



Mini Review Article

## Sexuality and Internet Use: The Promise and Dangers in Cyberspace

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### Abstract

This review highlights the relationship between sexuality and Internet use, the various ways in which the Internet includes and enhances sexuality, how it affects sexual behaviors and attitudes, and the important role it has in peoples' sexual behavior, education, interaction, and satisfaction. This article also presents the 'two faces' of the Internet. It is a useful, cheap, and widely available tool which 'opens the world' to people who only need to sit by the computer, but it may also include harmful, damaging, and twisted material which could – especially for the younger generation – be harmful and misleading.

*Keywords:* Psychology; Internet Use; Cyberspace; Sexuality.

### 1. Introduction

Sexual online content and Internet activity are widespread. The Internet may have positive or negative effects on its users, depending on how it is used. "Internet sexuality may impact on sexual attitudes and identities, the sexual socialization of children and adolescents, gender relations, the social position and political activism of sexual minorities, the inclusion of people with disabilities, the spread of sexually transmitted infections, sexual satisfaction in couple relationships, the promotion of sexual health, the development of sexual disorders and the occurrence of sexual victimization. Internet sexuality (or OSA, online sexual activities) refers to sexual-related content and activities observable on the Internet" [1, 2]. Internet sexuality, thus, refers to a variety of sexual phenomena, such as sex education, sexual contacts, and [naturally] pornography which are related to online services and applications such as websites, online chat rooms, peer-to-peer networks, referred to as 'cybersexuality' [3].

Internet sexuality includes the following areas of behavior:

*Pornography* – Internet users may access commercially available, produce and disseminate and discuss pornography. Pornography is created by professional studios and even by amateurs.

*Sex shops* – Internet users may obtain information regarding sexual aids and toys and discretely purchase such items online. Online sex shops concentrate on marketing of such products as vibrators, condoms, aphrodisiacs, sexy lingerie and erotic magazines.

*Sex education* – The Internet offers an abundance of information which may be discretely obtained and that is fully cognizant of changing sexual awareness, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as promoting sexual health. Conventional sex education materials, such as brochures, are widely available on the Internet, as well as multi-media learning modules, peer advice in online forums, and sexual field reports in online diaries.

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*Sexual subcultures* – sexual minorities, who are out of the mainstream, can easily and inexpensively connect with others and garner support and Internet friendship. Sexual subcultures use the Internet both for internal networking and for public self-expression. This may involve the exchange of information, and social support. Additionally, users can inform themselves about specific sexual subcultures in order to attach themselves to a particular affinity group. Online platforms for sexual subcultures may include special supplies for activities such as pornography, sex shops, sex work, sexual education, and sex contacts tailored to the sexual preferences of the user. All these activities are not harmful and are lawful. By contrast, there are those which are neither (meaning they are harmful and are unlawful):

It poses risk and concern when Internet users are confronted by the enormous quantity of online sexual content, exhibit addictive or compulsive usage patterns that have negative consequences for themselves or others. Sexual harassment, being exposed to unwanted sexual content, or being affected by problematic Internet content or by behavioral patterns on the part of other Internet users that they cannot avoid [4, 5].

## 2. Pornography on the Internet

The use of pornography is now common throughout the world. Explicit, potentially stimulating portrayals of sexual activity exist on the Internet in the form of photos, video clips and texts. Usually, all that pornography is provided free of charge, while pornographic material is also exchanged in peer to- peer networks, online forums, and online chat channels. In addition to soft- and hard-core pornography, illegal pornographic material is also available on the Internet, such as child pornography which is commonly sold or exchanged in close circles, and teen sex which is 'barely legal' [6, 7]. Violent pornography is primarily offered on specialized websites for a fee. Animal pornography, on the other hand, is relatively easy to find free of charge because it is legal in several countries [8]. Online pornography is characterized by anonymity, affordability, and accessibility which are described as a Triple A-Engine that drives its use [9, 10]. And while 1% of all cyber material is pornographic, that small percentage, actually represents many millions of files [11].

It was found that Internet adult pornography users are more likely to be male, younger, homosexual or bisexual, sexually active, non-religious, unmarried and have a higher level of education [12, 13]. In the United States, Adolescent Internet users tend to be from lower socioeconomic status and from families with less education [14]. Pornography is usually consumed by people who are either lonely, or in moments of solitude. When asked about the reasons they consume pornography, the answers provided included curiosity, sexual stimulation, masturbation, and enhancement of sex life with partners [15].

## 3. The Effects of Online Pornography

The most often mentioned risks of pornography include Cyberporn addiction, victimization through illegal online pornography and negative role models in mainstream Internet porn, which are all easily and freely accessible via the Internet [16-18]. While public political debates have addressed online pornography in terms similar to hard drugs like crack cocaine [19], it is debatable from a psychological and psychiatric perspective whether excessive Internet (pornography) use is actually a disorder [20, 21]. Research indicated that Internet addiction afflicts 2% of all Internet users in the United States [22, 23]. Psychological treatment is suggested for compulsive users of illegal online pornography [24, 25]. It was suggested that certain pathological inclinations can be exacerbated by access to deviant pornographic material, such as child pornography may foster the porn users' pedophile fantasies into actual pedosexual abuse [26]. Sexual desires, curiosity, peer pressure, as well as emotional, cognitive and behavioral consequences (e.g., sexual arousal, but also shame, anger, disgust) of the wanted or unwanted exposure to legal or illegal deviant online pornography (such as fetishist, animal, violent or child pornography) by clinical, criminal, and normal populations are not well understood so far (most studies address child porn use by sex offenders [27]). Additionally, traditional mainstream pornography, without excessive use, may be communicating a sexist portrayal of women [28] or unrealistic body images or standards of sexual performance, thus possibly contributing to viewers insecurity about their own performance [22], as well as possibly undermining traditionally held values of marriage and the family [29].

