex with other humans, all three of these brains are involved in the desires, the oral and genital responses, and the climax. The reptile brain, the dog brain and the human brain are all there playing their role in the animal-human movements, sounds, and the production of the fluids of sexual activity...All sex among humans actually involves two animals and one human being, and it is extremely important for us to come to sense this friendly and passionate animal world within ourselves. Because of the three-animal make-up of the human brain, it is completely natural for humans to be curious about animal sex, and to wish to have sex with animals. In fact, it would be unnatural for a human NOT to have these inclinations. The only thing that makes some people think otherwise is the tradition of their particular culture. When we understand the three animals that make up our brain, we realize that the dog part of our brain for example, can have more direct sex with an actual dog. We humans are fortunate to have all three types of brain, because by having sex with animals we can experience pure reptile sex, pure dog sex, pure human sex, or portions of all three at once—if not actual, in fantasy. Since sex with animals or "inter-species" sex is more direct sex for the particular animal part of the brain that is involved, it is actually healthy for the expression of the overall brain. Sex with animals allows greater expression of the three animals of the human brain and thus allows them to also work in greater harmony.

Such a notion of cognitive science is, of course, absurd (see, for example, Gazzaniga, 1992; Donald, 1991; among others). However, the use of normalization as a technique of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) performs two functions for the subculture. It aids self-esteem and the management of a stigmatifiable behavior by justifying the deviance as “normal”

and even “natural.” In doing so, it proposes that others are wrong in their (supposed) repression of such instincts and thus imbues with the subculture a moral clarity with which members can declare themselves, even if only in chat rooms and websites, the truly natural, ethical, and creative individuals in our society.

We had hypothesized that women are disproportionately represented on bestiality websites. Indeed, only one of the 100 websites featured a (human) male in a sexual act: receiving felatio from a goat (<http://www.kowww.com/goats.html>). Even here, however, he was standing with a naked woman and other pictures in the same photo spread featured women, the most graphic being a goat’s horn penetrating the woman’s vagina. This hypothesis is obviously supported by the data.

It is difficult to describe the depictions of women as anything but degrading. Some depictions were relatively benign, showing scantily clad women in compromising positions, but such a judgment is only in relation to depictions on other sites. One site welcomes visitors with the line, “I guess some women love the taste of animal cum” and the appropriate photograph. Another site opens up with a woman giving a bull fellatio and vomiting, stating “enter here if you have an iron stomach” (<http://www.horse mating.com>). Some are overtly violent, such as one (<http://animalsextoons.com>) that features cartoons which include animals raping women. Sites dedicated to community building tended to be less violent than others, but the portrayal of women was quite negative across the board. One must conclude that a primary source of sexual pleasure for the viewer is the presentation of such degradation of women.

Based on the extremely deviant nature of the subculture, one might hypothesize that much of the material is oriented toward stressing the deviant nature of the activity

(exhibitionism). This is, in many ways, the opposite of the community building hypothesis. Rather than stressing the behavior as essentially normal, deviant judgment involves the portrayal of bestiality precisely because it is so deviant. There were nine sites coded as such, two of which also featured more “conventional” pornographic material. Such sites make bestiality a “freak show,” tacitly giving the viewer the right to examine it because it is not normal. For example, one site (<http://beastiality-sex-pictures.net>) echoes a circus in its opening screen:

Horse Fucking! Dog Cock Sucking! Snake Pussy Pumping! Fish Ramming! It's all in here! If you've never seen any of these things being done before then don't miss out now! Come on in and watch some of the most bizarre animal bestiality sex pictures on the net today!

Another site (<http://animal-sex.beastzone.com/>) entices viewers with pictures described as “strange and taboo,” some of which included mice, squid, goats, snakes, eel, fish, and pigs.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study conjures a number of issues and concerns for sociological research and for more broad social implications. Bestiality is a practice that violates a strong social taboo that states that sexual activity should occur among members of one’s own species. Indeed, it is often the most extreme, the most deviant, behaviors that help us to learn about the structure and processes involved with more conventional practices. Given the rise of the Internet as a significant social force, it is important to examine its ability to give voice to a wide range of deviant practices. That said, it should be noted that the following observations should not be construed as a call for censorship.

