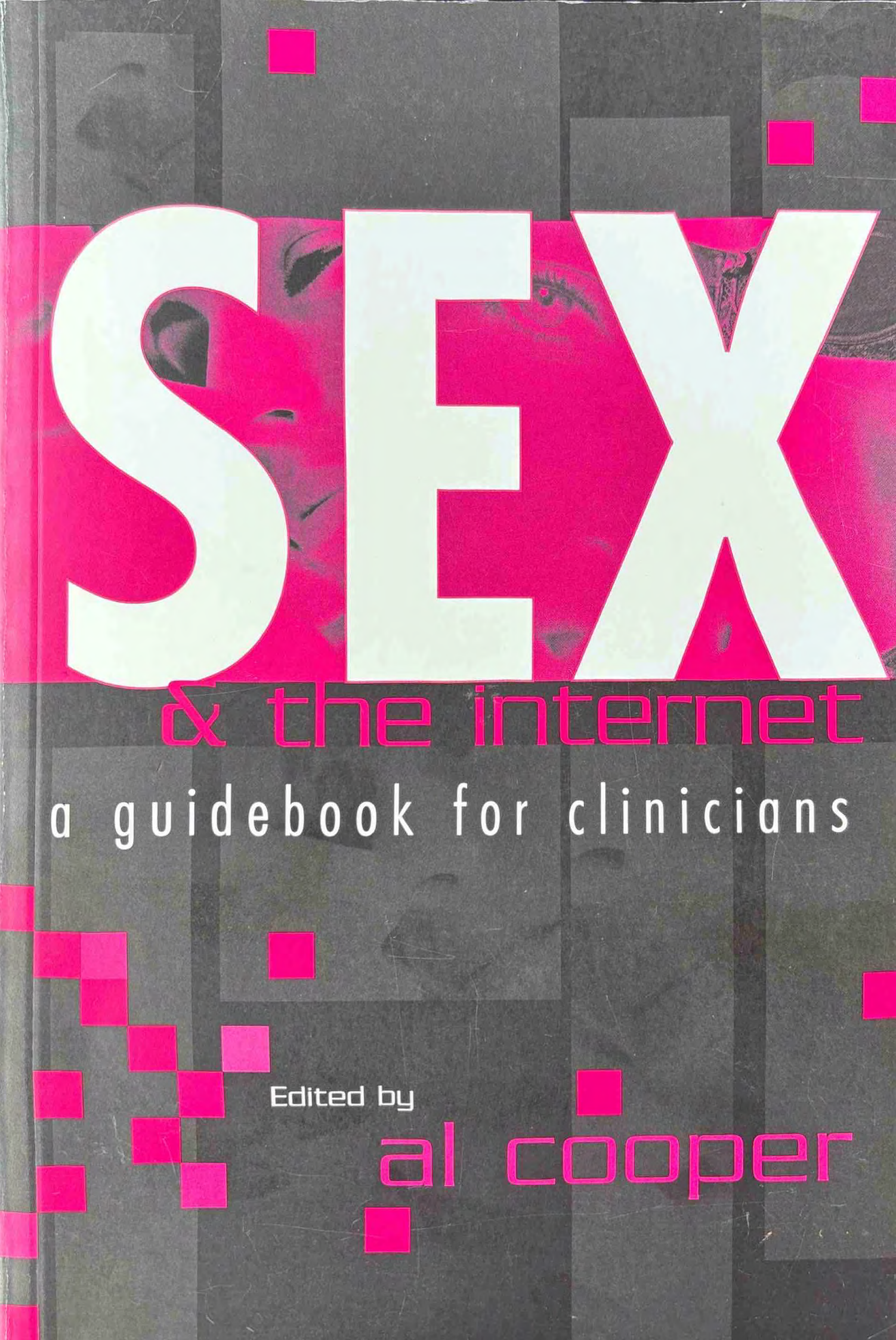


The background of the cover is a dark, textured collage. It features several overlapping, semi-transparent images of human faces, primarily focusing on eyes and noses. Scattered throughout the composition are numerous small, solid pink squares of varying sizes. Some squares are isolated, while others form a larger, pixelated pattern in the lower-left corner.

SEX

& the internet

a guidebook for clinicians

Edited by

al cooper

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A Guidebook for Clinicians

Edited by

Al Cooper

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2

CHAPTER

Sandra Leiblum
Nicola Döring

Internet Sexuality: Known Risks and Fresh Chances for Women

In the last decade of the 20th century the Internet was still regarded by many as a male domain. Sex on the Net was viewed as an erotic paradise for heterosexual men, replete with easy access to pornography or prostitutes. On the other hand, cyberspace was believed to offer few enticing sexual options or opportunities for women. The situation has changed dramatically, though, and now, at the start of the 21st century, almost half of Internet users are women. They use the various Internet services for a variety of purposes, including sexual stimulation and information. The female Internet user of today is confronted on the one hand with unwanted sexual solicitation, but also a chance to use online services individually and collectively to enhance, extend, and experience sex in either virtual or real-life space, with or without men.

"Cyberspace" is not an illusory world detached from "real life," but rather a segment of reality that women can turn to with everyday sexual concerns and desires. Women who surf the Internet are as varied and heterogeneous as women everywhere. There is no specific "feminine" approach to Internet sexuality, so any generalization about women, sex, and the Internet is likely to be an oversimplification. In fact, it will become apparent that women use the Internet in diverse, and sometimes contradictory, combinations of sexually related online and offline activities. For instance, some women who are conservative and inhibited in real-life may engage in active pursuit of sadomasochistic images and discussions online.

