

Sexuality of older adults and the Internet: from sex education to cybersex

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ABSTRACT Myths and stereotypes of older adults and sexuality are pervasive in nearly every aspect of our society. However, the Internet has provided older adults a venue for expressing, experimenting, and challenging the popular idea that they are asexual and uninterested and incapable of being sexual. Older adults are one of the fastest growing groups of Internet surfers and they are using the net in various ways to enhance their sexual identities and experiences. A review of available literature will document both the virtues and the vices of sexuality on the Internet for older adults.

Introduction

As clinical gerontologists, we regularly engage students in a conversation about the sexuality of their parents. This is usually met with looks of confusion and discomfort, then comments that suggest the activity is accomplishing its objective—to challenge the myth that older adults are (or at least should be) asexual! Attempts to take the discussion to the realm of students' grandparents further push the issue and most often the discussion ends where it began—forcing students to consider the importance of their own sexuality, its defining role in their unique identities, and whether they would like to be socially stripped of their opportunities to express their uniqueness in this way.

Society has been denying the sexuality of older adults for centuries. Academia and the clinicians it produces have perpetuated many of the stereotypes of seniors, however unknowingly. It is yet to be seen how long we, as individual members of society will continue to internalize anti-ageing messages, or how long it will take for society to approve the sexuality of older adults. Certainly technological advances and the globalization of information has awakened some to the possibility that older adults are a powerful (both politically and financially) demographic that needs to be

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acknowledged, not ignored. The Internet embodies technology and global information; it is also a venue that more and more senior adults are choosing to access as a means of challenging social ageistic prejudices. The purpose of this paper is to provide an impetus for empirical dialogue regarding the sexuality of older adults and how the Internet can foster positive changes on personal and social levels. The scope of this paper has been limited to dating and companionship pursuits, psychosexual education, and erotic venues for older adult within the Internet communities.

Graying societies

The United Nations (United Nations Population Division; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2002) has estimated that one of every 10 persons is 60 years old or over, totalling 629 million people worldwide. By the year 2050, those numbers are projected to double with the actual number of people over age 60 projected to be almost 2 billion, at which point the population of older persons will outnumber children (0–14 years) for the first time ever. Historically, Europe has had and highest proportion of older adults among major world regions, and is projected to be the global leader well into this century. In 1995 the percentage of the population age 75 and over in North America surpassed that in Europe as a whole, probably due to the decline in births around the time of World War I (Kinsella, 2000). However, by 2015 Europe is expected to regain the majority and by 2030 ‘10% of all Europeans are projected to be older than age 74’ (Kinsella, 2000: 544). Individual country’s experiences with the increase of an older adults population are unique and require some review of history.

During the closing hours of World War II, as the USA[1] found itself on a more solid economic foundation, there began a fertility boom; the like of which has not been matched. From 1946 to 1964 a cohort of 75 million babies were born which at times have affectionately and pejoratively been referred to as the ‘Baby Boom Generation.’ The peak of the baby boom was in 1957 when nearly 4.3 million babies were born. This large group of individuals has created unique challenges and opportunities for governments, communities, and families for decades (Quadagno, 2002).

Baby boomers have never been a group to sit passively by and wait for others to take notice, in part because of their huge numbers. For over a decade the USA has anxiously awaited the ‘pig’ moving through the demographic ‘python’ to reach maturity. As the baby boomers approach later life, they will be the largest cohort of elders in US history. Despite the growing differences, one fact is clear; this segment of the population is growing at a relatively rapid rate. A number of sources (US Bureau of the Census, 1993, 1996) suggest that between the years 1990 and 2020, the elderly population will increase from 31.1 million Americans over age 65, to more than 54 million people. By 2050, 1 in 5, or 20%, of all Americans will be over the age of 65.

Although this vibrant group of adults has begun to challenge the existing social stereotypes that older adults are helpless, depressed, and sexless, these myths still abound. These myths are driven, in part, by a parallel force to maintain youth, or at least its illusion, at all costs (e.g., cosmetics, hair dye, plastic surgery, anti-ageing medicines, etc.) and that success and beauty at strictly a commodity for the young. Perhaps some of

the media portrayals of older adults are becoming more positive (Bell, 1992), but when older adults give up their sexuality, it is primarily due to social and psychological causes rather than biological and physical causes, which can usually be remedied (Hillman, 2000).

