

The Internet and Sexuality: A Literature Review--1983-2000

Eric Griffin-Shelley, Ph.D.

Abstract

Internet sexuality has burst upon the scene in the last decade. Actually, articles concerning sex and the net have appeared since 1983 albeit sparsely. Serious theoretical considerations did not begin to be published until the mid-1990's and the initial research began to arrive after that. The trickle became a river. With the turn of the century, the river became a flood with four books being published in 2001. A review of the relevant literature in the intervening period is the subject of this article. Reviews of the literature are the basis of informed hypotheses and worthwhile research and can assist clinicians in their understanding and integration of both theory and fact into their interventions.

Internet sexuality is a "hot topic" clinically and is in the early stages of developing a research base. Most research starts with a literature review. Such a perspective is also helpful to clinicians. Informed observers realize that the Internet itself is expanding almost with out precedent. With the advent of the new century, the milestone of one billion web pages was reported (Inktomi, 2000). Shortly thereafter, a major search engine now examines over 2 billion web pages (Google, 2001). While the field is literally exploding with books, a number of important articles existed prior to 2001. This essay reviews these early writings about the Internet and sexual activity.

Early Stage

While the Internet was originally developed by the United States Department of Defense as a communications tool in the event of a nuclear disaster, it quickly expanded into the academic arena. When the World Wide Web became established in 1983, it was not long before commentaries on sex and love on the Internet began to appear in the popular press and warnings about child pornography began to emerge (Van Gelder, 1985). Ten years later, in the early 1990's, speculation began about whether the Internet was good or bad, a blessing or a curse, harmless or malevolent. Issues such as misrepresenting one's sexual identity and the vulnerability of children began to be discussed (Brawyn, 1993).

Psychological literature did not begin to appear in earnest until the mid-'90's. As with most emerging psychological phenomena, the initial reports appeared in presentations at national conferences. For instance, in 1994, 'Rip' and Deborah Corley referred to online pornography as the "crack cocaine of sex addiction" at the annual conference of the National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity (N.C.S.A.C.).

In 1995, an article appeared that connected use of the Internet with deviant sexual behavior (Durkin & Bryant) and another focused on pornography on the net (Rimm). The latter study was quickly critiqued as conceptually, methodologically, and ethically flawed (Hoffman & Novak, 1995). A fairly well known book on the psychology of the Internet was written by Sherry Turkel, Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet, and a less popular book focused on sex and the net, Net.Sex, (Tamaosaitis, 1995).

In 1996, a small study was published identifying Internet sexual activity as addictive (Bingham & Piotrowski). Six patients in an out-patient sex offender program were described as having inadequate social skills, obsessions with bondage fantasies, and online love affairs. In the same year, a popular book was published, Online friendships, chat rooms, and cybesex: Your guide to affairs of the net (Adamse & Motta), suggesting that sexual activity and romantic interactions were prevalent on the Internet. Another book explored sex on the net, A sexual odyssey: From forbidden fruit to cybersex (Maxwell, 1996). An online article appeared about pornography available on Usenet/newsgroups raising legal and political questions

about whether the freedom and anonymity available on the Internet was a problem (Bilstad & Godward, 1996). Dr. Stephanie Young (1996) identified "cybersex addiction" as a sub-type of Internet addiction.

Next Stage

Soon, the trickle became a sizable flow. In fact, in 1997, a professional journal dedicated a special edition to sex and relationships on the Internet appeared. Edited by Dr. Al Cooper of Stanford, the Journal of Sex Education and Therapy approached Internet relationships and sexuality from a number of angles. Dr. Cooper introduced the edition (1997) and Dr. Sandra Leiblum (1997) proposed that there exists a continuum of sexual and relational activities on the net ranging from curiosity to obsession. While the journal did not report research results, theoretical and clinical issues and insights were addressed to such online areas as romance (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997), intimacy (Schnarch, 1997), infidelity (Shaw, 1997), paraphilias (Kim & Bailey, 1997), ego-dystonic sexual interests (Newman, 1997), gender identity (Weinrick, 1997), and sexual education (Gotlib & Fagan, 1997). International perspectives were reported (Barak & Safir, 1997; Luni et al., 1997) and ethical concerns identified (Plant, 1997).