Clinicians should be aware of the wide spectrum of sexually related Internet experiences available to women in order to be able to identify problematic patterns of use and to offer appropriate treatments. Clinicians should also be knowledgeable about how to educate their female clients about the possible ways in which the Internet may be used to extend and support their sexuality and sexual knowledge. The Internet is neither positive nor negative insofar as it affects women. Rather, what is significant is the way it is used in different situations and real-life contexts.

Traditionally, women and girls have had a marginalized role in technology discourses as well as in sexual discourses generally. Men have tended to occupy a central role as either spokespeople or protagonists, while women appear underrepresented or are seen in sex-stereotypical ways. Nevertheless, the intersection of technology and sex in online sex has changed all that. Who would have predicted that women would be overrepresented among cybersex addicts (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000)? And who would have thought that in times of cyberporn hysteria, some feminists would publish autobiographical self-reports (Benedikt, 1995; Odzer, 1997; Ullman, 1996), practical advice (Levine, 1998; Semans & Winks, 1999), and academic analyses (e.g. Blair, 1998; Döring, 2000; Leiblum, 1997; McRae, 1996), which combine sexually related Net activities and recreational cybersex with liberation and empowerment? A sophisticated analysis of sexually related Internet activities is necessary to appreciate how the Internet plays an increasingly significant role in women's private and professional daily lives. Many assumptions about female sexuality will be challenged when we examine the reality of Internet usage among women.

☐ **An Analytical Framework for Understanding Women, Sex, and the Internet**

Internet sexuality is a collective concept for many different Net activities; the term requires further differentiation as well as consequent contextualization.

The following dimensions should be considered when we evaluate the positive or negative implications of Internet sexuality for women since peculiarities in connection with online sex are not solely determined for women and girls by their biological sex but are influenced by their unique gender role and their levels of sexual and technological sophistication. These characteristics are themselves affected by the woman's socioeconomic background (age, race, class, occupation, ethnicity, religion, etc.).

Comparisons between women and men in terms of sexually related Net usage without a theoretical background reproduces the questionable dichotomous gender model and neglects systematic differences that exist between various subpopulations of women. How subpopulations of women differ from one another and how they may resemble male subpopulations cannot be addressed here. Rather, the following dimensions should be acknowledged when discussing Internet sexuality from a gender perspective.

Gender Role

Whether women rate a particular sexually related Net offering as “woman friendly” or reject it as “sexist” is not determined by their biological gender per se, but is influenced by their interpretation of their own gender role. For example, a Web site fashioned in pastel tones, with romantic drawings and love poems but without any sexual explicitness will be received differently by women with a more feminine gender role orientation than by women with indifferent, masculine, androgynous, or transgender orientation.

Sexual Identity

An online community that features women staging S/M play with each other will have different valences for women depending on their sexual identity and orientation. Lesbian or bisexual women who are comfortable with S/M desires may identify strongly with this community, while conservative, heterosexual women may find it offensive. Similarly, the degree to which women are erotophilic or erotophobic will influence their reaction to such stimuli (Fisher, Byrne, White, & Kelley, 1988). Prior sexual socialization and current sexual lifestyle are also important considerations.

Internet Competence

Despite the much-publicized ready availability of sexual material on the Internet, neither meaningful sexual discourse nor satisfying sexual action is available “at the click of a mouse.” Rather, women must search for, select, and evaluate adequate offerings or create their own and become familiar with the technical and social conditions of Internet use. Among women with little or no Internet experience, for example, the “anonym-

ity of the Internet" is often perceived as a threat. On the other hand, women with Internet experience know that Net communication is not at all anonymous per se, but just offers the possibility of anonymity. This is helpful when dealing with delicate issues such as sexuality. Women who are competent users of the Internet are not at the mercy of objectionable Web sites but can decide when and whether they want to appear anonymously, pseudonymously, or under their own name, and conversely when they want to prevent or enable others to address them under the protection of anonymity.

Psychological Health

The Internet permits individuals to explore their gender and sexual identity in safe ways. It is possible to use the Internet as a means of "trying on" different sexual identities as a first step in altering their behavior offline (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). On the other hand, using the Internet to the exclusion of real-life experience can reinforce preexisting social and sexual fears.

Gwinnell (1998, p. 158) described the case of a young woman who suffered from agoraphobia but who pretended to her online lover over a period of months to be having an active, outgoing life with many social contacts. The online couple planned a marriage, but in the end the woman was never able to meet her cyberlover face-to-face, resulting in the termination of the relationship. Obviously, women (and men) with psychological handicaps can use the Internet to hide behind rather than to face their social or sexual fears and conflicts.

Features of the Context of Usage

Even when she metaphorically "enters cyberspace," the woman sitting at the computer remains a prisoner of her current reality. Does she have enough time and money at her disposal to be able to turn to sexually related Net activities? What about other social constraints and controls that may exist in her living or working situation?

Social Control of Net Use

Societal asymmetries of power between the sexes often extend to private relationships. Heterosexual women, in particular, may be confronted with a continuum of sexual aggression on the Internet (Kelly, 1996). Sometimes, women are subject to pressure from a partner or a third party to

use the Internet in specific ways. There have been instances of forced participation by women in Internet-related sexual activities (e.g., trading of women for cyberprostitution). It is not uncommon for a male partner to attempt to induce that their female partner explore the Internet with them for sexual titillation or involvement that may or may not be congenial to the woman but that she feels powerless to refuse.

