

# Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior

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# Chapter 67

## Internet Sexuality

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### ABSTRACT

*“Internet sexuality” is an umbrella term that refers to all sex-related content and activities observable on the internet. Six main categories of internet sexuality can be identified: (1) sexually explicit material (erotica and pornography), (2) sex education, (3) sexual contacts, (4) sexual subcultures, (5) sex shops, and (6) sex work. While online pornography is the most investigated and most controversial form of internet sexuality, online sex education is the most widely sought out type of sex-related content. All six areas of internet sexuality are associated with both opportunities and challenges for the sexual health of different groups of internet users.*

### INTRODUCTION

“Internet sexuality” (or online sexuality, cyber sexuality, online sexual activities [OSA]) refers to sex-related content and activities observable on the internet (Döring, 2009). This umbrella term designates a variety of sexual phenomena (e.g., sexually explicit material, sex education, sexual contacts) related to a wide spectrum of online services and applications (e.g., websites, online chat rooms, peer-to-peer networks).

Overall, six main categories of internet sexuality can be identified: (1) sexually explicit material (erotica and pornography), (2) sex education, (3) sexual contacts, (4) sexual subcultures, (5) sex shops, and (6) sex work. All of these categories have been traditionally studied as separate areas of research regarding the offline world. The rise of the internet, however, has changed behavior in all of these areas. And all six areas of internet sexuality are associated with both opportunities and challenges for the sexual health of different groups of internet users. It appears that the majority of internet users have predominantly positive or ambivalent experiences with internet sexuality

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(e.g., improved sexual pleasure, knowledge, self-exploration, intimacy and social support) while only a small minority is affected by predominantly negative consequences (e.g., excessive overuse of online pornography, use of illegal sexual content, online sexual harassment, online infidelity).

## **OVERVIEW**

Online sexuality was first seeded as a social force in the mid-1980s with the release of the first desktop computers and public computer networks. The earliest empirical studies in the field were published in the mid-1990s with the popularization of the internet. Since then, the volume of academic publications on internet sexuality has increased significantly with each passing year. The following three examples provide a valuable glimpse into the early phase of research in the field:

- In 1995, the *Georgetown Law Journal* published a notorious article titled “Marketing Pornography on the Information Superhighway” by *Martin Rimm*, an undergraduate at Carnegie Mellon University. Based on an analysis of n=917,410 files collected in Usenet newsgroups, Rimm concluded that more than 80% of the sampled online images were pornographic. Rimm’s study generated a heated “cyberporn debate” in both the press and academia. It even influenced in the legislative processes in the US regarding the regulation of online pornography (Blevins & Anton, 2008, p. 123). From a scientific point of view, the methodology of the study was flawed, and its findings have been overinterpreted (Hoffman & Novak, 1995).
- In her seminal book “Life on the Screen” (1995), based on online ethnographic methods, MIT psychologist *Sherry Turkle* described the emotional dimensions of virtual sociability including cybersex encoun-

ters among online chatters and gamers. In her view, the online world is not a pornographic dystopia but rather an erotic utopia, as it offers Internet users new possibilities for sexual experimentation, intimacy, and personal growth. Many of Turkle’s research subjects were psychology students, hence her results should not be generalizable to the online population at large.

- Alvin Cooper, a Stanford University psychiatry professor and sex therapist, developed the so-called “triple A-engine.” According to this theory, access, affordability, anonymity are the primary drivers of increasing online sexual activity (Cooper, 1998). Cooper investigated online sexual activities – ranging from healthy sexual exploration to pathological use – in large-scale online surveys (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999).

Public and academic debates about the nature and impact of internet sexuality have often tended to advance either dystopian or utopian views. However, a more balanced perspective that appreciates the benefits of internet sexuality while at the same time acknowledging its risks can be traced back to the 1990s. Such a perspective seems to be the most fruitful approach for the future.

## **1. PORNOGRAPHY ON THE INTERNET**

The internet has made pornography significantly easier to find and access, as pornographic material is now literally just a mouse click away. The US-dominated, mainstream pornography industry based in California’s San Fernando Valley faces serious threats due to the new opportunities for the online distribution of pornography, including: (a) the circulation of pirated material; (b) the flow of pornography from other countries into the globalized online pornography market; (c) the

establishment of countless smaller independent porn labels, including websites created by single individuals (Miller-Young, 2007); and (d) the growing number of amateurs offering free, home-made pornographic material, including stories, photos, and films (“reality porn”; Hardy, 2008).

