

Women and the web: cybersex activity and implications

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ABSTRACT *Women are often omitted from discussions of cybersex activity, yet women are over-represented among those who are rated as cybersex-compulsive. Failure to consider females' problems with their Internet sexual expression leaves this special population at risk and without helpful clinical resources. This article examines how women's web use compares with men's, why females are overlooked in their Internet behaviours, offers details of women's on-line activity, and suggests implications for women themselves and for those who treat them. Women's cybersex activities are contrasted with a model of healthy sexuality, which illustrates potential problems with females' Internet sex behaviours. Specific considerations are offered for clinicians who treat women who are caught in the web of on-line sex.*

Introduction

Obviously, the advent and use of the Internet has profoundly affected women as well as men. Daily, both genders access the Internet in ever growing numbers and spend increasing amounts of time online. This information superhighway affords women easy access to a nearly incomprehensible array of topics. From business to baskets, from entertainment to energy, from politics to plastic surgery, from relationships to racy lingerie—myriad treatments of these subjects and thousands more appear on command after a few simple keystrokes. Of all the possible topics, one surfaces as the focus of interest worldwide. Perhaps no longer surprising, sexuality is the most frequently searched subject and the most profitable part of the Internet. Nearly 20% of Internet users have accessed an 'adult' site (Zogby/Focus, 2000).

Estimates vary about the financial scale of the on-line adult industry. Some analysts report American consumers spent \$220 million at fee-based adult sites in 2001 (Elias, 2002), while others approximate \$1 billion in revenues annually (National Academy of Sciences, 2002). One cybersex expert quotes a figure as high as \$83 billion was spent on Internet sex last year, which is more than the sales of computers and software (Carnes, 2002).

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While the Internet can be used for healthy sexual expression and for meaningful relationships, such as by individuals who are isolated or disenfranchised (Cooper *et al.*, 2000), clearly this new technology can also give rise to significant problems with both human relating and sexual activity. Some, in fact, assert that sexuality is the biggest problem with the Internet, as well as its biggest product (Carnes, 2002).

This assertion does not catch most well-informed individuals unaware. Probably a majority of readers have encountered clients who are plagued with problems resulting from their online sexual behaviour. It is with good reason that this entire special issue is devoted to a scholarly examination of cybersex as a clinical concern. The Internet, as a microcosm of the civilized world, is prone to the pitfalls of human behaviour (Carnes *et al.*, 2001), including—and especially—difficulties in the dark side of human sexuality.

What perhaps is surprising is the number of women who experience problems with their online sexual and relational activity. Standards for feminine behaviour limit women's expressions of sexuality more than men's practices, and women's participation in Internet sex is far outside the stereotypical boundaries. The general public, as well as many professionals, stereotypes those who participate in cybersex, and that portrait assumes the user is male. Thus, even many professionals fail to recognize women's struggle with distressing sexual activity, especially when the vehicle is the Internet.

A number of reasons explain this oversight among both laypeople and clinicians. Only recently has attention turned toward compulsive sexual behaviour of any kind among any group. Obviously, knowledge is in the infancy stage about both the Internet and its impact. Yet, as people experiment with various expressions of sexuality, they take advantage of available mediums for the delivery of sexual material. Like no other vehicle before, the Internet packs potency that is unquestionably changing not only the world, but also the sexual behaviour of its inhabitants. However, professional, theoretical, investigational, and moral discourse has not caught up with the Internet's explosion onto the cultural landscape. No one could have predicted the accelerated result of combining the inherent power of sexuality with the velocity of the Internet, and many lack a frame of reference for considering these 'turbo-charged' sexual interactions (Delmonico, 2002).

Possibly an equally important reason women are not thought of as affected by problematic cybersex is that women are not presumed to engage in disturbing sexual behaviour in general. Categorically, sexual acting out is largely considered a male phenomenon, much as it was first thought that alcoholism primarily affected men (Ferree, 2001). In addition, women themselves are reluctant to expose their struggle with problematic sexual behaviour. The enormous shame that surrounds sexual difficulties is exponentially experienced by female strugglers. Few women speak openly about their problem with online pornography or sexual chat rooms, which adds to the likelihood that females will be omitted from the discussion of cybersex consequences.

In contrast to general perception, the reality is that women, indeed, participate in Internet sexual activity, often to a distressing degree. The secrecy and anonymity afforded by the Internet allows women more opportunities for sexual activity with less risk of discovery. In a reanalysis of a 1998 survey of more than 9,000 Internet users, women constituted 14% of the entire group (Cooper *et al.*, 2000). However, they

accounted for 21% of cybersex addicts. In other words, although women are online significantly less than men (14% females as opposed to 86% males), women are over-represented among those who progress beyond recreational use to the realm of addiction. This article examines women's Internet sexual activity, including what women do on the Web, along with theories about why they do it, the implications of that activity, and suggestions for intervention.