Social Integration of Net Use

Women experience different degrees of comfort in talking about or even divulging their use of the Internet for sexual purposes. Some women feel that they must hide their sexual cyberexperiences from others, while other women enjoy talking about these experiences with partners, friends, and therapists. Possible dangers associated with cyberlove and cybersexuality, such as an escapist drifting off into imaginary or idealistic worlds, may not just lie in the "nature" of their computer-mediated relationships but rather in the fact that these relationships are not subject to objective discussion and consideration of the possible (or likely!) risks or rewards. For example, a woman might avoid telling her Net-abstinent girlfriend or counselor about her latest online love if she believes the person will not be sympathetic or will be unable to comprehend how significant and meaningful she finds the virtual relationship.

Special Features of the Internet

Most of the sexual discourses and exchanges that take place on the Internet are purely text-based. Given that written means of communication have been around for centuries, it may be asked, What makes the Internet special? Two models provide a summary of the unique qualities of the Internet, especially in the sexual arena.

Triple-A Engine

Cooper (1998) suggested that there are three primary factors that "turbocharge" online sexuality and make it such an attractive venue for sexual pursuits. He called these the "triple-A engine," and they include *accessibility* (i.e., millions of sites available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week), *affordability* (i.e., competition on the Web keeps all prices low and there are a host of ways to get "free" sex), and *anonymity* (i.e., people perceive their communications to be anonymous). The triple-A engine principally refers to the use of available Web offerings.

Triple-C Engine

We have additionally postulated the "triple-C engine," which emphasizes the Internet's status as an interactive medium in which all participants are not only recipients, but also potential senders. The Net provides the opportunity of widespread *communication* of messages via self-maintained Web pages and postings in online forums. People living far away from each other can engage in computer-mediated *collaboration*. They can offer support to each other via the Net, and they can initiate real-life activities or actions. Finally, Net-based exchange can fulfill diverse social functions and can result in the construction of virtual *communities* (Rheingold, 2000).

Types of Use

These A and C features are not in themselves either positive or negative. The way in which the user accesses the Internet is also an important feature to evaluate when considering the impact of the Internet on female sexuality. The following types of usage patterns may be classified:

- rare versus frequent,
- passive-receptive versus active-productive,
- social versus nonsocial,
- commercial versus noncommercial,
- talking about sexuality versus sexual interaction.

Although representative data are lacking, it may be assumed that the majority of women users are not very affected by the plethora of sex on the Net because most women do not access the Net very frequently. For instance, one common pattern of use is to look for free sexual health Web pages but little else. This might be characterized as a usage pattern of rare, passive-receptive, nonsocial, noncommercial use. Other women might engage in the sporadic exchanging of erotic e-mails with real-life acquaintances or lovers (rare, active-productive, social, noncommercial, sexually interactive). These two usage patterns, which seem rather typical of women, would be unlikely to either endanger or enrich the sexuality of the user. At the collective-societal level, revolutionary radical changes for women would not be expected. It is likely, however, that the women who consult us clinically with concern about their own behavior are more intensely involved with Internet sexuality and with its attendant opportunities and risks.

Partners' Internet Sexuality

If one assumes that most women live in heterosexual relationships and that men spend more professional and private time online than women, then it is likely that the sexually-related activities of one's partner will pose more of a problem for women than for men. Triple-A and triple-C factors offer the sexually curious and motivated husband or partner many possibilities to enliven his sexual life and to keep these activities relatively secret for long periods of time.

The consequences for their female partners can be quite negative. Often, there is a deterioration in the primary relationship: The cybersexually involved partner may become more withdrawn and sexually avoidant and display less interest in his wife and children. Estrangement and couple conflicts emerge even before the cybersexual activities are discovered. When the wife or lover discovers what she perceives as "infidelity," she typically feels betrayed, hurt, and humiliated.

In a recent case seen in treatment, a husband exchanged romantic e-mails with his much younger unmarried graduate assistant. Although they never "consummated" their relationship sexually, they did correspond frequently and intimately. When his wife of 30 years discovered her husband's correspondence, she was devastated. She felt so betrayed that she insisted on an immediate physical separation and entered therapy to discuss whether or not to reveal her husband's cyberaffair to their grown children and thereby further punish him. It was only after many sessions of conjoint therapy that she was persuaded to adopt a more reasoned way of dealing with this situation and to view it as an indication that perhaps there was something basically amiss in their relationship for which she needed to take some responsibility.

In fact, the couple had become increasingly remote over the years and their relationship had evolved to one of convenience rather than intimacy. They had been leading separate lives. The cyberaffair provided the much-needed stimulus for initiating couple's therapy.

In other instances, women may agree to engage in sexual practices they are not really comfortable with or to view pornography which both stimulates and disgusts them in order to distract their husband from the feared competition with online sexual partners.

Sometimes women resort to "snooping" or "detective" behavior in order to determine why their husband or partner has become remote or sexually disinterested. Computer-savvy women often learn how to trace their partner's Internet activities, and in some cases may even try to entice him by logging into the same chat rooms themselves (Schneider, 2000, p. 52).

Clinically, the crises that online sexual involvement can precipitate sometimes lead to important modifications in the primary relationship. Long-standing marital or sexual problems may be uncovered by an Internet-mediated crisis. Sometimes, discovering that one's partner is engaging in compulsive online sexual behavior leads to effective clinical intervention and improved relationship functioning. Other times, it leads to a climate of suspiciousness and clandestine surveillance.

A recent case highlights both the negative and subsequent positive consequences of a husband's online and offline sexual behavior.

The middle-aged husband had retired 4 years earlier after a successful and stressful career in business. His abundance of spare time coupled with a growing dissatisfaction with his wife's weight gain, clumsiness, and sensual ineptitude, led to an increasing reliance on the Internet for sexual stimulation. He progressed from pornography to chatrooms and from chatrooms to an online affair. Eventually, he entered into a real-life sexual liaison with his Internet correspondent.