Changes in how pornography is marketed and consumed have been accompanied by the *diversification of the genre*. Non-mainstream pornography is gaining in importance (e.g., queer porn, feminist/women-friendly porn; Attwood, 2007; Schauer, 2005). The Internet helps normalize pornography and makes it less taboo. Yet controversy surrounding the “pornographication” / “pornification” of society (Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saaremaa, 2007) has led to increasingly prominent anti-pornography movements around the globe as well.

### 1.1 Production and Contents of Online Pornography

Three types of sexually explicit internet material (SEIM) can be identified based on prevailing local laws:

1. **Erotica (softcore):** i.e. portrayals of naked people and depictions of simulated sex.
2. **Legal pornography (hardcore):** e.g., detailed depictions of genitalia and sexual interactions, usually only allowed for adults.
3. **Illegal pornography (animal pornography, violent pornography and child pornography whose production, distribution or even possession are liable for criminal prosecution in many countries):** *Online child pornography* is extremely difficult to find for unsophisticated users, as it is illegal in most countries (Schell, Martin, Hung, & Rueda, 2007). Publicly accessible depictions of “teen sex” normally involve participants over the age of 18. In the media, there is often talk of a “child pornography mafia” that kidnaps children off the streets, or a

multi-million dollar “child pornography industry.” The reality is much less sensational, but perhaps even more disturbing: most pornographic images of children are produced by relatives. These images of abuse are exchanged online for free in closed insider circles, and not only just by “pedophiles” but also often by men with non-pedophilic sexual preferences (Taylor & Quayle, 2003). *Violent pornography* is primarily offered at specialized websites for a fee (Gossett & Byrne, 2002). *Online animal pornography*, on the other hand, is more visible because it is legal in several countries.

There are absolutely no reliable data on the online pornography market or how it is changing (Cronin & Davenport, 2001). The industry itself publishes no data (nor does it systematically collect it), and there are no empirical economic studies. Sociological studies concerning production conditions are also lacking, as well as systemic surveys of professional performers who could provide information about working conditions and how they have changed as the online distribution of pornography has grown (for example, the merging of pornography and prostitution when online performers also arrange to meet in person with internet users).

A systematic description and classification of legal internet pornography into various sub-categories – e.g., according to production type (professional or amateur porn), media format (textual or visual porn), content (depictions of different sexual activities), or target group (heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual audiences, female or male audiences) – is also lacking. An effort to develop a classification system would involve drawing distinctions (a) within the domain of mainstream pornography (Heider & Harp, 2002; Mehta, 2001) – the website “YouPorn,” for example, categorizes its approximately 20,000 videos into 61 different content categories; as well as (b) within and between various trends in

non-mainstream pornography (e.g., differentiating areas of overlap and boundaries between women's pornography, authentic lesbian pornography, and feminist pornography). While on the one hand user-generated content often contributes to the diversification and democratization of the genre (e.g., depiction of authentic desires of men and women), on the other hand, many amateurs don't innovate but imitate mainstream porn (van Doorn, 2010). Among the providers of commercial non-mainstream pornography, the ethics of porn production and sexual representation are frequently discussed. Non-mainstream providers often advocate a "porn-friendly" or "pro-porn" position and attempt to oppose the mainstream porn industry, yet not to reject sexually explicit material, but rather to promote better porn. The establishment of the yearly "feminist porn award" in 2006 (sponsored by the Canadian sex shop "Good for her") is an example of this effort. Empirical research on online porn production and porn content is scarce, though.

## **1.2 Online Pornography Users and Usage Patterns**

Today, the use of pornography in the Western world is common. A representative study in Norway revealed that the majority of the male and female population between 18 and 49 years of age has used pornographic magazines (men: 96%, women: 73%), video films (men: 96%, women: 76%), and internet content (men: 63%, women: 14%) at least once previously (Træen, Nilsen, & Stigum, 2006, p. 248). 40% of homosexual and bisexual females indicated they used online pornography, as opposed to 12% of heterosexual females. In a convenience sample of students in Canada (average age: 20), 72% of male and 24% of female participants reported having used online pornography within the last 12 months (Boies, 2002, p. 82).