We, as clinicians, do not seem to be any more sensitive to the issues of sexuality for older clients as non-clinicians. Ivey, *et al.* (2000) found that non-psychotherapist, therapists-in-training, and practicing therapist all viewed a younger couple with concerns about the absence of sexual intimacy as significantly less healthy than an older couple with identical complaints. It seems that even mental health professions, usually trained to be sensitive to issues of minority populations, have yet to be challenged on their own internalized stereotypes of older adults—a minority group we will all become a member. How much longer will we continue to ignore the works of Kinsey and his colleagues, (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948; Kinsey and Associates, 1953) Masters and Johnson (1981), and the more recent works (AARP Research Group, 1999; Aiken, 2001) that continue to document the interest and participation of older adults in sexual activities?

Seniors and Internet use

Besides being asexual, older adults are often stereotyped as resistant to change, incapable of learning new skills, and generally 'out-of-touch.' Like the sexuality of older adults, there is plenty of evidence to refute this claim. There are various reports that have estimated the online presence of older adults. A study done by a managed care company providing services to Medicaid and Medicare recipients reported, 'While perceptions continue to exist that seniors are not using the Internet as much as those under age 60, statistics confirm that for new users, seniors are now moving towards the Internet at a faster pace than other groups' (Riddle, 2001) and they are also the fastest growing demographic for computer sales (Conover, 1997). Not only are older adults more of the first-time users, but according to eMarketer, they are also logging more time online (about 8.3 hours per week) and visiting more websites than persons in younger age groups (as cited in Morrell, 2002).

At least two studies have reported gender differences in describing typical senior surfers. Older men tend to use the Internet much more than older women (Silver, 2001; Morrell *et al.*, 2000). Older adults generally log on to the Internet for activities like tracking their genealogy, checking the stock market, finding health-related information, communicating with family members, and expanding their social network by participating in chat rooms, forums, and bulletin boards. (Scanlon, 2001). The Internet is a powerful tool for older adults who have access to it. It is a medium that does not discriminate based on physical appearance like wrinkles, gray hair, skin colour, and body size, allowing older adults to avoid some of the initial prejudices they might otherwise encounter and providing the chance for seniors to challenge social stereotypes. The remainder of this article will focus on a few of the avenues where the sexuality of older adults and the Internet may intersect.

The Internet and the sexuality of older adults

The sexuality of older adults, like any other population, has been greatly enhanced as well as grossly distorted through the varied avenues of the Internet. Many have found new opportunities for sexual expression and permission to not just acknowledge their sexuality, but actually take responsibility and be assertive for their sexuality—something that some older adults (especially women) may have waited a lifetime to experience. But as with every discussion about the Internet, this one includes pieces from the liberating, positive side and cautions regarding the dangerous, negative side.

Cooper (1998) identified three key factors that give the Internet its power in terms of sexual expression: access, affordability, and anonymity. He labelled them the ‘Triple A Engine’ and they apply to nearly every aspect of this paper.

Access

The Internet is a medium that never closes. At any time of the day, an individual can log on and find a variety of information, products, or services. In terms of sexuality, anyone can find a website to satisfy any sexual need or desire. Usually any gratification is not delayed due to the ease of accessibility the Internet offers. As for people of any age, older adults can find websites similar to their sexual interests. Additionally, websites exist that portray the sexuality of older adults. Such websites may encourage sexual expression for older adults.

Affordability

Although many service providers charge a monthly fee, there are some that offer a connection to the Internet free of charge. Usually the monthly fees are low and as such are affordable to many. Similarly, many websites containing adult content charge a monthly access fee. However, consumers who are familiar with the Internet can often find free sexually related websites. Because of its affordability, the Internet becomes a resource for sexual wants and needs to those who may have a tighter budget. Older adults may like this aspect because sexual expression on the Internet may match their ability to pay.

Anonymity

This factor is perhaps what gives sexual expression over the Internet its greatest power. Because users are able to create identities on the Internet, communication is often marked with more sharing of intimate ideas, feelings, and secrets (Cooper *et al.*, 2000). Users often feel a sense of freedom: if they do not feel comfortable or no longer like their identity, it is easy to change handles and become someone new (Waskul *et al.*, 2000). Since society suggests older adults should not express their sexuality, the anonymity offered by the Internet can become an important. Older adults may be able to experiment with others as an older adult. If this identity does not work, they can become someone younger or directly rebel against the social myth of asexuality.