His wife noticed that he hastily changed the screen on the computer whenever she entered his study, but had no real proof of his affair until his Internet lover called to inform her of her husband's infidelity. This led to a marital crisis and then to psychological consultation.

Although the wife was greatly distressed by the discovery of this relationship, she came to accept the fact that she had contributed to it by both failing to appreciate how important an active sexual life was to her husband and how she had let her appearance go over the 25 years of their marriage. She took his affair as a "wake-up call" to diet, exercise, and pay more positive attention to her husband.

Although the preceding examples have been ones in which it was the husband who had become seduced and waylaid by cybersexual opportunities, increasingly women, too, are succumbing to the attractions of online sexual chat rooms and cybersexual relationships (see chapter 9 of this volume, by Schneider, and chapter 6 of this volume by Cooper, McLoughlin, Reich, & Kent-Ferraro). For instance, women who have felt sexually ignored or rejected by their real-life partner may go online and discover that they become sought-after sexual playmates and the recipient of gratifying comments and compliments. Some women develop an online persona that results in far more affirmation and attention than they experience in real life. Some of these women find themselves spending increasing amounts of time in online chatrooms and face the same likelihood as men of developing an excessive reliance on cybersex for personal gratification.

Cybersexual Addiction

Some men do become cybersex "addicts" and need treatment in order to cease or gain control of their compulsive sexuality (Schneider, 2000; Schneider chapter 9 of this book). Adverse consequences of cybersex addiction include depression, social isolation, marital problems, inadvertent exposure of children to online pornography, and decreased job performance or job loss (Schneider, 2000). Guidelines for evaluating the possibility of cybersex addiction have been published, as well as treatment interventions (see Greenfield & Orzack and Delmonico, Griffin & Carnes in chapter 7 this book).

Therapists need to take cybersex addiction seriously since it can have a cascade of negative consequences for the user, his partner, and his children. Apart from the psychosocial implications, the cybersexual addiction of a partner may confront women with legal and financial problems. For example, some men run up huge financial debts in their quest to look at or purchase pornography (pornography that may or may not be illegal, such as pornography involving children) or to seek sexual services that require payment.

Willpower and exhortation to stop is often insufficient, and treatment should include careful assessment of both the risks and extent of the cybersex behavior.

If the compulsive Internet user is not willing to enter treatment, his or her partner can receive support from self-help groups. Often, they seek the assistance of therapists. Relevant information can also be found online, for example, on the homepage of the National Service Organization of COSA: Co-Sex Addicts Anonymous (<http://www.shore.net/~cosa>).

Cyberinfidelity

When the partner's sexually related use of the net does not focus on searching for, collecting, and receiving stimulating texts and pictures or enlisting sexual services (e.g., online peepshows, commercial telephone sex), but rather on erotic and sexual contact with other individuals, the issue of cyberinfidelity is raised (see Maheu, 2000).

Most couples embrace the ideal of a monogamous relationship and view sexually related activities with someone other than themselves as a breach of faith, even if a real-life meeting has not (yet) taken place. There are, of course, different degrees of sexual exploration on the Internet. Some women are tolerant of the viewing of pornography or stories but draw

the line at actual face-to-face meetings, while other women view any sexual stimulation online that precludes them as a breach of trust.

However, cyberinfidelity is sometimes in the eye of the beholder. For instance, some women feel justified in engaging in online sexual forays as a reaction to their partner's past behavior or as a way of remaining in a relationship that has become physically barren because of either their partner's disinterest or incapacity.

One female patient, for instance, said, "I knew my married sex life was over when my husband had prostate surgery and refused to go for treatment for his erection problems." She wanted to remain with her husband, but could not tolerate a life without any physical intimacy. She felt little compunction in going online to seek casual lovers and has been successful (so far) in keeping these relationships discreet and infrequent while maintaining what she feels is a meaningful commitment to her husband and children.

By far the most common reaction of women (and men) to the discovery of a partner's cybersexual affair is a feeling of betrayal, hurt, and anger. However, if a partner is willing to acknowledge his extrarelationship sexual activities, psychotherapy can often help resolve the crisis (see Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000).

From a feminist point of view, special attention should be devoted to ensuring that any rapprochement between partners does not result in a woman's subordination or self-denial. That is, women may need affirmation from a therapist that their feelings of betrayal are legitimate, since the partner who is engaging in extramarital sexual activity will tend to minimize indiscretions. On the other hand, the immediate assumption that the "cheating" husband is only interested in finding a younger, more beautiful, and more willing playmate may be erroneous. In some instances, men use the Net in order to explore homosexual desires (see Ross & Kauth, chapter 3 of this book) or to have the opportunity to assume a sexually passive or submissive role (Leiblum, 1997, pp. 24; for the meaning of Internet sexuality in connection with paraphilias see chapter 10 of this book).

Relational Problems: Partners' Internet Sexuality as Cause, Symptom, Catalyst, or Cure?

Relational problems in connection with sexual compulsivity and unfaithfulness are not unique to heterosexual couples. Lesbian relationships are similarly affected by such conflicts. The Internet should not be viewed as the *cause* of cybersexual crises, however. Rather, crises involving cybersex signal the need for more comprehensive clinical assessment. A partner's

online sexual activities may be a *symptom* rather than a *cause*. It may signal preexisting problems in the individual (e.g., sexual compulsivity) and/or in the relationship (e.g., lack of sexual communication). For instance, Schneider (2000) described a 36-year-old man who had engaged in compulsive masturbation and reliance on pornography for years prior to discovering the Internet. He said, "Cybersex did not cause my sexual addiction—it is just another way for me to act out sexually. I was using porn long before the Net."