It is now normal for teenagers to have seen a porno film; most have viewed pornography prior to their first sexual intercourse (Lofgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010). Adolescents often watch videos together with friends. In such contexts, a focus is placed on joking as a group about the absurd content of the film – as well as on strengthening identity by distancing oneself from anything that is supposedly not normal or perverse. Adolescents know that "porno sex" is, in many ways, different from "relationship sex" (e.g., in terms of foreplay or expression of emotions). Nevertheless, adolescents may learn things from pornographic films not be covered in the sex education received from parents or at school (e.g., different sexual positions).

Boys and men in particular use content that excites them to masturbate. For boys and men, an active engagement with one's sexuality agrees with gender expectations. Girls and women masturbate significantly less and also use pornography less frequently. In addition, there is less awareness of pornography products by and for women. An interest in pornography among girls and women often conflicts with both the traditional feminine gender role and the feminist self-image (Ciclitira, 2004). Given this backdrop, the above reported prevalence rates of 12–40% female online porn users should not be considered negligibly small. It is rather notably high.

The role of pornography in heterosexual relationships can vary widely. At one extreme, the discovery of one partner's porno collection can cause a rupture in the relationship (Manning, 2006). At the other extreme, the couple may enjoy using or even producing pornography together (Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, & Irizarry, 2010). Usually masturbation and the use of pornography are viewed and accepted in a relationship as part of one's private life.

The deliberate viewing of online pornography must be distinguished from unwanted exposure. A representative sample of adolescent internet users

between the ages of 10 to 17 in the US revealed that 25% had unintentionally come across online pornography in the last 12 months. One quarter (6%) were very discomforted by the experience (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003, p. 9). There are various legal provisions, technical solutions (such as filtering and blocking software), and educational programs aimed at protecting children and adolescents from online pornography (Dombrowski, Gischlar, & Durst, 2007).

### 1.3 Effects of Online Pornography

Deterministic models that ascribe direct responsibility to media content for particular changes in mind and behavior among the public are increasingly being replaced in media research by interactional models. The central question is no longer “What does pornography do to people?” but rather “What do people do with pornography?” (Attwood, 2003).

Within the context of an interactive process, we can assume that pornography in combination with certain other risk factors can have negative effects (Fisher & Barak, 2001). A small minority of people seeking relief from depression, anxiety, or crisis situations in their personal or professional lives develop extreme usage patterns that are compulsive, addiction-like (cyberporn addiction; Daneback, Ross, & Månsson, 2006) and/or illegal (Quayle & Taylor, 2005; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2010). The use of online pornography in the workplace can impair performance and potentially result in employee dismissal (Cooper, Golden, & Kent-Ferraro, 2002). Aggressive and misogynistic tendencies can be aggravated by the intense use of violent offline or online pornography (Seto, Maric, & Barbaree, 2001). Here, however, it is not the pornographic media content per se but rather its interplay with specific personal predispositions and situational factors that can lead to negative effects. Risk groups and their victims should be identified early and offered

psychosocial support preferably before prosecution becomes necessary.

In a convenience sample of Swedish online users (n=1,913), only 5% of men and women reported “some problems” or “big problems” caused by sexually related Internet use (Ross, Månsson & Daneback, 2011). Feeling “addicted” to online porn appeared to be the most widespread problem area and affected up to 20% of the respondents, though. If and how science can draw the line between uncomfortable feelings regarding online pornography use on the one hand, and the clinical diagnosis of a pornography-related sexual disorder (e.g., “hypersexual disorder”, “pornography addiction”) is an issue of ongoing debate in sex research.

In addition, there are a range of correlations between online pornography use and sexual attitudes or behaviors that are often misinterpreted as cause and effect relationships. Those with more liberal sexual attitudes have a larger number of sexual partners, masturbate more often, and use online pornography more intensively (Lo & Wei, 2005; Lam & Chan, 2007). This does not mean, however, that online pornography causes sexual permissiveness.