Continuing the theoretical development of the psychology of the net and sexuality, Delmonico (1997) explained three basic forms of cybersex: 1) online pornography exchange, 2) real time sexual exchanges, and 3) multimedia software and connected these with four possible explanatory variables, i.e., isolation, fantasy, anonymity, and low cost. He proposed research on "cybersex addiction" and identified online recovery resources. Bargainner (1997) speculated on the future of sexuality on the net for The International Encyclopedia of Sexuality. Research studies explored the content of pornographic images in newsgroups (Mehata & Plaza, 1997) and the effects of online erotica on men's attitudes and behavior towards women (Barak & Fisher, 1997). The former found that commercial websites were more likely to post explicit sexual material in newsgroups to attract new customers and the later found no direct, negative impact of exposure to online sexual material on men's attitudes and behavior towards women. Popular books, such as Virtual Spaces: Sex and the Cybercitizen (Odzer, 1997) and The Women's Guide to Sex on

the Web (Seamons & Winks, 1997), continued to appear.

Interest in the Internet, its psychology and its relationship with sexuality continued to flow. Caught in the Net (Young, 1998) included online sexual pursuits as a subset of Internet addiction. Psychology and the Internet (Gackenbach, 1998) included chapters on gender differences (Morahan-Martin, 1998), the psychology of sex (Noonan, 1998), and disinhibition (Joinson, 1998). Books for the general public on Internet sexuality such as The joy of cybersex: A guide for creative lovers (Levine, 1998) quickly came into print. Professional articles explored the value of the Internet for sex education and counseling (Acevedo, Delgado & Segil, 1998) and developing online, virtual communities for sexual minorities (Koch & Schockman, 1998). Cooper (1998a) indicated positive benefits to the net in terms of promoting social contacts that de-emphasized distance and physical attractiveness, tending to increase and speed up self-disclosure, emphasizing good communication techniques (written words, reciprocal interactions), reducing isolation, connecting disenfranchised minorities and promoting virtual communities, and providing easy access to sexual information.

The "dark side" of the Internet came under greater scrutiny. Durkin and Bryant (1998) examined the online writings of pedophiles who were apparently attempting to justify their offending behavior. Delmonico, Bubenzer & West (1998) included the three types of cybersex in their article on assessing sexual addiction. Professionals expressed fears about censorship (Portelli & Meade, 1998) and negative consequences to online sexual activities (Cooper, 1998b). A website for online sex addicts was established (Putnam, 1998). Dr. Cooper (1998b) hypothesized that the power of the Internet was driven by the "Triple 'A' Engine" of access, affordability, and anonymity.

Scientific Data Appears

A major leap forward in the scientific study of Internet sexuality came with the publication to two large online studies (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999; Greenfield, 1999). Dr. Cooper et al. (1999)

conducted a sex survey during March and April, 1998 at the MSNBC website that included in 9,265 respondents. The first major conclusion was that the vast majority of participants used pornography, sex chat, and other sexual activities as casual recreation. The authors reported that 91.7 % spent less than 11 hours/week on sexual activities and 46.6% did these activities less than 1 hour/week. In addition, 84% of men and 80% of women were satisfied with their online activity and 87% never felt guilty or ashamed of it. The second significant finding was that 17% were at risk for problems with their online sexual activities and 8% used online sex compulsively, i.e., being online more than 11 hours/week and resulting in distress and interference with their lives. A third result was that men prefer visual stimuli (49.9% vs. 22.6% of women) while women prefer relational activities like sexual chat (48.6% vs. 22.8%). Of course, the other major effect of this research was moving our understanding of online sexual activities from the theoretical to the practical realm of objective data.