The Internet can lead to an escalation of sexual difficulties, it may be a reflection of sexual problems in a relationship, or it can serve as a catalyst for new and different sexual problems for individuals or between couples. Personal inhibition levels, social controls, and the lack of willing partners and sexual scenes that may limit sexual activity in everyday contexts are obsolete in cyberspace. It is easy for latent desires to be realized in cyberspace. Internet sexuality may thus serve as a *catalyst*.

Although a crisis triggered by the Net sexual activities of a partner is taxing and threatening for a woman, it does represent an opportunity for intervention and it can lead to therapeutic change and eventual relationship enhancement for both the individual and the couple.

Therapists who are treating women whose partners are sexually active on the Net, may find it useful to help their patients anticipate and articulate the exact nature of their concerns. Is she worried that her partner will leave her? That his activities are deflecting attention from domestic or family responsibilities? That her partner is doing something illegal (e.g., viewing child pornography)? That he is acting on homosexual urges? By determining the nature of the woman's worries, it may be possible to intervene more effectively.

Finally, therapists should avoid joining the woman in assuming that a man's use of the Internet is necessarily either threatening or in need of control. In some instances, a partner's use of the Internet can have a positive impact. For example, heterosexual men who engage in Net sexual activities do not just consume pornography, engage in cyberprostitution, or cultivate sexual cyberaffairs; many also participate in sexual metadiscourse and exchange ideas with other men and women about how they might improve or enhance their love lives with their partners. Even cyberaffairs do not have to perforce imply a crisis in the relationship, but with the establishment of certain ground-rules (e.g., no face-to-face-meeting with the cyberlovers) may be the means of safely satisfying the thirst for sexual adventure without putting a real relationship on the line. The following case example illustrates this point.

Martin and Beth, both 41, have been married for 19 years and have four children. From the start of their relationship, Martin expressed regret about not having had more time for sexual experimentation prior to

getting married. Early on in their marriage, he had an extramarital affair. The affair hurt Beth deeply, and Martin decided he never wanted to do it again. When Martin discovered Multi-User Dungeons/Domains (MUDs) he was thrilled. "I really am monogamous. I'm not interested in something outside my marriage. But being able to have, you know, a tiny romance is kind of cool."

Martin decided to tell Beth about his MUD sex life, and after reflection, she told him she did not mind. Beth made a conscious decision to consider Martin's sexual relationships on MUDs as more like his reading an erotic novel than like his having a rendezvous in a motel room.

To Martin, online affairs were a way of fulfilling what he felt were missed opportunities as an adolescent, since he married young and had not had much premarital sexual experimentation. He wanted a "safe" way of experiencing youthful fantasies without endangering his marriage (Turkle, 1995, p. 224).

While not all partners may be as reasonable as Beth, it is possible for a therapist to help clients take a less catastrophic view of the meaning of online sexual exchange than they might initially. For instance, all men and women have sexual fantasies that they typically do not verbalize but that enrich their sexual life. Sharing fantasies online may not be dissimilar in its impact; it may ultimately serve as a sexual stimulus for both partners.

Finally, it is also possible that the use of the Internet for sexual purposes by one partner may be integrated into a more mutual use (e.g., exchange of mutually received or produced cybererotica, participation in sexually orientated discussion and meeting forums for couples), be it simply as a sign of desire, curiosity, and expansion of one's horizons (see Levine, 1998) or explicitly as a part of therapeutic intervention (see Cooper, Scherer, & Marcus, chapter 11 of this book).

Forced Internet Sexuality

Early on, feminists and others hoped that cyberspace could be a social space in which individuals interacted with each other as equals via textual communications without respect to gender, age, race, or class. However, sexism and violence against women are not absent from cyberspace, and sex continues to be used in the service of power.

Cyberharassment

Women can have unwanted sex pushed onto them when using the Net in both sexually motivated as well as non-sexually motivated ways, and

this harassment concerns both nonsocial (typically logging onto Web pages) as well as social Net use (e.g., chat or e-mail contacts).

The search for lesbian Net resources can lead to www.lesbian.org, a feminist Web portal, yet with the slightest typing error—www.lesbians.org—one lands immediately at a porn site. Women who discuss political or personal aspects of sexualized violence in the newsgroup talk.rape are not infrequently confronted with pornographic tales of rape or open threats that are sent to the group by men. Feminists who question the patriarchal structure of society and raise their voices with their own Web sites are confronted with sexualized threats ("You're just a cunt"; see Kennedy, 2000), just as female users who simply enter into a sociable online chatroom and are immediately greeted with anonymous messages such as "Need a fuck?" or "How large are your boobs?" (Adams, 1996, p. 158).

Such cases can be (re)traumatizing and are experienced by many women and girls as akin to the sexist violence that may occur in other areas of their lives. It is unclear, particularly in the case of cyberstalking (Griffiths, 2000, p. 548), whether real violence will follow the threats ("I know where you live").

As sad as the existence of these various forms of cyberharassment is for women and girls, it must be recognized here that we are not dealing with a fundamentally new problem. And the terror of cyberstalking is not based upon the fact that a new quality of violence is occurring online, but rather that the dangers that have always existed for women of being physically violated are a possibility in cyberspace as well. It is at least inherent to the Net that, as a rule, harassment can be prevented and fought against more adequately than in real life with corresponding competence in Internet use (Spertus, 1996).

