

REVIEW

Women, sex and the internet

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ABSTRACT *In just a short span of time, the internet has become 'home' to tens of millions of women who sign on for connection, education and titillation. Women are playing an increasingly prominent role in cyberspace as visitors, purveyors of goods and services, customers and featured performers. This article will explore the various ways in which the world wide web provides educational opportunities and support for women, opportunities for developing and exploring romantic and sexual relationships and an entrée into new erotic worlds and marketplaces. The virtues of the internet—the democratization of sexual access and the opportunities afforded women of any age and physical condition—will be highlighted, as well as the potential risks associated with its ready availability and ease of access. The downsides of the internet, namely the possibility of misrepresentation, misinformation and isolated instances of misogyny will be reviewed as well.*

Women today are searching the net in unprecedented numbers—though not necessarily for the same reasons as their male counterparts. This article will explore the particular attractions of the internet for women—what they look for and what they find as a result of their net explorations. The potential ethnic and gender barriers that exist in cyberspace for women will be briefly considered, as well as the benefits of the internet in terms of its capacity for retrieving an impressive array of health information, in providing a forum for communication exchange and support and as a vehicle for increasing and expanding women's sexual and interpersonal options. The costs as well as the benefits of net travel will be highlighted.

The particular aspects of internet exploration that have special meaning for women include the following five areas: (1) reproductive and sexual health information; (2) accessing and providing sex education and resources; (3) entry into chat rooms and discussion groups; (4) exploring erotica—heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual, conventional and non-conventional; (5) limitless shopping.

Sexual and reproductive health information

For much of the twentieth century a woman's relationship to her health care provider was passive—she typically abdicated and adhered to the advice and

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recommendations of her physician. It was certainly the case that before the end of the Korean War, the typical doctor–patient relationship was paternalistic, with unquestioning acceptance of the professional authority of the physician (Winkel, 2000). It has only been since the mid-1950s that women have begun to criticize, and then demand, a greater voice in health care delivery and treatment. Before then women often complained that they were treated in a demeaning and disrespectful manner by health care professionals, and most of the time they were correct. Physicians were considered—and considered themselves—the voice of authority and felt empowered to provide recommendations and advice freely, often without specialized knowledge. For example, many felt qualified to dictate sexual mores. A 1981 gynecology textbook (Novak Jones & Jones’s *Textbook of Gynecology*), for instance, recommended that “The female should be advised to allow her male partner’s sex drive to set their pace and she should attempt to gear her satisfaction to his” (Novak *et al.*, 1981).

Similarly, another widely referenced textbook of the 1970s, Willson’s textbook of *Obstetrics and Gynecology* (1979), suggested that “the evaluation of the patient’s [woman’s] personality need not be a lengthy matter. It begins as she enters the consultation room and sits down. Character traits are expressed in her walk, her dress, her makeup ... The observant physician can quickly make a judgment as to whether she is over complaining, over demanding, aggressive, passive, erotic or infantile.”

In the past several decades, thanks to a confluence of forces, women have successfully demanded the end of this paternalistic and objectionable attitude and they have become more active participants in their own health care. Many middle-aged women will remember the powerful impact of the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the largely successful efforts of a lay group of Boston women to educate women of all ages and backgrounds about their anatomy and gynecological health (Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, 1976). For the first time, a significant number of women felt emboldened to take charge of their bodies in a way that was unthinkable in earlier decades. Many women wax nostalgic when they recall the speculum-insertion exercises they performed in the intimacy of small consciousness-raising groups back in the 1960s and the excitement they felt at encountering their genitals—often for the first time—in an atmosphere of demystification and personal control.

The internet has become the latest step in this process of ownership over one’s body and sexual/reproductive health since familiarity with the internet enables one to access information, treatment and discussion groups about virtually every health complaint and disorder, whether gynecological, reproductive or sexual. The internet has made possible, in an unprecedented way, collaborative and informed choices for women, since they now have access to many of the same sources of information, drugs, and treatment alternatives that their physicians do—and they are taking advantage of these resources in increasing numbers according to recent reports (*New York Times*, March, 2000).

Women’s interest in health care information and resources is prompted by the reality of being more active consumers of health care services than men. Hospital use

rates are 37% higher for women than for men and women are responsible for the majority of health care decisions made by their family. In fact, it has been estimated that 60%–90% of all health care decisions are made by women (Winkel, 2000). According to one recent source, there are more than 15 000 health-related websites (with hundreds being added daily), 46% of internet use is directed toward obtaining health information, and 50% of women who use the internet do so in order to access health information (Nickelson, 2000). One such site, www.allhealth.com/, enables the reader to access hundreds of others dealing with every imaginable clinical, medical, emotional and physical problem. Many women surf the internet for health care information and for no other reason.