In keeping with the so-called *third-person effect*, the adverse impacts of pornography are primarily attributed to other people: most adolescents and adults claim to be able to maintain a critical distance from pornography as a form of media (Lo & Wei, 2002). On the other hand, they believe “others” are easily influenced (for example, those younger than themselves, singles, or less educated people). When men and women are asked about the subjective consequences of their own online and/or offline pornography use, the positive effects of enriching their sexual lives or widening their sexual horizons dominate in the responses received (Hald & Malamuth, 2008). But these effects are rather weak and virtually non-existent in the case of infrequent use.

The potential positive effects of online pornography – including increased pleasure, self-ac-



ceptance, and improved communication between sexual partners, in addition to the widening of traditional sexual roles and scripts – have been a subject of increasing scrutiny (cf. Boies, 2002, p. 85; Jacobs, Janssen, & Pasquinelli, 2007; Innala, 2007). People who actively, self-determinedly and competently participate in the production, exchange and reception of sexually explicit online material to share and explore their sexualities may in particular experience positive effects.

## **2 SEX EDUCATION ON THE INTERNET**

The internet has become a very important distribution channel for sexual information and online sex education services. While many people may successfully expand their knowledge by turning to sources of information on the Internet, others may experience negative consequences, such as exposure to content of questionable value, confusion because of too much information (information overload), or even “cyberhypochondria” when trying to self-diagnose sexual diseases. People with less Internet literacy and limited opportunities to discuss online information confidentially with other people might also be more vulnerable to online misinformation.

### **2.1 Access to Online Sex Information**

The majority of internet users occasionally search for sex information online (Gray & Klein, 2006), including information on sexual techniques, sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, or safer sex. In a convenience sample of 760 Canadian students, 45% of females and 68% of males indicated they had searched for sex information on the internet within the past 12 months (Boies, 2002). The wide variety of content, as well as the confidentiality with which it can be obtained, are the main reasons indicated for engaging in such online searches. When assigned the task of finding

online information about condom use and sexually transmitted diseases, test participants between the age of 18 and 21 in the US were able to locate an appropriate website within four minutes – or five to six clicks – on average (Smith, Gertz, Alvarez, & Lurie, 2000). If an internet-capable computer equipped with filtering software designed to block pornographic content is used (cf. section 1.2), the most restrictive settings block out 91% of pornographic content, although 24% of sexual health information available online is also no longer accessible (Richardson, Resnick, Hansen, Derry, & Rideout, 2002).

### **2.2 Quality of Online Sex Information**

A few studies have dealt with the quality of selected information being offered online for sex education. Various information deficits have been documented at English language websites that present information on contraception and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as at Chinese websites presenting information on HIV (Weiss & Moore, 2003; Keller, LaBelle, Karimi, & Gupta, 2004; Li, Lu, Yong, & Zhang, 2006). However, no systematic comparisons have been conducted between error rates in online sex information and in other contexts (e.g., print brochures, oral information provided by medical personnel). While many institutions offer scientific and sound sex information online, some religious groups, companies, and other stakeholders disseminate questionable or even dangerous advice on the internet, yet the same happens offline. Examples of misinformation include claims that sexual abstinence is an effective method of contraception during adolescence; that homosexuality can and should be cured; and that unsatisfying sex is a symptom of female sexual dysfunction disorder that needs medication. A critical review of the information provider’s credibility, comparisons between different sources, quality seals (e.g., HONcode: [www.hon.ch](http://www.hon.ch)) or official sexual education webliographies (i.e. topical link collections



selected and commented on by independent experts) can help internet users to identify reliable online sources on sexual health.

### **2.3 Types of Online Sex Education**

In order to ensure sexual well being and to overcome sexual problems, individuals must have sex-related information (I), motivation (M), and behavioral skills (B) (the so-called IMB model of sex education: Barak & Fisher, 2001). For this reason, online sex education covers a broad range of online services, including multimedia training modules for sexual-communication skills, regular visits of social workers and sex experts in online sex chats, e-card services designed to warn former sex partners of a possible STD infection (e.g., [www.inspot.org](http://www.inspot.org)), and laboratory results viewable online (Rietmeijer & Shamos, 2007). Control group studies confirm that online interventions lead to an increase in knowledge and changed attitudes (e.g., Lou, Zhao, Gao, & Shah, 2006). To date, changes in behavior have been researched with comparatively less frequency (e.g., Roberto, Zimmerman, Carlyle, & Abner, 2007).