Instead of forbidding our daughters to go out into cyberspace, we would do better in educating them about virtual self-defense (Spender, 1996). Just because online search tools primarily return references to pornographic offerings under the keyword "women," we should no longer be intimidated, for this difficulty is as familiar as the effectiveness of alternative search strategies for women-related resources (Korenman, 2000). And even if we must reject the utopian vision of the Internet as a gender-equal paradise, the dystopian views of the Internet as a woman-hating, sexist, and violent environment are ill-suited: In both political and therapeutic contexts, dealing with and combating real (and virtual) violence can be very effectively organized by Internet-initiatives.

In Nigeria, Bene E. Madunagu, DAWN regional coordinator for Anglophone Africa and Chairperson of Girl Power Initiative in Calabra Cross River State, Nigeria, uses e-mail to create international support and solidarity for young girls taking action against female genital mutilation for themselves and their sisters, relatives, and peers. "The technology of

electronic mail has been of immense use to us in our work. It has enabled us to share our work with others to mobilise larger groups . . . to break the cycle of reproducing decadent culture and tradition" (Harcourt, 2000, p. 695).

Our indignation at the fact that the organizers of these types of Net initiatives are confronted again and again with annoying e-mails should not be greater than our indignation at the fact that the corresponding forms of real physical violence are so widespread and often receive little attention outside of the Net.

Cyberprostitution

E-commerce abounds in the virtual commercialization of sex and often in the exploitation of women (Butterworth, 1996). Just as child pornography rings use the Net, so the organized trade of women uses this infrastructure (Hughes, 1997). And the boom of porn sites, of cybersex and telephone sex offers, and of Webcams and online sex shows requires female suppliers who are in part either urged or forced by their partners or third parties to participate. While these issues are primarily legal, criminal, and political matters, in clinical practice we are interested in dealing with the resulting trauma to women, assuming they are able to access professional help at all.

On the other hand, it should be noted that not all women who engage in sex work feel exploited (Alexander, 1996; Podlas, 2000). For example, a strong amateur movement has developed on the Net (Semans & Winks, 1999, pp. 55), which offers nude and sex photos, films, and Webcams where men, women, and hetero- and homosexual couples appear and along which a fluid boundary to the professional branch of sex work can be traced. Conflicts and problems that are associated with these types of semicommercial sexual expression should not be rashly traced back to the fact that offering cybersex services is necessarily detrimental to women, but rather that the participants' actual conditions of production, expectations, and opportunity of having a say in the matter have changed.

☐ **Using the Internet to Promote Oneself**

We do not know exactly how many women use sexually related Net offerings and which women, for whatever reasons, prefer, ignore, or reject particular sexuality-related Net activities. Nonetheless, forms of self-chosen sexually related Net activities that are especially important for women are worthy of consideration. The spectrum includes sexual metadiscourse

and sexual interactions that occur in commercial as well as in noncommercial sectors.

Commercial Sex

From the feminist point of view, commercial sex is often equated with the exploitation of women, which also implies a sweeping discrediting of women who partially choose to work in this field and are concerned with improving their working conditions and position in society (Alexander, 1996). Apart from the danger of coerced cyberprostitution, there exists the possibility, especially on the Net, that women emancipate themselves from third-party-controlled prostitution and not only are economically better off with their self-controlled Web offerings, but also can shape their own work medically, socially, and psychologically (e.g., Podlas, 2000).

A former erotic dancer, big-breasted model, and star of soft-core videos, Danni Ashe gave up the strip-club circuit and moved her fan club online (Danni's Hard Drive: www.danni.com). The site's instant popularity, fueled initially by Danni's many fans on Usenet newsgroups, who spread the word about her site, convinced Danni that the Web was a superior way for erotic performers to pursue their trade, so she expanded her site to include photos and biographies of several dozen other models. Danni's models retain complete control of their online image: They write their own biographies and choose which photos to present. As a result, you won't find the "I'm horny for you, Daddy" tripe typical of many adult pay sites. Instead, viewers get a more authentic and interesting peek into the lives and dreams of real women (Semans & Winks, 1999, p. 58).

In addition to prostitute services, which are computer-mediated sexual interactions with customers, nonsocial offerings belong to commercial sex as well. Online shops selling sex toys, condoms, lubricants, lingerie, books, CDs, and videos are omnipresent on the Net (Fisher & Barak, 2000). Some online sex shops claim to be "women-friendly" and are often headed by women (Fisher & Barak, 2000, p. 576; Semans & Winks, 1999, p. 125). One example is the online branch of the feminist sex shop Good Vibrations (www.goodvibes.com). The online shop Toys in Babeland (www.babeland.com) is also run by women and contains, among other things a select assortment of books and videos for women and a lesbian e-zine; it describes itself as "S/M, transgender, queer, straight, vanilla, and bi friendly."

Potential new opportunities are arising through commercial online sex not just for female suppliers, but also for female customers. Only a few

interested women have the opportunity to seek out the sex shop Good Vibrations in San Francisco personally. But through the online shop, they can survey the ambience, order appropriate products, and study instructional and informational material that belongs to the concept of the shop, for example, the online historical museum of vibrators. Online shopping is ideal for female customers who otherwise rarely have the opportunity to privately investigate the purchase of sex toys or other products or who might have special requests.

For example, one of our patients 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 increasingly comfortable. She was extremely computer literate 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 homepage (www.bettydodson.com), where she was impressed and encouraged by the direct discussion of masturbation as well as 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 materials 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 anonymously online (Leiblum, 2000).