The ability to access health information independently gives women advantages never before available to them. They can and do actively question health care providers armed with pages of internet printouts. They ask about or even demand to hear about alternative treatments and, if treated dismissively or disrespectfully, abandon one physician in favor of another who will answer their questions and treat them respectfully.

Many of the health related issues for which women search the internet are related to questions concerning their sexual and reproductive health. Women demand to know the latest techniques, success rates and alternative treatments for such diseases as breast or ovarian cancer, the most current thinking about the potential benefits and risks of hormone replacement or lumpectomy vs mastectomy, the sexual aftermath of hysterectomy with or without oophorectomy, the risks associated with breast implants or the most up-to-date thinking on the costs and benefits of breast feeding and circumcision. They want to know about both success and failure experiences with cosmetic surgery.

Moreover, women want to hear not only from professional health care providers but directly from the recipients of different treatments. And the internet permits them to do so—for just about any disease, medication or intervention. (To see a tiny sample of the offerings available and the links to other sites, just look at these websites devoted to women: www.obgyn.net/women/WOMEN.asp; and www.thriveonline.com).

In addition to accessing the most current information on clinical trials and controversial health issues, women are using the internet to obtain answers to specific questions concerning their own health and sexual practices. For example, consider the following questions:

“Is it possible to get an abortion for under \$200 without letting my parents know? Where?”

“Is it safe for me to have intercourse when I’m being treated for a yeast infection?”

“Can I take my husband’s Viagra while I’m being treated for hypertension?”

“How safe is it for me to receive cunnilingus when I’m eight months pregnant?”

“ What are the benefits and risks of estrogen replacement if my mother died of breast cancer at age 45?”

These are the kinds of frank questions many women have and are reluctant to ask or discouraged from asking their health care providers. On the internet such questions can provoke lengthy discussion and debate, with women from all over the world commenting and advising in addition to the professional experts. Moreover, these questions can be raised and discussed anonymously and confidentially, in the privacy of one's own home. This additional bonus increases the likelihood that information about sensitive or embarrassing subjects will, at the very least, get some 'airing', even for women not inclined to follow advice.

There are also support groups for women (as well as for men and couples) dealing with common reproductive and/or sexual issues or problems. For example, a 35-year-old woman recently requested therapy complaining of a life-long problem with vaginal penetration. Although she was sexually enthusiastic in all other respects, she could not tolerate vaginal insertion of any sort. She thought she was a 'freak' and kept the shameful secret to herself. It was only by cruising the internet and discovering that there was not only a condition called vaginismus, but a support group for it, that she felt emboldened to seek therapy. She reports that the support group provided her with valuable affirmation and suggestions.

Similarly, world-wide there are millions of couples struggling with infertility and it is typically the woman who suffers most from the frustration associated with reproductive failure (Daniluk, 1997). The Internet provides access to an incredible array of infertility information and support groups as well as access to information about adoption—ease, legality and availability—in every country in the world. The internet also provides countless opportunities to speak with thousands of women about their personal experience of different reproductive options, as well as with infertility specialists, adoption agencies and lawyers. The ability to pool information and trade resources is a major attraction of the internet for women.

Finally, women who may be reluctant to seek self-help or health information directly may be more comfortable doing so via the internet, particularly regarding topics that are potentially stigmatizing, such as alcoholism, domestic violence or sexual abuse services.

The downside to this explosion of information and inquiry is that some of it is wrong. There is no monitoring of the net for accuracy and veracity. Misinformation abounds as well as genuine fact and there is no way for the questioner to be certain that she is getting an accurate answer or simply someone's heartfelt opinion. 'Consumer beware' is the proper attitude to adopt when researching the net. Other concerns that have been raised regarding the use of the internet for health information include the possibility that unfounded hope or optimism may be activated by hearing about a single individual's success story, that time and money may be spent pursuing inappropriate treatment(s), that things can get worse by terminating or delaying appropriate interventions in the hope of a long shot and that indecision at the array of options offered and discussed via the internet may compound stress and anxiety (Gackenbach & Ellerman, 1998). Of course, these

'risks' exist in any situation where there is unlimited information and no-one available to help process it effectively, such as a public library!

Sex education

It comes as no surprise that a large amount of information available on the internet relates to sexuality. For men, sex is the major topic searched when surfing the net (Cooper, 1998; Freeman-Longo & Blanchard, 1998). Teens, too, use the internet as a major resource for sexuality information. They, even more than their elders, are posting questions, discussing conflicts and debating issues in both real time and in interactive fashion. This means that opportunities for providing sexuality education are virtually unlimited, whether this be information about sexual problems and possible solutions, safe sex practices, sexual disease prevention and treatment, information about the latest contraception, abstinence support groups, etc. There are advice columns, discussion groups and distribution lists providing a non-stop stream of information and resources. As Schnarch (1997) has noted, the internet brings together individuals who want to know with providers who want to share, teach, preach or simply titillate.