*Online sex shops* – There are numerous sex shops on the Internet, selling sex toys, sexual aides, lingerie, erotica and aphrodisiacs, and are sold by regular mass market retailers such as Amazon, or by specialized sex shops. The visibility and easy accessibility of sexual products on the Internet contributes to familiarization and discreet purchase of those products on the Internet [3]. Viewing the merchandise of these sex shops may trigger physiological, affective, and cognitive reactions in the user which can prime him to engage in sexual activity and impact the nature of those activities [30].

*Sex work on the Internet* – *Offline* sex tourism, prostitution, and even strip clubs are now widely marketed on the Internet, which gives it a sense of normalcy [31, 32]. It is argued that the Internet plays a role in forced prostitution and the sexual trafficking of children and women [33]. Sex work has also developed *online* with live sex shows broadcast via webcam. The women involved reported that it feels much safer and more comfortable to them than the

prostitution that they previously practiced on streets or brothels [34].

*Sex education on the Internet* – Institutions, companies, groups, and individuals use the Internet to obtain and provide information about sexuality. Most users occasionally search for sex information online [35]. A Canadian study revealed that 45% of females and 68% of males indicated they had searched for sex information on the Internet within the previous 12 months. The wide variety of content, as well as the confidentiality with which it can be obtained, are the main reasons indicated for engaging in such online searches [36].

*Online sex* – is commonly accompanied by self-masturbation of partners who seek to stimulate one another sexually by exchanging explicit images, and/or video [37]. Cybersex partners can be found in various online chat rooms, online communities, online games, or virtual worlds. Contact between them may be fleeting or more enduring. Cybersex, may offer sexual and emotional intimacy, eliminates risks that may be present in offline sex such as physical violence, unplanned pregnancy and the transmission of STDs [38]. Cybersex allows participants to present themselves in a much more positive manner than they can in face-to-face encounters. Any physical handicap can be made to disappear; older people can become young lovers; adolescents may present themselves as older and thus be taken more seriously [39].

Cybersex is associated with three forms of risks: *Suffering from acute psychological afflictions*, due to compulsive preoccupation with online sex [40]. While compulsive use of online porn is more widespread among men, compulsive cybersex affects women as well [41]. Cybersex may be perceived as *betrayal* (Cyber infidelity) by one's partner and may lead to a crisis in the couple's relationship [42, 43]. If cybersex is not initiated on mutual consent, it may result in unwanted sexual advances (i.e., online sexual harassment, online sexual solicitation) among adults and adolescents, as well as the online sexual molestation of children [44]. In a US based sample of 10–17 year old, 18% of girls and 8% of boys reported that they had experienced online sexual harassment, while 7% of girls and 2% of boys experienced these contacts as very unpleasant [45]. The Internet can and is used to seek *offline sex*. A British survey indicated that 7% and 5% of heterosexual women, 14% and 10% of heterosexual men, and 47% and 44% of gay men had used the Internet to search for offline sex partners within the past 12 months [46]. A Swedish study showed that 35% of men and 40% of women had sex, at least on one occasion, with someone they met on the Internet. Active participation of sex with Internet partners was noted in singles, women between 34 and 65 years old, and homosexual/bisexual men. Similar results were reported in Australia as well [47]. Communication on the Internet is achieved via e-mail, instant messenger, webcam or Skype. These means allow criteria such as physical attractiveness, matching sexual preferences, or preferred safe-sex practices to be discussed and agreed upon in advance. Sometimes, prior to meeting in the real world, potential partners engage in online sex in order to test their sexual compatibility [48].

The Internet opens the possibility for sexual contact among people who live in geographic isolation, as well as among people who have little access to typical locations where sexual partners can be met [49]. However, such Internet communication may pose real dangers, such as when unwanted contact or violence [towards women or minors] may lead to dangerous meetings. Some child molesters attempt to contact minors on the Internet in order to meet with them in real-world settings [50]. The Internet also plays a role in sexual crimes against minors by family members and acquaintances [51]. About one-fifth to one-third of women and men seeking offline sex on the Internet report having unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse with sex partners met online, which puts them at increased risk of STDs and especially HIV [52, 53]. Studies that were done on pornography seem to emphasize risks inherent in it, such as harm to children and adolescents, the dissemination and consumption of illegal or deviant pornography; and creation of negative role models through mainstream porn. Research has indicated that sex contacts initiated via the Internet are quite prevalent and popular. Sexual harassment, sexual abuse, addictive overuse, encouraging infidelity toward present partners, and when offline contacts are involved, increasing the potential spread of STDs [1].

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, the Internet is an integral part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is here to stay. It enhances our ability to connect, to be almost anywhere in the world without leaving our house, and to share with others parts of our lives (i.e. Facebook). However, it is also important to remember that being so widely available, the Internet can be misleading, harmful, and may subject people to threats, abuse, and crime. Needless to say, it must be approached with reverence, but also with vigilance.

#### 5. Acknowledgements

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#### 6. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## 7. Ethical Approval

The manuscript does not contain experiments on animals and humans; hence ethical permission not required.

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