In the Fall of 1998, Dr. Greenfield (1999) obtained 17, 251 responses to the Virtual Addiction Survey posted on the ABCNEWS website. He found that 6% of his subjects were Internet addicted. Among this net addicted population, 62% (4% of the overall study) used pornography an average of 4 hours/week and 37% (2% overall) masturbated while online. Dr. Greenfield found "a high correlation between on-line cybersex and subsequent real-time sexual behavior. In addition, there was evidence to support the existence of disinhibition, accelerated intimacy, dissociation (timelessness), and what seems to be a unique on-line sexual behavior pattern." (p.410) In addition, he reported that 20% of the Internet addicts also admitted to being sexually addicted. In the same year, Dr. Greenfield also published Virtual Addiction: Help for Netheads, Cyberfreaks, and Those Who Love Them. Another piece of research, Barak, Fisher, Belfry, and Lashambe (1999), reporting on two studies found that differential or substantial exposure to net pornography did not impact men's attitudes towards women.

In addition to the above articles, a special issue, guest edited by Dr. Kimberly Young, of CyberPsychology & Behavior was devoted to Internet Addiction and included an article by Delmonico and Carnes (1999) on "virtual sex addiction." Noting the emerging overlap between real-life sex addiction and online cybersex, the authors presented case studies and called for research. To facilitate the scientific study

of online sexual behaviors, they included a "Internet Sex Screening Test" (I.S.S.T., p. 461) for cybersex addiction. Dr. Carnes was noted as indicating the 65% of his clients who scored high on his Sexual Addiction Screening Test (S.A.S.T.) had problems with Internet sexual activity. Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, and Boies (1999) elaborated on the MSNBC study (Cooper et al., 1999) by providing case examples of "recreational," "at risk," and "compulsive" users of online sexual activity along with suggestions on assessment, treatment, resources, relapse prevention, and comorbid disorders. Dr. Putnam's website and Online Sexual Addiction-Questionnaire (O.S.A.-Q) were included.

On a more theoretical level, Cooper, Boies, Maheu, and Greenfield (1999) identified sex and the Internet as "the next sexual revolution" in a book on the scientific science of sexuality. The authors presented the "Triple A Engine," commercial, positive and negative aspects of online sexuality, recreational, at risk, and compulsive users, and romantic relationships on the net. In their discussion of implications for mental health professionals, they identified a depressive type and a stress reactive type of "at risk" user. In addition, they presented information and suggestions about online treatment, online sexuality research, ethical considerations, and speculations about the future. In a similar vein, while reflecting on online experiences with gambling and pornography and calling for more research, King (1999) suggested that the Internet will require more individual responsibility for coping with dangerous situations online and that government will be able to protect consumers in the virtual environment. Binik, Mah, and Kiesler (1999) addressed ethical issues involved in online research on sexuality.

In the same year, Greenfield reported on a study of 224 mid-sized businesses. He indicated that a number of problem behaviors were found relating to Internet activity. In these businesses, there were difficulties with the use of pornography (21%), inappropriate email (19%), and shopping and gambling online during work hours. Of these firms, 60% reported disciplining employees for Internet behavior and 30% had fired employees for their Internet behavior. In addition, 83% had policies regarding Internet use but only 10% trained managers on how to deal with these problems. Finally, 83% of managers had written up employees for Internet behavior, 57% were concerned about this problem, and 37% had monitoring

software.

Special Editions of Journals

The advent of the new millennium found two professional journals devoting special editions to sexuality on the Internet, a double edition of Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention (7, 1-2, 2000) and CyberPsychology and Behavior's "The Internet and Sexuality" (3, 4, August, 2000). Cooper (2000) collected major contributors in the Internet and the sexual addiction communities to describe and discuss online sexual compulsivity (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000), its effects on the family (Schneider, 2000), online infidelity (Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchana, 2000), children and teens online (Freeman-Longo, 2000), web resources and behavioral telehealth treatment (Putnam & Maheu, 2000), treating virtual sex like other sex addictions (Orzack & Ross, 2000), and anonymous, fantasy online sex as dissociative reenactment (Schwartz & Southern, 2000).