For women, access to sex information is particularly important, since so many women grow up in homes or religious groups that discourage accurate and unbiased sex information and education. Hindu, Muslim, Orthodox Jewish and Southern Baptist women, to mention just a few religious/ethnic groups, can independently seek alternative explanations and information about a host of sexually related questions in the privacy and anonymity of their own room via the WEB. No woman needs to be intellectually cloistered or denied access to the latest information about virtually any sexual topic.

A recent case highlights both the advantages and disadvantages of this aspect of the internet. A young Indian couple recently consulted me because of the husband's premature ejaculation prior to intromission. His wife, a 25-year-old woman, reported that she had been raised in a culture (and a family) in which no sex education was provided. Before her arranged marriage, she surfed the internet in order to become more knowledgeable about sex. She was (inadvertently) exposed to both the facts and the fictions associated with conjugal sexuality of every stripe and variety. Unfortunately, while this internet-based educational exploration served to inform her about all the possibilities, it did little to relieve her of her anxieties about penetration and it provided little real appreciation of the pleasures associated with sensual touching. She knew the facts, but could not imagine the feelings. Consequently, she delayed initial coitus and communicated her anxiety about penetration to her equally naïve and anxious husband.

On the positive side, the internet provides an opportunity for sex educators to reach large and sometimes inaccessible audiences cheaply and efficiently. Since the majority of sex educators are women, they can have a substantial impact on groups that may have been unreachable, such as the physically disabled, hearing impaired, or cloistered women.

For sex educators of teens and young adults, the internet offers an attractive

alternative to the kind of education (or misinformation) offered by peers or television. Log on and one can see how a condom is unrolled, find out the truth about aphrodisiacs, learn how to catch or avoid catching an STD, and hear the facts about the three-day-after pill. Not only can information be rapidly updated and specially designed for particular populations, but knowledgeable female sex educators can moderate chat rooms for adolescents and their parents.

The interactive nature of the internet makes it particularly appealing to young women since it can actively foster empowerment and mastery of their sexuality as well as lead to increased feelings of self-esteem and self-acceptance when they learn they are not alone in their worries or conflicts (Roffmann *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, for young women who tend not to raise questions in traditional classroom settings, the internet provides a safe, anonymous and protected place for admitting ignorance and raising concerns. Finally, as McCormick (1997) notes, feminist sexuality education on the internet provides a forum for diversity and viewpoints which may diverge from white, male, phallogocentric or heterosexual standards.

Although as yet underutilized, it is not far-fetched to consider how sex educators can use the net to offer a wide variety of curricula for underserved populations or groups. Cooper (1998) suggests, for example, that classes instructing parents on how to talk with their teens about safe sex could be made available through the internet to such faraway places as a rural village in Mexico or an urban center in India. The only limitation on the possible curricula that can be offered lies in the creativity and imagination of the educator (as well as in access to a computer!). Sexual enrichment for lesbian couples or masturbation 'training' exercises can be offered via the internet with no limitations on the issue of proximity or concerns about embarrassment at enrolling or being seen attending.

The internet can also serve as an adjunct to more traditional face-to-face therapy. While this option is less developed than others and has many more controversial and as yet unresolved issues associated with it, many software developers are writing interactive computer programs for overcoming sexual problems and increasing sexual enjoyment.

A recent edition of the *APA Monitor* (April 2000) was devoted to psychology and the internet. One of the topics discussed was the increasing number of both self-help sites and practitioners poised to provide online treatment (Rabasca, 2000). Many psychologists (and other mental health experts) have formed partnerships to develop counseling and web-based therapy sites. For example, Epotec, a web enterprise, contracts with employee-assistance programs and managed-care companies to offer online behavioral services. Already, two million clients have access to this site, where they can learn everything from goal-setting to loss and grief reactions, coping with stress and change, depression, worry and anger management!

It is difficult to determine the net effect and efficacy of all these offerings. How many women are actually using the internet for sex education? Does it result in attitudinal or behavioral change? Overall, what is the proportion of wheat to chaff—of useful information to politicized or particular agendas? How can responsible sex educators effectively capitalize on the resources of the internet for classroom or professional use? How can one ensure that uncritical, uneducated and

naïve women do not come away from their tours of cybersex education with dangerous misinformation?