What women do on the web

Types of Internet sexual activity

Women's cybersex activity, like men's, includes a broad range of online behaviours. Delmonico (1997) identifies three main categories of cybersex pastimes: pornography exchange, real-time discussions, and compact disc distribution. It seems more helpful, particularly in the context of this discussion about women's Internet activity, to consider conduct in terms of the user's interface with others: either solitary activity or interactive pursuits. Thus, this author offers the following classifications of Internet sexual behaviour:

Solitary activity

- View and/or distribute pornography of various forms: Pictures, audio, video, or multimedia such as CD-ROM material or sex games (with or without masturbation).
- Read written material (erotica, romance or fantasy text, newsgroups).

Interactive activity

- Exchange e-mail.
- Participate in sexual chat rooms or discussion groups.
- Participate in 'virtual' locations: live video feed with activity suggested by the viewer.
- Engage in cybersex (communicating online while masturbating).

Within these two main categories, activities may take a variety of forms. Interests may target the opposite sex or same sex, animals or objects, adults or children, voluntary or coerced behaviour, or painful or pleasurable interactions. In terms of both anecdotal report and clinical research, women engage in all of these activities. Females, though, exhibit a clear preference for a segment of these online behaviours, and their choices align with women's sexual acting out patterns in general.

Women are more likely to want romance and relationship as part of their sexual activities, and the 'love' or 'relationship' addict is the most typical presentation for females (Ferree, 2002). This pattern translates intact to the Internet, where women strongly prefer chat rooms where they can 'relate,' instead of solitary activity like accessing pornography. In all four groups of Internet users (nonsexually compulsive,

moderately sexual compulsive, sexually compulsive, and cybersexually compulsive), a major study found women were disproportionately represented in the interactive mediums such as chat rooms, which were preferred by 70% (Cooper *et al.*, 2000). Simply put, women's online sexual behaviour mirrors their offline behaviour: Females most often favour relationally-oriented activity. This finding is consistent with Young's (1997) position that social support serves as one key psychological reinforcement for computer-based interaction. In contrast, men are more interested in online solitary pursuits, usually of a visual nature like viewing pornographic material or using multimedia for sexual purposes. Even those women who desire the same goal as most male users—the casual sexual encounter—tend to couch their activity in some semblance of a relationship (however fleeting) instead of anonymous sex.

While not the majority, some women prefer solitary Internet sexual activities such as accessing pornography on the Web. In definitive research by Cooper *et al.* (1999), 10% of female cybersex addicts used the WWW instead of chat rooms, and 22.9% of women reported recreational (non-compulsive) use of web sexual pursuits. Generally speaking, most women who choose visual material are younger females, age 18–34. A possible explanation is that these younger females are more accustomed to visual stimuli due to the nature of our media-oriented culture. Although not confirmed by valid research, anecdotal experience indicates that women who prefer visual pursuits typically access either same-sex or sadomasochistic activity, instead of heterosexual images. Clinical experience also suggests women usually take advantage of free sexual material, while men are more prone to paying for online sexual images.

An alarming trend among women who connect on the Internet

A key difference surfaces in the way women progress in their Internet sexual activity. An early study reports women are more likely than men to seek real-life meetings with their online sexual partners. In fact, an astounding 80% of female cybersex addicts admitted this behaviour (Schneider, 2000). This escalation of sexual activity clearly has enormous implications and risks. Once a woman steps offline, she is increasingly vulnerable to destructive interactions and their resulting consequences.

Why women may welcome Internet sexual activity

A possible reason for women's preference for relational Internet sex is found in the conceptualization of sexual compulsivity as a 'courtship disorder.' While not all women who seek sex online are sexually compulsive, the concept of courtship is still useful in providing a foundation for understanding why women disproportionately turn to the Internet as a relationship vehicle. Courtship is a process of creating and building relationships, and the Internet profoundly changes the way we relate to others. Specifically, the Internet limits certain aspects of the courtship process (Carnes *et al.*, 2001). First, it eliminates metacommunication cues such as tone, facial expression, and body language. It allows people to control the information they share, which provides unlimited opportunity for deception. Forty-eight percent of Internet users report

misrepresenting personal facts, at least in terms of accurately stating their age (Cooper *et al.*, 2000). Internet communication fosters pseudo-intimacy, where people perceive they know each other well, because the anonymous environment prompts them to quickly reveal themselves beyond what they would do in a real-life relationship (Schneider & Weiss, 2001). On the other hand, the Internet prevents physical touch, which is essential in all relationships, not just for the purpose of sexual intercourse. Because of their lack of authenticity and genuine intimacy, online relationships are deficient in the true commitment necessary for meaningful human bonding. In sum, the Internet short-circuits most components of human courtship, such as noticing, attraction, touching, creating intimacy, and commitment (Carnes *et al.*, 2001).