The data presented here suggest that the Internet is most useful as a marketing device. Eighty-six percent of the sites consulted have as a dominant theme the provision pornographic

imagery. Many of these sites either required payment or provided some imagery with the sales pitch to the viewer to buy access to yet more imagery. In every case, some form of money-making device was prevalent, such as banner advertisements or with links to other (often paid) sites. This is due to the fact that as small as the market for zoophile pornographic material happens to be, it is large enough to support an array of Internet sites.

The ability to create a common space for social interaction, even of the disjointed type found online, fosters a budding community of zoophiles. The Internet allows niche marketers to find their customers. The Internet fulfills a similar function as bohemian neighborhoods and red light districts have fulfilled for other (larger) deviant subcultures in the past. By creating a “commons” for individuals with similar interests and concerns, it is not surprising that a subculture devoted to bestiality has developed. As with other social groups, there has developed a leadership within the community and an emphasis on social activism. Zoophiles have created sites for advocating for their beliefs and unique perspectives, often explicitly comparing themselves to the example of other (more successful) movements, such as the gay rights movement, the civil rights movements, and the women’s rights movement. Such activism is typically concerned with public relations, and as such the deviant behavior is portrayed as within the realm of natural human experience – conformist sexual behavior is, in this view, the unfortunate byproduct of a sexually repressed society.

Despite attempts at social activism intended to portray zoophilia as one of an array of sexual choices, the subculture as found online seems to work against this goal. Past studies suggest that bestiality is a predominantly male enterprise, and the subculture certainly exhibits the male influence. Women are, with very few exceptions, portrayed engaging in bestiality. The portrayals range from the merely lurid to the violently offensive. What is not clear,

however, is the degree to which such portrayals of bestiality are authentic expressions of the zoophile community. While it appears exceedingly rare that an individual is exclusively interested in sexual relations with an animal, one would expect that portrayals aimed directly at the zoophile community would involve more portrayal of the animal as a sexual object than what is observed. It is difficult to discern, for example, whether an individual is attracted to the animal or the woman engaged in sexual activity with the animal. This is a point for future research. In the interim, those interested in the advocacy of zoophilia as simply another sexual preference are stuck with the fact that most bestiality found online is degrading to women, to say nothing of the animals.

Deviance of many types, from murder to drug use to boardrooms of white-collar criminals, attracts voyeurs. Only nine of the sites in this sample were explicitly voyeuristic, although it is likely that many of the others similarly attract the merely curious. For some sites, the obvious purpose was to invite the public to laugh at those who participate in such behavior. In the end, of course, the websites invite the public to examine similar imagery as those designed as more conventional zoophile-centered pornography.

Deviant subcultures have developed online around a variety of behaviors. It is likely that a similar structure of the Internet community will be found: a large infrastructure devoted to marketing related to the behavior, a smaller but committed cadre of community builders, and a number of sites related to exhibiting the behavior for entertainment purposes. Studying the structure of the bestiality online community in this way has provided the Durkheimian answer to how a subculture of this kind might operate. Further research is necessary to understand if the structure survives as the subculture in question is less deviant. Any difference or similarity of structure is significant.

This study is limited by the fact that it did not examine the websites critical of bestiality. It is worth noting, however, that sites critical of bestiality addressed an issue that was entirely absent from the bestiality sites: consent. Consent is, at the surface, an animal rights issue. Upon further investigation, however, consent is important for humans as well. The psychological ability to coerce an animal into sexual activity is related to the ability to force humans to do the same, and it is thus not surprising that juveniles who abuse animals (in a variety of ways) are also more likely to commit violent acts against humans (Alvarez & Feinhar, 1991; Duffield et al, 1998; Fleming et al, 2002).

Consent is a concept that the zoophile community rarely addresses. Certain actions are dangerous to the animal (to say nothing of the human). Even in those cases where an argument might be made for the animal's consent, such as certain activities with dogs and other higher mammals, consent is constructed to mean active participation in the behavior. There is no acknowledgement that the animal might have only a minimal understanding of the behavior or that the behavior is even sexual in nature for the human. Even with such knowledge, can a dog or a cat really make an informed decision about such activity? Would they participate simply in order to please their master, much as a child may wish to please a parent? This data cannot address such concerns, but fortunately the animal rights community can.

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