These are the questions that must be addressed in future research, although it must be noted just how difficult it will be to obtain reliable and valid answers. How can one be certain of a reliable sample, given the tendency of individuals to adopt false ages and identities online? How can one assess efficacy or attitudinal change? Developing a rigorous approach to answering these questions is well beyond the scope of this paper (and the expertise of this author!) but these questions pose important issues for future research.

Romantic possibilities and relationship options

The opportunity to develop online romantic relationships, friendships and virtual lovers is an aspect of the internet that women are turning to in increasing numbers, much as they earlier used match-making services or newspaper personal ads. Match-making options abound and there are no limits to geography or preference possibilities. Often, what begins as an online flirtation escalates into face-to-face meetings—some of which may be rewarding, most of which are disappointing.

For example, a recent patient, a 46-year-old, twice-divorced mother of two says “the internet is a fabulous way to meet men ... it saves you time, money and preparation and gets the crap out of the way right away.” She describes how she places an ad, systemically screens and interviews the respondents, and rules out the men who are clearly inappropriate. She reports that “in my age group, the men are genuinely interested in meeting and forming real relationships”. When asked if she had found her ‘soulmate’, she replied “Not yet, but I’m still looking”.

Many women (and even more men) use the internet as a way of engaging in ‘safe’ flirtation and titillating sex talk. Instant chats on AOL and other websites often become increasingly sexualized, with participants detailing what they would like to do—or are doing—to and with each other. For some women this represents a slightly naughty but exciting way to try on a different sexual persona and explore unrealized aspects of their sexuality. For others, it may provide an alternative way to obtain sexual satisfaction when their real-life circumstances are disappointing or circumscribed. For example, one recent female patient was married to a man much older than herself. He had prostate cancer and was uninterested in any form of sexual intimacy. The woman loved her husband, but felt sexually and emotionally deprived. Through the internet she satisfied her craving for attention and sexual release.

One of the oft-cited advantages of the internet for relationship formation is the fact that individuals can ‘chat’ with one another anonymously and invisibly. A woman’s physical attributes (positive or negative) do not determine her initial impression but rather her skill with words, ideas, images and fantasy, etc. This gives many women confidence, especially those who in face-to-face contexts may be passed over but who via the internet can shine with wit and eloquence. It is also an advantage for shy or otherwise socially constrained or inhibited women and men. While some research has suggested that excessive reliance on the internet for one’s

social contacts leads to greater feelings of loneliness and depression, in moderation social success on the internet may be a useful first step in enhancing self-confidence and in promoting greater risk-taking in real-life situations.

The internet provides countless opportunities to meet fellow singles (or in some cases, individuals posing as single) of every color, stripe, sexual disposition and description. For instance, Jewish singles can meet like-minded others on the Jewish singles network, Christians can meet other Christians, lesbians can meet other lesbians and transsexuals can find sympathetic others. A patient I saw in therapy was sexually aroused by infantilism (Leiblum, 1997), elaborate fantasies of being diapered, dressed, nursed and spanked by a 'mother' who alternated between being nurturing and punishing. He went online and discovered that there were female 'mothers' out there who wanted adult babies. He met one such woman online who lived across the country from him. What began as a mutually arousing fantasy relationship became a true romance. While initially they discussed what they would each like to do for and with one another, over time their talk focussed less on sex and more on their real life experiences and vicissitudes. They started calling each other on the telephone and over a period of months, arranged a visit. They were thrilled with this face-to-face meeting. My patient eventually left his wife and children and moved to join his female 'soulmate'. In a recent e-mail (April 2000), he reports that the relationship continues to flourish!

Chat rooms and discussion groups

As Helen Fisher has noted when asked about the internet, women like to talk and men like to look. One of the most popular uses of the internet for women are e-mail communication and interactive chat rooms and discussion groups. There are several aspects of computer-mediated versus face-to-face communication that are especially appealing to women. Conversations on the internet tend to be more free and disinhibited than face-to-face interactions (Finn & Banach, 2000).

It has been suggested that since online communication does not include social status cues such as dress, age, race, body language and facial expressions and because it tends to occur in isolation, there is little to inhibit direct expression (Finn & Banach, 2000). The negative side of this is that 'flaming' can occur or even that women may be exposed to threats, profanity, seduction and confrontation (Walther, 1997). The positive side of online communication is that women can be more forthright, spontaneous and self-disclosing in internet chat rooms than in real-life groups. They are freer to raise questions and/or admit to non-politically correct sentiments.