When women appear in greater numbers as customers of sexual materials, not only can they experience sexual agency individually (which may have a positive impact on their real-life sexual relationships) but they can also influence the structure of the supply of sex products. Remember that videos were initially made popular because of their ability to satisfy the pornographic interests of men, but increasingly, women and couples have become consumers of this medium, which has led to noticeable changes in the depicted scripts (for example, a greater focus on woman's sexual satisfaction; Williams, 1999). Similarly, women's easier access to sex toys, erotica, or sex shows by way of online shopping might weaken the dominance of heterosexist scripts and gender models and might lead to more varied, woman-centered views of sexuality in general.

The availability of online shops may be used to assist or encourage female clients to expand their ideas about sexual options. Some women may feel gratified and encouraged by the large selection of vibrators or harnesses available online; it may suggest to a woman that it is, indeed, completely acceptable to gratify herself or to penetrate her girlfriend with

a dildo. On the other hand, the selection of toys and underwear portrayed in online shops may lead women to feel more performance pressure to be sexually adventuresome and liberal and may increase a woman's feeling of sexual anxiety and insecurity. Research is necessary to evaluate how and in what ways women can benefit from the availability of online sex and sexual aids. It is also necessary to consider how to incorporate the plethora of cybersexual materials in a therapeutic way and to investigate possible consequences of the use of online sex shops systematically from the physiological, cognitive, affective, and imaginative processes that accompany their use (Fisher & Barak, 2000, p. 578), instead of assuming either pathogenic or salutary effects.

Sexual Information, Education, Discussion, and Support

Sexual and reproductive health information, sex education, and sex-related discussion and support groups are available in large numbers on the Internet in English (Leiblum, 2000, Semans & Winks, 1999; see also Ochs, Mah, & Binik chapter 13 of this book). Relevant sites are conducted by individual professionals or laypeople and also by teams. Some are reserved for girls and women, others have no access restrictions. Owing to the triple-A and triple-C factors, the Internet is the ideal medium for finding information relating to sexual questions and to exchange experiences with others. Especially for girls, who are usually more competent than their mothers, the Internet constitutes an important informational source for sexual questions (see Longo, Brown, & Orcutt, chapter 5 of this book).

The open exchange of one's own sexual experiences or lack of them is rare for women because of feelings of shame or embarrassment. The overabundance of sexual topics and images in the mass media should not hide the fact that most people, even in the closest of circles, only rarely and selectively relate personal sexual experiences, which, particularly in the case of problems, leads to feelings of helplessness, insecurity, and loneliness. Social support in the sense of emotional reassurance, information and materials, and practical help assumes first that social communication fields exist in which sexual topics can be revealed. Women's initiatives have made useful information and support available by way of women's health information, resources, and discussion groups. Regrettably, these resources reach only a fraction of the women and girls who might benefit from them.

Relevant Net offerings are useful to those who have an especially hard time finding support in real life (e.g., women living in rural areas; girls from families who belong to certain religious groups; women and girls with marginalized sexual identities such as lesbians, transgenders, those

engaged in the practice of bondage/dominance/submission/sadomasochism [BDSM] or women who are affected by disabilities or illnesses that have sexual implications; see Tepper & Owens, chapter 4 of this book). Even with a superficial look at relevant mailing lists, newsboards, or newsgroups, one encounters a large number of postings in which women and girls express gratitude for the support they have received from various online forums.

The advantage of the Net in accord with the triple-C engine of allowing the affected to express and link themselves also contains a dark side, in which laypersons, either inadvertently or sometimes deliberately, disseminate incorrect information or react to delicate self-revealing statements insensitively or disparagingly. Another danger is that the variety of perspectives that may be found in an online discussion can overtax and confuse some individuals. Sometimes, those searching for help online are disappointed if their statements or disclosures are misunderstood or ignored. While a real-life group provides both nonverbal and verbal feedback, online it is not easy to evaluate how others are interpreting or reacting to one's communications.

Here, as well, Internet competence plays a central role. One needs to know how to separate information from disinformation (Morahan-Martin & Anderson, 2000) and how to become comfortable in an online community (Rheingold, 2000). These issues are not peculiar to the Net. In other spheres (e.g., library, discussion group, TV shows), too, we are often confronted with contradictory and partially false information or are contradicted or ignored.

In general, online support is not to be understood competitively, but rather as an extension of the existing consultation and therapy infrastructure. Often the selection of the sexually related problem on the Internet proves to be the first step to more extensive dealings with the topic. Laypersons encourage one another to take advantage of professional medical or psychological help and exchange information about helpful clinical services. Crisis intervention centers that offer e-mail or chat consultation often arrange on-site consultation.

As clinicians and professionals, it is important to optimize these interfaces between online and offline help, between self-help and professional help. Many Net initiatives are looking for voluntary professional support. Such participation might benefit both professional educators and therapists, since it stimulates the quest for accurate information and expands and extends our knowledge about the issues and concerns of particular members of a virtual community. Closed online forums that do not want the participation or observation of professionals are, of course, off-limits.

Because the medical and psychological discourse on sexuality has traditionally been dominated by men, women-oriented information and

communication offerings provide a useful and necessary counterbalance. Critical assessment of the quality of these Net offerings is necessary, however. For example, it is important to determine the professional qualifications of those responsible for the service and who the participants are, how appropriate and current the information or resources being offered are, and so on. When deciding on issues concerning the quality of online support, the use of all-women forums is often especially valuable for women and girls (e.g., Herring, 1994; Spender, 1996). For instance, online discussion about sexualized violence or lesbian lifestyles can occur in moderated and/or closed forums, so that participants are protected from inappropriate contributions.