Women, perhaps because of their relational 'wiring,' find it easy to overlook these flaws of courtship in the compelling environment of the Internet. Cyberspace technology allows for an immediate (though artificial) sense of connection with another person, which provides the rocket fuel for females' participation in Internet sex. As an added boost, women can eliminate the inconvenience or risks associated with face-to-face interaction. Further, a cyber-environment bypasses the relationship hurdle of physical attractiveness, because users may falsely describe themselves, doctor their electronic images at will, or even substitute someone else's picture altogether. The Internet also allows a woman to be in total control of her sexual activity and relationships. Without the element of physical dominance, the playing field is level online and women possess equal clout, which they lack in most real-world stadiums. This power component is a huge draw for women, who often stage a power struggle through use of their sexuality (Ross, 2000). The Internet provides the perfect arena for females to exert their power, both sexually and relationally.

The web is also a draw for psychologically or emotionally unhealthy women who gravitate to the fantasy world of the Internet. Females who are unsure of themselves, needy, insecure about their physical attractiveness, lacking in communication or relationship skills, or looking for another person to make them feel whole can compensate for their deficiencies in the Internet environment of illusion (Schneider & Weiss, 2001). This medium offers the perfect breeding ground for fantasy-based interactions, which in turn, feeds the potential of 'romance' addiction to which women are particularly susceptible. The web transforms fantasy sexual activity and relationships into reality—at least virtual reality.

The Internet, however, impacts human relations in even a more basic way. The very nature of computer interaction alters how people communicate (Schneider & Weiss, 2001). E-mail correspondence and even conversation via instant messages or in a chat room forces users to take turns responding. Each person has time to formulate thoughts and share them effectively, which may not be the case in real life. Those who interrupt or dominate can hide these traits. Because of the sequential nature of Internet communication, people are forced into an artificial theater of interaction, where users present better than they possibly are. What you see is not always what you get. However, even if a woman is disappointed by an Internet partner, other possibilities are only a click away. The hope for the perfect romantic connection lures women around the next cyber corner.

Implications of women's cyber activity

Is women's Internet sexual activity merely another outlet for erotic expression or does it constitute something more problematic? The answer is as individual as women themselves. Some women, like some men, seek sex on the web recreationally without unfavourable results. Other women, again like other men, become caught in the web of online sexual pursuits.

Perhaps the best way to discuss the implications of women's cybersex is to compare this activity to characteristics of healthy sexuality. Manley (1995) suggests a five-component model of sexual health, which involves the following dimensions: behavioural, physical, personal, relational, and spiritual.

Behavioural dimension

The behavioural element of healthy sexuality is actually the absence of problematic sexual behaviour such as compulsivity. As earlier established, women who use the Internet for sexual purposes are not necessarily sexually addicted. However, similar to how marijuana is often a gateway to harder drugs, even recreational use of Internet sex exposes a woman to the possibility of progressing into addiction. For some people, web connections prompt almost instant addiction, much like the highly addictive nature of cocaine.

The anonymity of online behaviour has a disinhibiting and normalizing effect. For some women, the result is positive as they explore aspects of sexuality and interaction that they would never dare investigate in real life. Cybersex veers away from healthy sexuality when it interferes with normal responsibilities, causes distress, or becomes out of control. A number of self-score questionnaires are available to help a woman judge whether her online activities are causing her problems (Delmonico, 1999).

Physical dimension

The physical dimension of healthy sexuality covers three main areas. The first is the mechanics of sexual functioning, such as freedom from disorders like erectile dysfunction, or in a woman's case, dyspareunia or orgasmic inhibition. Women whose primary sexual activity is on the Internet may find they experience sexual difficulties in real-world encounters. Self-stimulating to orgasm is quite different from achieving orgasm with a physical partner. The clandestine and solitary nature of sex on the web does not foster the freedom necessary for healthy interaction with a real life partner.

Second, the physical dimension deals with body image. Women who use web pornography decline in their positive image of themselves as physical and sexual beings. The fantasy world of pornographic material cannot be matched by typical women marred by normal physical flaws. In this contest, a woman will always lose. Females who use pornography themselves, as well as women whose partners use pornography, suffer from comparing their bodies to online images.

Healthy self-care is the third element of the physical dimension. Healthy sexuality presupposes some level of general 'health,' yet as their behaviours increase, cybersex

addicts have reduced time for healthy self-care. Sleep deprivation is a significant consequence, as women surf the web long into the night after household members are asleep (Schneider & Weiss, 2001). Research is clear that heavy Internet users spend excessive time on the computer to the exclusion of other activities. Forty percent of women ranked as cybersex compulsives spent at least 11–20 hours engaging in cybersex. Thirty percent of female cybersex compulsives spent 31–40 hours online (Cooper *et al.*, 2000), which is the near equivalent of a full-time job. It is extremely unlikely that these excessive Internet users find time for healthy exercise, nutritious eating, or even simple self-care such as grooming.