As noted by Sproull and Faraj (1995), people connect to each other on the internet from vast distances and read notes posted by invisible others while remaining invisible themselves, all with few logistic and social consequences. Internet chat groups provide women with opportunities for affiliation, information and support. Examples of online support groups for women include groups for breast cancer survivors, home care givers, eating disorders, sexual abuse survivors,

single young mothers and parents (Finn & Banach, 2000). The internet provides an opportunity to share experiences and resources as well as to overcome isolation.

There have been studies looking at the value of online self-help forums. Dunham (1996), for example, studied a group of young single mothers who were provided with computers so they could connect from home and share coping strategies as well as advice. Results revealed a high level of use of this resource and an overall decrease in the level of stress reported by these young mothers. Over half the notes exchanged were supportive in nature.

The web chat rooms and other resources can serve as an equalizer for women—by entering chat rooms or answering sexy e-mail, women can have the opportunity of initiating, leading or pursuing new relationships with men or women and challenging conventional authority, all without risk. Women can assume control of what and how communications proceed and can terminate sessions instantly if they become bored, scared or uninterested. There is no danger of pregnancy, rape or STDs with online acquaintances. And, as stated earlier, the web is also a safe place for sexually disenfranchised minorities to meet and greet, to share their disappointments and successes and to find a place for themselves. If you are a woman who is HIV positive or has AIDs or have a recovered memory of incest, you will find others like yourself, people with whom you can talk and listen to, affirming that you are not alone in the world.

For instance, when researching this article, I posted an online request for people's experience with the internet and received the following e-mail reply:

The internet has been crucial in my sexual life. I came out into on-line butch-femme communities. Because there are so few butch—or femme—identified females in most parts of the country, we might not be able to find each other if it were not for the internet.

On the internet, we articulate butch-femme culture through daily conversation. We also use the internet as a tool to organize real-life gatherings. Finally, butch-femme personal ads proliferate on the internet; by contrast, one sees only one or two butch-femme ads in the Southern California lesbian papers.

It is clear that the internet provides a venue for women with every kind of interest, hobby, dilemma or need to find each other and to find support.

On the other hand, online support groups usually lack professional leaders or moderators who are responsible for promoting responsible discussion and enforcing group ethics (Finn & Banach, 2000). Leadership shifts as the time and interest of participants' change so that there may be a notable loss of continuity or clarity of discussion. Finally, there will always be individuals who dominate group discussion or who falsely claim authority and expertise. For instance, one of my patients was involved in a vaginismus support group. While initially she found it helpful, she became increasingly angry with one woman who wanted to use the group as a vehicle for self-promotion and exhibitionism. This woman wanted to post naked pictures of herself to illustrate sexual positions that did not involve vaginal entry (e.g.

doggie style anal intercourse). When my patient protested, she became involved in an angry online exchange of e-mail attacks (flames). Fortunately, she was bright enough to simply abandon contact with this discussion group.

Erotica, pornography and cybersex

Noonan (1998) says that “sex on the internet is, at once, a compendium of the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly. As such, one could argue that it is reflective of sex in real life” (p. 143). Certainly the internet is a treasurehouse of erotica appealing to every taste and proclivity. While volumes of research studies and reports have documented male use of erotica, it may be asked to what extent their female age-mates surf the net in search of erotic images, stories and pictures.

In fact, it is probably impossible to determine to what extent women are using the internet for sexual stimulation, since there are certainly men posing as women who surf the net, but the numbers of genuine women exploring erotica, enacting fantasies and engaging in cybersex may be a lot higher than we may think.

There are countless websites advertising erotica for women. Some of these provide stories and pictures that are tasteful and likely to appeal to most women; some are written for those interested in a particular activity, such as bondage and discipline, while others would probably be dismissed as overly explicit and off-putting to ‘traditional’ women used to ‘vanilla sex’. Many women acknowledge, however, that their husbands or partners have invited them to view pornographic pictures or websites and that, while they are intellectually put off by the crude and explicit quality of many of the images, they are nonetheless aroused.

For many women, sex is a complicated and ambivalent issue. The traditional female sexual script has emphasized the primacy of love, trust, commitment and intimacy. Nonetheless, in women—as in men—there often lurk more aggressive and violent and socially unconventional impulses. While for most women these aspects of their sexuality are ‘split-off’ or disowned, they nonetheless exist. Internet explorations may confront or invite women to explore these aspects of their sexuality in a safe and protected way. For instance, while a woman might not be interested in bondage and discipline or exhibitionism, she may become quite aroused by viewing pictures of these activities in the privacy of her bedroom. She may discover that she is excited, disgusted or intrigued. This realization may provide the avenue wherein women can begin to embrace and extend their own sexual identity to include room for activities or fantasies they may otherwise have disowned, denied or suppressed.