Protected by the anonymity that an online forum provides, it is possible to discuss sexual experiences and to receive information and peer advice from a wide range of different people (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). This form of online support also includes online self-help groups for sexual topics – with their attendant opportunities (e.g., round-the-clock help, no matter where one is located) and risks (e.g., social conflicts among forum members; cf. Waldron, Lavitt, & Kelley, 2000). In scattered instances, the internet is also being used to support professional sex therapy via e-mail (e.g., [www.therelationshipspecialists.com](http://www.therelationshipspecialists.com): Hall, 2004).

## **3 SEXUAL CONTACTS ON THE INTERNET**

There are two forms of sexual contact on the internet: contacts initiated exclusively for computer-mediated exchanges (online sex), as well as contacts leading to real-world sexual liaisons (offline sex).

### **3.1 Online Search for Online Sex**

When engaging in online sex, partners seek to stimulate one another sexually by exchanging explicit digital texts, images, and/or videos – often while masturbating (Daneback, Cooper, & Månsson, 2005; Waskul, 2002). Cybersex partners can be found in various online chat rooms, online communities, online games, or virtual worlds. Fleeting contacts between anonymous strangers are possible, as are more enduring online relationships. As with solo sex, a number of sexual risks are eliminated when engaging in cybersex, including physical violence, unplanned pregnancy, and the transmission of STDs. In contrast to solo sex, however, cybersex offers many of the gratifications associated with partner sex, including sexual and emotional intimacy. Due to its mediated nature and the opportunities it offers for anonymity, cybersex helps to lower inhibitions and also encourages particularly open communication. Sexual inclinations and preferences otherwise concealed in the real world due to the fear of rejection can be acted out on the internet. Participants experience this as liberating, and it often encourages self-acceptance (McKenna, Green, & Smith, 2001).

Online sex provides participants with the opportunity to collect new sexual experiences and engage in sexual activities with a diverse range of partners in a relatively safe and playful setting. Cybersex is not “disembodied” per se. Sexual stimulation is experienced on a bodily level,

and physical attributes and carnal reactions are also symbolically portrayed. Cybersex allows participants to present themselves in a much more favorable light than otherwise possible in face-to-face encounters. By projecting a specific persona in an online setting, individuals who are otherwise unexceptional in real-world settings can experience the lust and desire of others. Senior citizens, for example, can become young lovers, and adolescents can be taken more seriously by portraying themselves as older. While age and skin color are frequently altered in online settings, virtual gender swapping is much less common: only 1% of people regularly switch gender when going online for sexual purposes (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999).

Cybersex should not be classified as a deficient substitute for “real sex”, but should instead be understood as a specific form of sexual expression that can play a legitimate role in the sexual and relational life of its participants (Carvalho & Gomes, 2003; Döring, 2000; Ross, Rosser, & Stanton, 2004). The degree to which cybersex is experienced as satisfying and meaningful depends on the participants involved, as well as their behavior and relationships with each other. Women seem to have a stronger preference for cybersex than men (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999). In a sample of Swedish internet users who went online for sexual reasons, women in all age groups – aside from those aged 18-24 – engaged in cybersex more often than men (25-34 years: women 35%, men 30%; 35-49 years old: women 37%, men 25%; 50-65 years old: women 22%, men 13%; Daneback, Cooper, & Månsson, 2005). Cybersex is also particularly popular among gay and bi-sexual men (Ross, Rosser, & Stanton, 2004).

Aside from its advantages, cybersex is primarily associated with three forms of risk:

1. Extreme usage patterns similar to addictive behavior can result among individuals who suffer from acute psychological afflictions (i.e. cybersex addiction; Schwartz

& Southern, 2000). Not infrequently, these behaviors are accompanied by the excessive consumption of other sex-related internet content (online pornography, online sex shops; Daneback, Ross, & Månsson, 2006).