The Internet and dating, companionship, and courtship

Chat room activity. According to Silver (2001), 87% of older adults use the Internet for sending and receiving electronic mail (e-mail). E-mail allows older adults to keep up and stay connected with their friends and family (Furlong, 1989), combating social isolation and loneliness. We know that a majority of older adult are using e-mail to maintain social connections, but much less is known about their participation in chat rooms and similar means of connecting with others. Chat rooms provide users of all ages the opportunity to socialize, build friendships, and develop emotionally intimate and potentially sexual and erotic relationships. Cooper and Sportolari (1997) examined the development of romantic relationships online by analysing computer-mediated communication (CMC), or sometimes referred to as computer mediated relating (CMR). CMR relationships may take longer to develop than face-to-face (FTF) relationships, but overtime they can become as personal 'along dimensions such as affection, immediacy, receptivity, trust, and depth' (p. 8). CMR relationships follow themes similar to FTF relationships such as: physical attractiveness, propinquity and rapport, self-disclosure, similarity, interpersonal space and intimacy, and erotic connection. A positive aspect of online romantic relationships is the deviation from gender roles that exist in FTF relationships. Men no longer need to feel in control of 'running' the relationship, and women may feel more free to express themselves sexually, and finally feel that they own their sexuality.

Although Silver (2001) reported that approximately 8% of older adults in Canada visit chat rooms, the number of older adults who seek to create romantic relationships in chat rooms is unknown. All we know is that older adults seek out social support and companionship in chat rooms; which quite often sound the same. Wright (2000) discussed the social support and companionship that older adults benefit from while participating in online chats. He found that older adults have larger companionship networks than social support networks online. This finding is not all that clear as social support and companionship are not mutually exclusive. However, it seems to imply that older adults may be seeking intimate rather than superficial relationships online.

Popular websites for older adults like *ThirdAge.com* and *SeniorNet.org* offer organized chat rooms for members to socialize with people of similar interests, seek answers to questions they have from a wide range of topics, and receive social support. Another website aimed at older adults is *Zelgo.com*. It offers forums that are specific to dating and seniors who are wanting to find a partner. *Yahoo!Chat* is also a site that provides chat rooms specifically for older adults who are interested in romantic pursuits.

Dating and courtship through personal advertisements. Online personal ads are a convenient means in which 'lifestyle advantages of coupledness can be achieved' (Coupland, 2000: 10). According to Coupland (2000), older adults are more likely to need company due to the loss of long-term partners through death, retiring from work, and a loosening of family ties; this may be especially true for women. Similar to the control in chat rooms, older adults are able to portray their physical and personality characteristics through personal advertisements in a socially positive and desirable way. Personal advertisements are generally a compression of the self into conventional

attributes. Older adults are challenged to create an appealing synopsis of themselves, striving to attract their ideal partner. Often personal descriptions reflect the tension between being older and embracing the beauty that is accompanied with it and the social standard of appearing youthful—usually the synonym for attractive.

For the most part, older adult personal advertisements portray this entry into ‘Third Age’ (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Third Age is the extended period of active adulthood. It is a time for new beginnings, creativity, continued learning, and exploration. It can also be a time for new relationships, staying connected to family and friends, exploring the spiritual side of life and self-discovery (Furlong, 1997). The Internet is a perfect vehicle to pursue all things associated with Third Age. The following is an example of what you might find when searching for a personal advertisement of older adults online:

Man seeking woman

I recently retired after 40 years in business. I would like to meet others for companionship and friendship. If we become more that is even better. I enjoy visiting new places, concerts and plays, dining out, and quiet nights at home. Ideal partner would be fun, open-minded, n/s, and attractive. E-mail me, I would love to hear from you!

Many personal advertisement sites, like this one at *ThirdAge.com*, also offer a more specific profile for interested parties to learn more about the person such as age, location, and general physical description. Searchers may narrow potential advertisements by indicating what state they live in, if they are seeking a man or woman, smoking status, and age range. *ThirdAge.com* also offers personal advertisements for people seeking an ‘Activities Buddy’ or ‘Online Friend or Pen Pal’.

At *Zelgo.com*, older adults may choose from a number of chat rooms and personal advertisement to find that special someone they are looking for. They offer rooms based on ethnicity and race to make it easier for members to find what and whom they want. Their Senior Dating Service provides lookers with a photo of the advertiser and also access to more specific profile information. By including photos, the physical attractiveness component of relationship formation returns to the forefront of online dating. *SassySeniors.com* also includes photographs in their personal advertisements. However, there is no evidence yet to suggest whether older adults interested in personal advertising prefer sites that include pictures or lean toward sites that allow them to simply describe themselves textually.