Noonan (1998) raises the possibility that the internet may increase feelings of anxiety for some individuals when they come across photos or depictions online which are not congruent with their identified ‘lovemap’. He gives the example of a person becoming aroused by a gay or pedophile scene and then becoming worried that one is gay or likely to molest children. He terms this possibility ‘self-defined lovemap-inappropriate sexual arousal’ (SDLISA) and suggests it may include pedophilic, sadomasochistic, homosexual, heterosexual or any imagery or ideas that

are incongruent or in conflict with one's perception of one's own sexual persona yet which may be sexually arousing or troubling at times. A common example of this phenomenon would be the young adolescent woman who fears she must be gay because a single same-sex encounter was arousing or she is 'turned-on' by the large-breasted women featured on the pages of *Playboy*.

While it is unlikely that these instances of arousal to lovemap-inappropriate or incongruent imagery will be really troublesome, it may occur and be upsetting to some women. Nevertheless, it pays to remember that the effects of pornography are short-lived and innocuous for the vast majority of individuals. In fact, for many women, awareness of arousal to unconventional sexual imagery may be liberating and may lead to greater tolerance of others who practise non-conventional sexual lifestyles.

The vast availability and variety of erotica on the internet, especially the pornography featuring 'amateurs' where women of every size, shape, age and description post pictures of themselves in various provocative poses and positions, may help women become more self-accepting. It is interesting that there is so much amateur (non-professional performers or models) explicit pornographic material on the net. While it is possible that their lovers or husbands are providing the impetus for posting them, either as a way of exploiting women emotionally or financially, it is also possible that there are more women than we may think who enjoy the opportunity for anonymous exhibitionism.

A step up from simply viewing erotica or pornography online is the actual engagement in cybersex. Doring (2000) defines cybersex as "a social interaction between at least two persons who are exchanging real time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused and satisfied" and she reviews the feminist literature on cybersex from two perspectives—the victimization perspective and the liberation perspective. The victimization perspective sees cybersex as a heterosexist practice in which women are raped, objectified, harassed and forced to engage in cyber-prostitution. This position holds that men who engage in cybersex are exploiting and degrading women both by their language, which may be vulgar and explicit ("How large are your boobs?") and by their suggestions ("Spread your legs"). Even though actual body contact does not occur, the symbolic suggestions may be viewed as both menacing and frightening, especially if a male says that he is going to learn a woman's real identity and locate her personally (Adams, 1996).

The liberation perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the options computer-mediated communication offers women and girls who actively seek sexual pleasure online. Appearance does not matter, it is easy to find partners, anonymity minimizes social control and inhibition, the physical distance between parties and the computer's off-switch prevent really dangerous or harmful situations. From this vantage point, cybersex frees women to explore their sexualities safely and to enjoy more sex, better sex and different sex.

Doring (2000) suggests that there is a third position from which to view cybersex for women—the empowerment position. From this position, sexual empowerment is a process that occurs on both an intellectual level and an

experiential one. Girls and women can learn to take control of sexual interactions and make them both safe and satisfying by setting boundaries, by articulating needs and by insisting on mutually consensual interactions. Moreover, there need be no assumptions about what kind of sex women want or don't want. Rather, women are asked to consider intellectually, thoughtfully and independently what brings them pleasure or pain. A woman need not respond to anything she does not want to or she can reframe or reshape sexual suggestions to meet her own needs. She can become sexually empowered and she can enjoy cybersex.

Finally, there is the question of whether the anonymous, accessible and easy availability of internet pornography and cybersex leads to sexual compulsivity. This is an issue for another paper, but it can be said that it seems quite unlikely as far as women are concerned. In Cooper, *et al.*'s (2000) admittedly non-random and non-representative survey of cybersex participants, only 17% were female (as opposed to 83% who were male) and less than 1% of the total number of survey respondents indicated that they took part in it for more than 11 hours a week.

In this survey men reported using websites featuring visual erotica more than women did (49.9% of men as opposed to 22.6% of women) whereas women favored chat rooms (48.6% women as opposed to 22.8% men). Further, 49% of women reported that they had downloaded sexual material.

In summary, it is clear that there are women who are actively surfing the net for erotica, pornography and cybersex and it is likely that this number will grow as women become more comfortable in cyberspace and with computer technology generally [1].

Limitless shopping

Internet spending by consumers is a growing practice. It is estimated that internet spending could increase to \$180 billion over the next five years, up from \$20 billion in 2000 (*New York Times*, 23 April 2000). Net advertisers have realized that women are one of the three fastest growing audiences on the web (the others being the 50+ market and the under 18 market). Women are now believed to make up 47% of the online universe and websites for them are growing rapidly (@Plan's Winter 2000 survey). Some popular ones include Women.com, Epicurious.com, PHYS.com, and iVillage.com. It hardly needs to be said that women can purchase every imaginable item from the internet and are being encouraged to do so with on-line marketing directed specifically at them.