2. If married persons or individuals with a steady partner secretly engage in cybersex with a third party, this – not infrequently – is understood by the partner as an act of betrayal (so-called “online infidelity”), and may lead to a crisis or exacerbate existing problems in the relationship (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006; Young, 2006).
3. Cybersex is not always initiated based on mutual consent, which can result in unwanted sexual advances (i.e. “online harassment”) among adults and adolescents (Barak, 2005), as well as the online sexual molestation of children: Adults may pose as adolescents in chat rooms intended for teenagers and initiate computer-mediated sexual interactions with under-aged persons. In a US-based random sample of 10-to-17 year olds, 18% of girls and 8% of boys responded that they had experienced online sexual harassment in 2005; 7% of girls and 2% of boys experienced these contacts as very unpleasant (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2007, p. 121).

### **3.2 Online Search for Offline Sex**

In two surveys conducted in British hospitals, 7% and 5% of heterosexual women, 14% and 10% of heterosexual men, and 47% and 44% of gay men had used the internet to search for offline sex partners within the past 12 months (Malu, Challenor, Theobald, & Barton, 2004; Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2006). In a Swedish sample of individuals who use the internet for sexual purposes, 35% of men and 40% of women reported that they had had sex at least once with a person met online (Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2007). Particularly active were singles, women

between 34 and 65 years old, and homosexual/bisexual men.

Online profiles, photos, and various dating, chat, and social networking sites are used to identify potential offline sex partners; communication is undertaken by e-mail, chat, webcam and/or telephone conversations. These means allow relevant criteria such as physical attractiveness, mutual personal interest, matching sexual preferences, and preferred safe-sex practices or HIV status to be clarified in advance. Prior to meeting in the real world, potential partners sometimes engage in online sex (cf. section 3.1) and/or telephone sex in order to test their sexual compatibility. Among a large number of potential partners a selection is finally made through this filtering process (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Padgett, 2007). The internet expands opportunities for sexual contact among people who live in geographic isolation, as well as among people who seek partners for specific sexual practices, who do not want to be visible on a public stage, or who have little access to typical locations where sexual partners can be met (e.g., people with physical impairments; ethnic minorities).

The online search for offline sexual partners shares the same risks as online sex, as both activities can lead to patterns of *addictive behavior*. Both of these forms of sexual activity can also be associated with *unfaithfulness* and relationship problems. *Sexual harassment* and the *sexual solicitation of minors* are further potential risks: Some *sex offenders*, for example, attempt to contact underage children on the internet in order to meet with them in real-world settings (Malesky, 2007; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2010; Babchishin, Hanson, & Hermann, 2011). Although children have been abused by pedosexuals who use the internet to identify and meet their victims, the number of children abused in this manner is exceedingly small in relation to the high number of sexual attacks perpetrated in everyday social settings, despite the intense

media attention called to the internet as potential source of abuse. All the same, the internet plays a role in sexual crimes against minors by family members and acquaintances (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2005). In some countries like the US police is posing as juveniles to catch online sex offenders (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2005).

Beyond the aforementioned risks, the online search for offline sex is also presumed to foster the *spread of sexually transmitted infections* or diseases (particularly HIV). This is because homosexual and heterosexual individuals who seek out sexual partners on the internet tend to be more sexually active, more willing to take risks (i.e. more frequently decline to practice safe-sex), and more often affected by STDs (McFarlane, Bull, & Reitmeijer, 2000, 2002; Liao, Millett, & Marks, 2006). Targeted preventive measures on the internet can help to ameliorate this self-selection effect (Bull, McFarlane, Lloyd, & Rietmeijer, 2004; cf. section 2.3). The possibly increased risk of *unplanned pregnancies* has not yet been investigated. Likewise, there is lack of empirical evidence as to whether *sexual attacks* or violations of consent occur with greater frequency when contact between adults is initiated via the internet as opposed to other means. Last but not least, there is also a lack of data on the *success or failure rates* of online attempts to arrange for offline sex (e.g., problems with no-shows or misleading online self-descriptions).

On the whole, studies exploring the problems and risks associated with the online search for offline sex comprise the bulk of scholarship in this area. Virtually no publications describe this type of behavior as largely ordinary and harmless (Daneback, Månsson, & Ross, 2007). Even rarer are studies that expressly examine the benefits arising from this behavior as viewed by its participants – i.e. expanded opportunities for sexual encounters and enjoyment.