The first article in the Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity special edition reported on a large scale study by Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2000). Cooper et al. found that 1% ($n = 96$) of 9,265 survey respondents were cybersex addicts. The classification of cybersex addiction was based on respondents having 11 hours per week or more on sexual activity and their score on Kalichman's Sexual Compulsivity Scale. Women and homosexuals and bisexuals were somewhat over-represented in this small subset.

In the second article in the same journal, Schneider reported on her 1999 survey of the effects of cybersex addiction on the family. This smaller sample of mostly women who identified their male partners as addicted to cybersex ($n = 91$ women, 3 men) found

60.6% reporting that the problem activity was limited to cybersex, not offline sex. In this group, 31%

reported that cybersex was a continuation of pre-existing sexual addiction. These partners indicated that they felt hurt, betrayal, rejection, abandonment, devastation, loneliness, shame, isolation, humiliation, jealousy, and anger as well as loss of self-esteem. However, only 22% were separated or divorced which suggested that the majority of these partners stayed with their cybersex addicted partners. The reported adverse effects on children include exposure to porn and objectification of women, involvement in parental conflicts, lack of attention, and separation and divorce.

Barak and King (2000) took a broader view of Internet sexuality and brought together experts who examined both positive and negative aspects of online sexuality. Cooper, McLoughlin and Campbell (2000) provided an overview. Griffiths (2000) reviewed the brief research, discussed pornography, examined children online, summarized online relationships, and described sex related Internet crime. Putnam (2000) articulated his views on and experience with online sex addiction with special emphasis on classical and operant conditioning as it applies to online sexual behavior. Levine (2000) looked at flirting online and elaborates on how attraction works in cyberspace. Fisher and Barak (2000) summarized their experience searching for sexual information online and describe all that is available without much effort. Burke (2000) reported the results of a content analysis of online lesbian personal ads and indicates that 2/3rds are seeking a meaningful relationship.

Likewise, Tikkanen and Ross (2000) described their findings from research on men seeking sex with men and comment that it is common for online contacts to become face-to-face sexual encounters. Ochs and Binik (2000) suggested that the Internet may be the appropriate environment for their sexual diagnostic and treatment system. Finally, Palandri and Green (2000) report on their ethnographic study of the online bondage, discipline, sadomasochistic subculture which suggested that such online sexual activity may be freeing and helpful in terms of identifying and enacting parts of the person that would otherwise never have surfaced.

Goodson, McCormick, and Evans (2000) describe the development of a survey instrument, which is included in their article, to measure college students' online sexual and relational activities. They identified

three main scales (with two subscales each): 1) seeking sexual information online, 2) establishing and maintaining relationships online, and 3) engaging in sexual gratification online. Their research indicated that "frequent users differ significantly from infrequent users on their attitudes towards information seeking and towards sexual entertainment/arousal [stronger interest in both among frequent users]." (p. 139).

Finally, Books

Eventually, the river of information of sexuality and the Internet became a flood, special volumes of professional journals gave way to books about online sexual activities and dangers including: Schneider and Weiss' (2001) Cybersex Exposed: Simple Fantasy or Obsession (2001), Carnes, Delmonico, Griffin, and Moriarty's (2001) In the Shadows of the Net: Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Behavior, Griffin, Moriarty, and Delmonico's (2001) Cybersex Unhooked: A Workbook for Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior and Young's (2001) Tangled in the Web: Understanding Cybersex from Fantasy to Addiction. In 2002, Cooper, will publish Sex and the Internet: A Guidebook for Clinicians.

Reviewing literature for some may seem like an arduous task, but it sets the stage for productive research and clinical work. Obviously, the Internet is becoming more and more a part of our culture. As most of the authors quoted above have noted, sexuality is an important aspect of Internet activity. Familiarity with theoretical constructs as well as empirically determined data on cybersex from this early era will inform clinical decision making and research hypotheses in future endeavors.

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