For women who are reluctant to purchase sex toys, books, condoms or videos at their local shopping mall, the internet provides a discreet, anonymous and efficient way to access these goods. It is possible to purchase a huge variety of sexy clothes on the internet—everything from split-crotch panties to a full Parisian maid's outfit—with special sizes available for the full-breasted or attractive prostheses for those with one breast, not to mention stilettos, feather boas and full-regalia leathers, depending on taste.

Audio-erotica is also for sale, making it possible to listen to hot tales of passion

while masturbating or engaging in partnered-sex. There are tapes to listen to with headphones so it sounds as if one is in the midst of an orgy, complete with moans, heavy breathing and even a few slaps or spanks highlighted in vivid stereophonic sound.

Figures on the amount of shopping that women actually do online are difficult to come by because they change rapidly and purveyors jealously guard the information they have about their customers, but it is likely that this venue will expand exponentially as women become more internet savvy and comfortable. While many women enjoy the actual experience of shopping and handling the goods they purchase, they may be less comfortable going into 'sex shops' for erotic purchases and many appreciate the opportunity to do this anonymously.

One married woman of 45 complained that she and her husband had been looking for a good vibrator for years but did not want to ask any of their friends for advice. Once directed to a website that specialized in sexual toys, she commented "I knew there had to be something better than those back massagers with attachments, but I didn't have a clue as to how to go about finding one. Thank-you!"

Another example is of a patient who was extremely sexually inhibited. She entered therapy as a 42-year-old single woman who felt gravely deficient in terms of her sexuality. She had never experienced orgasm and her goal in treatment was to become orgasmic with masturbation. While initially unable to even maintain eye contact or to talk directly about her sexual anxiety, over time she became more comfortable. She was extremely computer literate, however, and soon began surfing the net to find sexual materials. At first, she bought self-help books at Amazon.com but then ventured onto Betty Dodson's home page (www.bettydodson.com) where she was impressed and encouraged by the direct discussion of masturbation as well as of every other conceivable sexual topic of interest to women. She gradually became more confident in conducting net searches and found that she was not so unique in her sexual difficulties. She purchased vibrators—both vaginal and anal—and instructional manuals as well as erotic videotapes online. She freely admitted that she could never have brought herself to explore sexual merchandise if it was necessary to walk into an actual store, but she had few reservations about shopping online anonymously.

It is clear that shopping (and hunting for bargains online!) is an activity that women enjoy. As younger women come online in greater numbers, it is possible that they will feel greater freedom in sexual purchasing and won't wait for their husbands' or boyfriends' promptings to order vibrating leather butterflies or double dildos built for two. And gay women who may not live near a large city will use the net as a sexual supermarket for products they could not find elsewhere. Certainly for sexuality-related purchases such as lingerie, videos, sex toys and erotic books, the internet is fast becoming the leading vendor. Those women who would never have dreamed of visiting a sex shop are snapping up vibrators, velcro hand cuffs, ribbed and flavored condoms and explicit films. The impact these purchases will have on the amount of sexual experimentation or activity they engage in is unknown, but it suggests an active interest in, and curiosity about, sexual novelty and experimentation.

Men, women and the internet: an equal playing field?

Although the internet was initially developed and run exclusively for military and later scientific research purposes (Noonan, 1998), the gender gap appears to be rapidly shrinking. In fact, according to a year-end survey from Nielsen/NetRatings, women accounted for 47% of the total US internet population on average from February to December 1999 and jumped to 50% during December as holiday shopping increased. From February to December, as the overall number of active US web users jumped 23% to 119 million, the number of women who used the web surged by 32%, outstripping the 20% growth rate for men.

While the internet has, indeed, become a fact of life for millions of women, it has not eliminated the traditional barriers that women face in other areas of their life. Some authors have suggested that issues of access, experience, language/code and canon faced by women on the internet mimic the power structures and hierarchies existing in the real world. Some authors question whether electronic networks adequately include marginal constituencies, such as women and ethnic minorities, within their boundaries.

It is certainly true that fewer women than men have technological competence, are comfortable or qualified to navigate their way down the information superhighway, are actively outspoken in cyberspace or moderate chat rooms or internet sites, but this is changing rapidly. Many young women are highly technologically competent, having grown up with computers, and even middle-aged and older women are testing the water and discovering they can swim.