All of the websites listed have links or material for gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual senior adults and *SeniorNet.org*, *Yahoo!Chat*, and *Sassyseniors.com* provide chatrooms and personal ads to help assist the those who are stigmatized and marginalized (i.e., gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual senior adults) express themselves and find romance and companionship.

There are cautions that should be extended to older adults who are beginning to explore the Internet as a way to socialize and meet potential partners. As Lins de Barros and Goldman (1999) first began to articulate, there are often members of younger age groups (cohorts) who wish to join the virtual chat rooms of older adults. Some of these

surfers seek contact with the older generation and interact through friendly dialogue, but others infiltrate and engage participants in prejudiced, demeaning interactions that serve (directly or indirectly) to reinforce stereotypes of older adults as undesirable, unattractive, asexual, and inappropriate for the topic of sexuality. Still others use the Internet to degrade, suppress, and ridicule the sexuality of older adults.

The Internet and sex education

There once was a time that if a man experienced male erectile disorder, that was the end of a couple's physical intimacy. His sex life (as known by most men of this era), having revolved around penile vaginal penetration, was over and he quite often withdrew from his spouse sexually and affectionately. Prescription medications like Sildenafil Citrate (the generic form of Viagra) have offered help to those with physiological aetiologies, and have sparked a sexual revolution for older men and their partners. In a similar way, the Internet has provided older adults with information on sexuality and sexual functioning, which has the potential to fuel the sparks ordained to engulf the myths of senior asexuality.

Educational interventions can begin to challenge the negative myth and stereotypes that older adults may have internalized about themselves and their sexuality. Sex education is not just a phenomenon with the purpose of helping youth understand and manage their hormones; sex education for older adults can lead to the development of more positive attitudes toward sex (White & Catania, 1982). The Internet has the potential to deliver educational material to older adults interested in exploring sexuality to a degree that no other venue has to offer. According to McCormick and Leonard (1996), one of the advantages that the Internet has over traditional learning venues is that it provides anonymity, which prevents users from being labelled and stereotyped based on initial appearances. This may allow older adults to try new ways of interacting with others, experiment with different personas, and take more interpersonal risks than they might otherwise (Harris *et al.*, 1999). The Internet may be especially suited for sex education because, without the risk of being shamed or socially sanctioned, older adults may feel freer to have open and frank discussions about issues they have been trained to avoid. The Internet also provides sexuality professionals the opportunity to provide important information about sexuality to large numbers of people who may have been difficult to access previously (Roffman *et al.*, 1997).

Despite the advantages that the Internet may offer sex educators, the limitations are as plentiful. In a systematic review of internet resources for older adults with sexual concerns, Harris *et al.* (1999) summarizes a number of these limitations and illustrates them as well. They cite the lack of a centralized or continuously updated index of sexuality resources, the 'here-today, gone-tomorrow' lifespan of many websites, the overwhelming requirement of wading through vast amounts of irrelevant, and potentially offensive, material that indiscriminant search engines return to locate legitimate site with helpful information, and the lack of editorial standards to help users distinguish between advertising, professional information, and personal opinion—so called 'experts' or online 'professionals' may not only provide incorrect information, they may provide potentially damaging information. Harris *et al.* (1999) continue by

listing annotated bibliographies of five web sites that met their strenuous inclusion criteria. Of those five sites, only two are still in existence.

Clinicians should become conversant with what is available and, as much as possible; verify the legitimacy of sexual information on the Internet for older adults. Assigning internet homework to older clients may be a way for clinicians to provide psychosexual education in a way that invite older adults to become more engaged in the topic than an in-office session may allow. In fact, it is possible that sexual educating information provided by the Internet may assist some older clients to feel more comfortable and willing to discuss sexual issues in session that they might otherwise be reluctant to address. Clinicians may also consider becoming more involved directly in providing information to address the sexual concerns of older adults (see Chris Steidle, M.D.'s sources for men's and women's sexual problems through www.seekwellness.com), thereby directly resolving some of the limitations presented by the Internet.

The Internet and sex—erotica, pornography, and cybersex

That the Internet is becoming a medium through which sexuality is expressed has been well established (Cooper *et al.*, 2000a,b). Adult websites continue to attract new consumers and account for a large portion of Internet revenue (Koerner, 2000). Adult related queries far outnumber other search topics (Miller, 2000). Given that many older adults are using the Internet, it is likely that many of them visit adult oriented websites (Morrell, 2002). Leiblum (2001: 398) pointedly stated, 'the internet is a treasure house of erotica appealing to every taste and proclivity'. Surely this is true for the old as it is for the young. While one could easily locate empirical work documenting the use of erotica by the young (age 40–45 is usually the ceiling), it is also reasonable to ask to what extent older adults use the internet to access erotic material (e.g., pictures, stories, images, and products).