## **4 SEXUAL SUBCULTURES ON THE INTERNET**

Many studies from different parts of the world have shown that the internet empowers sexual and gender minorities to exercise their sexual human rights and engage in consensual sexual activities, thus helping to diminish discrimination. At the same time, subcultures that engage in non-consensual and/or harmful sexual behaviors are also empowered by the internet, such that the internet is thought to support psychopathologies and deviant behavior.

### **4.1 Benign Online Sexual Subcultures**

When a sexual minority is seen as unfairly discriminated against (e.g., LGBTQI and BDSM communities in most of the Western world), one rightfully welcomes the emancipation and empowerment that internet usage can bring. By providing an easily accessible platform for the establishment of contacts between individuals of similar sexual preferences and orientations, the internet can ameliorate social isolation, facilitate social networking, strengthen self-acceptance and social identity, help to communicate practical information, and encourage political activism, among other things (e.g., Hillier & Harrison, 2007; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). To some extent, online sexual subcultures have also been subject to processes of commercialization (as seen with the outgrowth of online sex shops or commercial dating platform addressing specific sexual minorities). The internet is an important place of refuge for individuals who do not have access to urban subcultures by virtue of social restrictions or their place of domicile (such as homosexual youths in rural areas). The spectrum of sexual subcultures on the internet encompasses homosexuality and bisexuality (e.g., Heinz, Gu, Inuzuka, & Zender, 2002; Nip, 2003; Lev et al., 2005; Pullen & Cooper, 2010), transsexual and transgendered individuals

(e.g., Gauthier & Chaudoir, 2004; Shapiro, 2004), cross-dressers (Hegland & Nelson, 2002), as well as recreational sadomasochists, practitioners of fetishism and polyamory or asexuals (e.g., [www.asexuality.org](http://www.asexuality.org)). The internet also addresses the many and complex intersections between different sexual and non-sexual subcultures (e.g., online communities for Christian BDSM, gay and lesbian Muslims, ethnic minority fetishists).

### **4.2 Potentially Harmful Online Sexual Subcultures**

By contrast, the use of the internet by some sexual minorities is often perceived as a danger, particularly by those who are viewed as rightfully ostracized for engaging in behavior harmful to themselves or others (Durkin, Forsyth, & Quinn, 2006). It is feared that the online presence of deviant minorities could help to justify socially unacceptable forms of non-consensual or harmful sexual behavior, strengthen the development of pathological disorders, or even encourage criminal activities. For example, posts which seek to legitimize the sexual abuse of children are circulated in online forums frequented by pedophiles (Malesky & Ennis, 2004). Online forums geared towards other varieties of sexual deviation with the potential for grievous harm (including amputation, cannibalism, and barebacking: Grov, 2004; Tewksbury, 2006) are also seen as a danger. On the other hand, due to the visibility of such subcultures on the internet, they can be addressed by research and interventions more easily. The line between benign and potentially harmful sexual subcultures is drawn differently depending on the cultural context and associated value system. Countries that criminalize and religions that condemn homosexuality do not value LGBTQI online communities. By contrast, civil rights activists who advocate freedom of choice do not accept the stigmatization of consensual sexual risk taking among adults (e.g., barebacking), and therefore

defend the legitimacy of many “deviant” online communities.

## **5 SEX SHOPS ON THE INTERNET**

There are numerous sex shops on the internet. Sexual products – including toys, aphrodisiacs, lingerie, condoms, lubricants, and erotica – are sold online by both mass-market retailers (such as Amazon.com) and specialized sex shops. The visibility and easy accessibility of sexual products on the internet might contribute to the increasing normalcy with which the use of such products is viewed, as large segments of the population can now familiarize themselves with and purchase such products discretely (e.g., older adults; Adams, Oye, & Parker, 2003). Online sex shops geared toward women (such as Goodvibrations.com) present dildos and vibrators as fashionable lifestyle products while also communicating images of empowered female sexuality (Attwood, 2005).