Nevertheless, the tendency toward male bias exists in the world wide web as well as in 'outerspace'. For instance, research on gender differences in internet behavior and attitudes resembles research on gender behavior with respect to computers generally. Males have both used the internet longer and more frequently than females (GVU, 1996, 1997, 1998). A 1997 American Internet User Survey (FIND/SVP, 1997) reported that women were less likely than men to use the computer for all but two of the 10 most frequently used content areas of the internet: news, hobbies, entertainment and movies, government and community, product information, sports, music and games. The exceptions were using the internet for travel information and to find health and medical information, the latter reflecting the traditional care giver role of women, as discussed earlier.

Interestingly, as in mixed-gender groups generally, a number of studies of varied online discussion forms have found that males monopolize online conversations in both the number and length of their postings (Morahan-Martin, 1998). Even in feminist groups, We (1993) found that males dominated two of three USENET groups. Online, when women try to have equal footing on male-dominated lists, they tend to be ignored, trivialized or criticized by men (Herring, 1994), leading them to drop out of online discussions. Consequently, women want—and are developing—their own online communities and discussion groups. In these all female forums, they have more uninterrupted online expression as well as are less likely to find themselves confronted. Women in women's discussion groups find more support, safety and control.

Acknowledging the dark side

Spam (unsolicited advertising, chain letters, and scams found in masse-mailings and newsgroup postings) and tasteless pornography are abundant on the internet. Being bombarded with crotch shots, larger-than-life sex organs (and for those with a sound card) moans and groans may not be to every woman's taste. Many women are turned off and even upset by many of the pornographic sites they may stumble onto when surfing the web. Sometimes they do not know how to find their way out. They may be so turned off that they do not bother to peruse the more useful sexuality pages if they have found their way onto the web via the male route.

They may be stopped by the spam that splatters across the screen as soon as they begin to check out anything that might be linked to a hardcore site. Sex is shoved in your face and some women may find it upsetting. Certainly, it may provide obstacles for women who are anxiously and tentatively exploring their sexuality.

There are new and insidious ways to sexually harass women via the internet. In the workplace, it is reported that sexual harassment is a fact of life despite federally mandated training, reporting and disciplinary action. Unfortunately, for those misogynists who enjoy humiliating or stalking women, the internet offers a wide array of anonymous opportunities to hound unsuspecting women. Some protection will be offered women, however, through new electronic-eavesdropping surveillance systems (Cooper *et al.*, 2000). Such systems with names like WEBSweeper, Disc Tracy and Secure VIEW can conduct desktop-to-laptop sweeps, monitoring web use everywhere from the mailroom to the executive suite.

Perhaps a better strategy for women is to become knowledgeable about ways of protecting themselves online: to learn survival skills in cyberspace. Finn and Banach (2000) urge women to learn about "password protection, encryption software, blocking and filtering software, anonymous mailers, alternate E-mail receiving sites, chat room and newsgroup safety, the potential for misinformation, how privacy may be lost, how to deal with online harassment, policies and laws regulating (or not regulating) interaction in cyberspace and where to get help if victimization occurs" (p. 250). Websites that offer education and resources include Women Halting Online Abuse (<http://whoa.femail.com/>), Stalking Victim's Sanctuary (<http://www.stalkingvictims.com/>), Cyberangels (<http://www.cyberangels.org/>), SafetyEd (<http://safetyed.org/>) and Safer Dating (<http://www.saferdating.com/>).

Conclusions

It is not easy to provide a neat summary of women, sex and the internet. Certainly, women are going online in ever-increasing numbers and finding much to entertain, educate and enlighten them. They are using the internet for many of the same reasons as their male age-mates and for different pursuits as well. Most women love e-mail and the opportunities for interactive chats and discussions. They are using the internet for match-making as well as sexual stimulation and titillation, especially

young women. They are using it as a major resource for sexual and reproductive health information.

There is little doubt that greater and greater numbers of women will visit Cyberspace in the years to come. Like men, they appreciate the anonymity, accessibility and increased access to information the internet provides. On the other hand, there are differences between men and women in the comfort and safety they feel both in going online and staying online. These differences stem from linguistic differences between men and women as well as males' greater comfort and expertise with computer technology generally. It is likely that these differences will diminish over time with more universal internet access, cheaper costs and more user-friendly interfaces.

Finally, women must be cognizant of the dictum 'Consumer beware' when surfing the net, since misrepresentation, misinformation and isolated instances of misogyny exist in cyberspace as well as in outerspace.

Note

- [1] Some internet sites that are of particular interest to women are the following: the pink kink catalogue (<http://www.razberry.com/raz/pink/top.htm>), the erotica readers' association (<http://www.erotica-readers.com/>), black rose (www.br.org) and especially resources for kinky women (<http://www.kweb.org/>). Going to one of these sites will offer you links to others.

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