It may be impossible to determine the exact number of older adults who are using the internet for sexual expression and stimulation, undoubtedly, many may feel the threat of stigma if they acknowledge that they are not only sexual, but that they engage in (historically) unconventional means of expressing it. Regardless, there are probably more older adults exploring the erotic realms of the net than we may think (or perhaps more than we would *like* to think).

There exists a market of erotic stories and pornography that seems to be targeting older surfers of the net. Internet erotic shires can be found for the celebrities and pin-ups of the US's 'Golden Age' like Marilyn Monroe, Bettie Page, Ava Gradner, and Lili St. Cyr. The photos and the resurgence of the classic pin-ups are not the only means of drawing older adults back to the sexuality of their youth, authors of erotic novels and short stories have placed many of their plots in familiar settings characteristic of the 30–50s. Although these examples serve to reinforce the idea that sex is synonymous with youth (i.e., playing on the eroticism of older adults' youth), it also allows older adults to experience sexual feelings and stimulation as they recall the passions of their youth in the here-and-now, possibly recognizing the feelings are still alive, despite being neglected.

In addition to the professional vintage erotica, there are an increasing number of amateurs posting erotic pictures of themselves, including older women and men. This may serve as a direct challenge to the stereotype that elderly adults are asexual and may also help other older adults become more self-accepting. The Internet can also allow older adults to explore alternative sex scripts which can enhance their sexual identities and experiences at a time when society is trying to deprive them of what little they may have had. It is important to note that lovers or spouses may be the ones providing the motivation for the posting of these pictures and digital streams, possibly as a way to exploit their partners, however, it is also possible that there are more senior adults than we might think who are taking advantage of the chance for anonymous exhibitionism (Leiblum, 2001).

Other sex related markets are seeking to tap into senior surfer's pocket-books through online retail. Novelty sex toys, vibrators, books, videos, and erotic clothing are a few of the items available for anonymous, immediate purchase without the stigma that some senior might fear by purchasing from local vendors. There are also medications and natural supplements that are touted as capable of raising a person's libido, increasing erectile strength and vaginal lubrication, and boosting sex appeal. These claims may not be as credible as the marketer would like us to believe, but these are some of the major concerns older adults have regarding their sexuality (See Leiblum & Rosen, 2000).

Without a doubt, sexual expression on the Internet has facilitative potential for older adults. For example, individuals can find a sense of 'normalcy' about their sexual interests when finding others with similar pursuits. There are some, however, who are unable to control the time and content of Internet usage (Cooper *et al.*, 2000b). This can cause problems in their social, occupational, and personal lives. This may be especially true for coupled seniors, because the Internet may create a diversion or distraction from sexually related interpersonal difficulties, thereby exacerbating them. In fact, using the Internet for sexual purposes may now be the most prevalent paraphilia-related disorder because it allows and accesses every other category of paraphilia (e.g., pedophilia, voyeurism, exhibitionism, masochism, sadism, and paraphilia—not otherwise specified; Wincze, 2000).

Conclusions

There are too many unknowns to provide a complete summary of older adults' sexuality and the Internet. However, there should be no doubt that those over age 65 are becoming more numerous, more proficient, and a highly sought after source of Internet revenues. They are using the Internet for many of the same reasons as their younger counterparts as well as for unique pursuits. The Internet allows older adults to socialize despite limitations with mobility and physical impairments. It also allows them to educate themselves about changes they may experience in their sexuality and to explore and experiment with the more intimate aspects of themselves anonymously, affordably, and immediately. This is not only true for seniors living in North America, but globally.

It would be safe to assume that as the first cohort of Baby Boomers begin turning 60 in 2006 and as Europe regains the largest proportions of older adults in 2015, the

numbers of senior adults will grow exponentially. For decades, as a group, they have challenged and pushed the limits of the USAs norms; redefining the concepts of family and sexual expression (among many others). As practitioners and researchers, we should anticipate increased changes and challenges in other social norms as this huge cohort moves into later life—in the USA and abroad. Their technological competence and relative affluence will increase the potential of the Internet as a source of personal and social expressions of sexuality in later life. Will we keep pace?

Note

- [1] Although the majority of this paper will focus on the context of the US; the ideas, trends, and arguments presented seem applicable to the issues and opportunities that international practitioners and older adults may face regarding sexuality and later life.

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