In accordance with the Sexual Behavior Sequence Model, online sex shops can be classified as a sexual stimulus that triggers various physiological, affective, and cognitive reactions in the user, depending on his or her predispositions (Fisher & Barak, 2000). These reactions can prime the user for sexual activity and also impact the nature of the activities engaged in. A Swedish study revealed that 30% of the  $n=1,614$  respondents who reported to use the Internet for sexual purposes had purchased sexual merchandise online (31% women, 29% men; Daneback, Månsson & Ross, 2011). The results suggested those who purchased sexual merchandise were older adults, sexually more active and in couple relationships. Vibrators/dildos and lubricants were the most popular items, and the primary reason given for making the purchase online was convenience.

## **6 SEX WORK ON THE INTERNET**

The internet has changed the social organization of offline sex work and has also created a new market of online sex work. Three trends are observable (Sanders, 2009): (1) the internet has expanded the sex market from both the demand and supply side (especially among the middle class); (2) the sex industry is becoming more professionalized (e.g., entrepreneurial activities of independent sex workers); and (3) there are increasing moves in many states to criminalize both sex workers and their customers, in part due to the higher visibility of such activities induced by the internet. While studies have addressed female, male, and transgendered sex workers as well as male customers, the female customers of sexual services (e.g., female sex tourists) and their involvement in online communication have not been investigated so far.

### **6.1 Online Organization of Offline Sex Work**

Online communication between sex service providers and their patrons now plays a central role in the marketing and management of many types of offline sex work (prostitution, escort services, massage parlours, sex tourism, etc.). Recent data from the US revealed that female sex workers who solicit online largely represent new growth in the overall prostitution market, as opposed to the simple displacement of the offline, street-focused market, although some displacement effects certainly occur (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011). If and how national prostitution laws need to be modified with regard to online solicitation is a controversial issue (Ashford, 2008, 2009; Sanders, 2009).

Many feminists reject prostitution on the principle that it is a form of sexual exploitation. They argue that the internet encourages sex tourism and



prostitution while lending it a patina of normalcy (Hughes, 2000, 2003; Jones, 2001); that online forums concerning prostitutes and the quality of their services impart a cynical view of woman (e.g., *theeroticreview.com*; Holt & Blevins, 2007); and that online communication with customers constitutes a new form of stress for prostitutes (Davies & Evans, 2007). The internet is also indicted in connection with forced prostitution and the sexual trafficking of children and women (Surtees, 2008, p. 56f).

Other feminists who recognize prostitution as a legitimate occupation – on the condition that equitable working conditions are present – have to some extent evaluated the internet in a positive light. The internet offers female and male prostitutes additional opportunities to advertise and manage their services (e.g., through their own websites or online ads at classified websites such as *craigslist.com*), work more independently and safely, network among each other, and verify the identity of potential clients (Ray, 2007; Uy, Parsons, Bimbi, Koken, & Halkitis, 2004; Castle & Lee, 2008; Pruitt & Krull, 2011; for methodological and ethical issues of researching the online sex work community, see Sanders, 2005).

## **6.2 Online Sex Work**

A new market for sex work has developed online with the advent of live sex shows broadcasted via webcam. A number of professional female sex workers have reported that their activity in online sex shows (which involves responding to customer wishes in front of the camera) is much more comfortable and safe than the prostitution they previously practiced on the street or in brothels (Podlas, 2000; Bernstein, 2007). On the other hand, a potential risk is faced by individuals who chose to enter into the seemingly unproblematic online sex business with excessive haste, overestimating the financial rewards while underestimating

the negative psychological and social effects (Ray, 2007). The characteristics of providers and consumers of online sex services have not been systematically identified, nor have the impacts of the online sex business both at the individual and societal levels.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Future research on internet sexuality needs to examine the impact of ongoing technological change (e.g., trend towards mobile internet use that enables – among other things – location-based sex dating services) and globalization (e.g., online sexual activities in the Muslim world). The challenges and opportunities of internet sexuality for different demographic groups (e.g., youth, senior citizens, disabled people, non-heterosexuals, ethnic minorities) also need to be investigated systematically. Sound research on internet sexuality can inform internet users and policy makers on how to improve sexual health both online and offline – not only through avoidance of risks, but also through enjoyment of self-chosen, socially responsible sexual exploration and expression.

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