Personal dimension

This aspect of healthy sexuality refers to an individual's trauma history. In descriptive data from a clinical population of cybersex abusers, 76.2% of females presented a history of sexual abuse, and 52.4% bore a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (Schwartz & Southern, 2000). The same authors contend female cybersex abusers may be vulnerable to trauma reenactment as they explore sexual behaviour on the web, particularly in the case of sadomasochistic practices. More basically, the excessive use or abuse of online sexual pursuits is, in and of itself, often a source of trauma (distress) in a woman's life. Individuals with unresolved trauma are less likely to enjoy healthy sexuality.

Relational dimension

Healthy sexuality is more about relationship—i.e., intimacy—than it is about body parts. As detailed earlier, Internet sexual activity involves only pseudo-intimacy, not genuine relationship. In fact, sex on the web adversely affects real-life sexual relationships. According to Schneider (2000), 68% of couples reported one or both partners had lost interest in relational sex. Further, partners felt that cyberaffairs were as emotionally devastating and harmful to the relationship as live or offline affairs. In addition, children suffered because of their exposure to Internet pornography with its objectification of women and men, as well as from the neglect of an online parent. Cybersex addiction was a major factor in the breakup of 22.3% of couples in the survey.

Spiritual dimension

The final component of healthy sexuality is the spiritual one. This aspect recognizes that human sexual behaviour has significance beyond the physical interaction involved. Our sexuality is closely akin to our spirituality—our experience of being intimately aware of ourselves first, and then intimately connected with another. In a metaphorical sense, the sexual drive to unite with someone can be seen as a desire to be united with the Divine (Carnes *et al.*, 2001). Ultimately, then, our spiritual tenets permeate our sexual experiences.

In the absence of cultural mores to guide choices about online sexual behaviour, women must turn to their own value systems (Carnes *et al.*, 2001). They must

determine a definition of sex and what it means in their lives. (For example, is an online relationship really an affair?) Women must decide if Internet sexual expression is a recreational activity or something more significant. They must choose whether to engage in solitary sex behaviour or open themselves to interactive manifestations. Unlike any previous medium, the Internet is a new frontier for women to navigate these deeply spiritual concerns.

Considerations for clinicians

Women and their use of web-based sexual pursuits require special consideration on the part of clinicians. Many therapists must first confront their own bias about women's sexual activity in order to recognize this issue in the first place. In most cases, professionals must inquire specifically about female clients' Internet sexual behaviour, because their shame prevents many women from disclosing it. In a positive vein, though, female cybersex addicts may seek treatment earlier than males, perhaps precisely due to their accelerated shame (Schwartz & Southern, 2000). Establishing a trusting therapeutic relationship is unusually vital when working with shame-based female cybersex users. Women also gain enormous benefits from being connected with other women who are confronting their online problematic behaviour. With the appropriate releases of information, clinicians should arrange support among women in their practice who struggle with the shadow side of the net.

Therapists must understand the relational nature of most women's cyber activity, and ask the right questions to identify problems in this area. If a woman reports she does not access online pornography, the professional must not assume her Internet use is problem free. Further probing is important. Similarly, many screening tests for problematic Internet sexual activity may not identify female cybersex abusers, because many questions focus on solitary behaviours (like viewing pornography) or consequences (like financial problems) not applicable to the majority of women.

Effective clinicians will be savvy diagnosticians who are alert for co-morbid conditions in female cybersex users, such as affective disorders, PTSD, or other psychiatric and somatic symptoms. Female cybersex addicts will often present with partner relational disorders, when the underlying cause is hidden Internet activity.

Therapists face the challenge of helping women who are caught in the web without the benefit of much clinical literature to guide them. To this author's knowledge, this article is one of the first to specifically address women's experience on the web. The lack of material tailored to women's cybersex activity increases their feelings of shame and isolation. Professionals must be creative in adapting existing information and assuring women they are not alone in their experience.

Discussion

This exploration of women's use of the Internet for sexual purposes is not intended to be a criticism of this new wonder of technology. The information superhighway is not a black and white road that leads either to Goodville or Badtowne. Human sexual activity,

itself, is potentially both life affirming and life destructive. The Internet merely provides a new, accelerated vehicle for travelling an age-old road.

Clearly, however, this new carriage has enormously greater power, which is just as likely to crash Cinderella as it is to carry her safely to her ball. This article has intentionally focused on these potential crash factors as a way of raising therapists' awareness that women, also, are along on the Internet ride, and these female drivers may be especially prone to careering out of control.

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