It must be acknowledged that personally insulting contributions (so-called "flaming") do not come only from men. One should not automatically assume that women-only forums are always friendly and harmonious, because women are known to flame as well (Witmer & Katzman, 1998). In addition, particularly concerning questions of sexual advice and education, there exists interest on the part of heterosexual or bisexually identified women and girls to hear what men and boys have to say about the topics at hand. In online self-help groups that deal with menopause or breast cancer, men are encouraged to participate and share impressions. In general, the effectiveness of online groups is not solely dependant upon their gender composition, but rather on various other factors relating to the groups' composition and their setting of goals (Savicky & Kelley, 2000) which are in themselves worthy of further study. It is then particularly relevant, in connection with sexually related questions, whether and to what extent women consider these questions themselves in relation to gender aspects: While some women, for example, understand the exchange with other lesbians primarily as a sign of gender solidarity, for others, sexual attraction is the most important element. Relevant differences must be sorted out in the online forums and then lead into a determination of rules of conduct or the splitting up of the forum.

Sexual Self-Expression

Besides the exchange of advice and information concerning actual problems, the Net is also used to share erotic and sexual experiences. Different female users may offer diaries, poems, stories, drawings, or photographs on their personal homepages which express the personal and the sexual. Such individual initiatives are sometimes connected by "Webrings," for example, *Femme Fatale* (www.femme fatale.de) a German Webring for erotic self-expression by women, and *BiFems* (www.lunamorena.net/BiFem), an international webring only for bisexual women. Additionally,

there exist communal projects such as e-zines (e.g., scarletletters.com) or Web portals. While in the mass media a large enough target group with enough buying power must exist in order to produce a media public at all, Net publications with comparatively little expense are readily feasible. These publications accommodate experimentation with new perspectives that do not correspond to any shine-and-gloss aesthetics or mainstream philosophy and give space to marginalized groups and forms of expression. The following is an excerpt from A Dyke's World (www.dykesworld.de/).

Welcome in! These sites are dedicated to celebrate lesbian visibility and diversity—in all its dignity, its craziness and various colours. A DYKE's WORLD is a personal home page—a work of passion, done for free spirits, woven by Indina Beuche. It's quite a huge site—and still growing—call it web-pollution! This site is non-commercial and has no institution behind, its staff fits into one chair, its focus is global, it has no hidden traps, worships no political party nor message, charges no entry fees—rien comme ça. Simply said: It's a world that welcomes fun, wit, diversity and an open mind.

Between autobiographical and artistic self-expression, informational and entertainment offerings, lie these Net publications that admittedly find no mass public, but that not infrequently have small fan communities who rally around them, help to establish social contacts, and sometimes are reviewed by traditional media (e.g., magazines, television shows).

Although there exists relatively widespread agreement that women should be empowered to create more comfortable and self-defined sexualities, it often remains unclear in which social spaces this self-expression should occur. The Internet is well suited to such initiatives in accord with the triple-C model and can reach even the “marginalized among the marginalized” (Koch & Schockman, 1998).

Clinically, therapists may encourage the creative efforts (writing, painting, photography, etc.) of their female patients, which can be combined with Net publication. The documentation, archiving, and publication of one's own work on the Web may not only instill pride and motivate further creative activity, but can lead to the establishment of Web contacts. This special potential of the Net requires high Internet competence. It may include production, publication, and maintenance of personal Web pages and their promotion (e.g., registration with search engines and Webrings).

Cybersex and Cyberromance

The Internet offers ideal opportunities to initiate and cultivate sexual and romantic contacts and relationships. Two ways of meeting new people on

the Net can be differentiated: the *casual meeting*, which takes place within the framework of social forums or discussion groups and the *deliberate partner search* through online personal ads (see Burke, 2000), forums for singles and sex chats.

Regardless of whether an erotic encounter occurs accidentally or deliberately, individuals can decide whether or not to meet in real life with the hope of forming a permanent partnership or marriage or whether to have a casual, noncommitted affair. Net relationships can, on the one hand, focus on emotional-romantic exchanges in which worlds of feeling and thought are reciprocally exchanged in detailed e-mails and hour-long private chats and support is provided when problems arise. On the other hand, cybersex can occur, in which one tries to arouse the other through explicit verbal or e-mail messages. Often, sexual talk is accompanied by solo masturbation.

The unique quality of cybersex and cyberromance is accelerated self-disclosure in comparison with face-to-face-situations. One expresses thoughts and feelings more frankly and more quickly than is characteristic of face-to-face situations and often experiences more intense feelings of closeness and passion (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Döring, in print; Gwinnell, 1998). Individuals can spend many hours online and can begin to lose interest in what feels like mundane daily life. Imagination and projection often play a critical role in online love affairs, and online relationships can be ruled by illusory hopes and expectations. Since computer-mediated communication messages can be sent and received around the clock, it requires a considerable amount of self-discipline to distance oneself from preoccupation with online lovers and focus on other activities. Cybersexual addiction can develop not only in connection with the exchange of erotica and pornography, but also in the cultivation of online romantic and sexual contacts.

Besides overinvolvement, there exists the danger of deception and disappointment. In the online encounter, it is more difficult to develop a realistic picture of one's counterpart, which not only increases the probability of a false assessment, but also raises the danger of falling victim to intentional fraud.

Subject: love on the net ?

Date: 30 Dec 2000 14:07

From: Annette <anette@hotmail.com>

Newsgroup: soc.women.lesbian-and-bi

My name is Annette, I am an 18 yrs old girl (lesbian) and I have a question for those who could enlighten me a little.

I live in the Dominican Republic, a very closed-minded country. I've always been aware of my sexuality, but also of the fact that it is not something I could be open about. Also, I've been raised in a very quiet environ-

ment, so my need for anything outside my home wasn't big; my interests were not the same as most teenagers so I did not "fit" very well in groups. That is why, when I "discovered" the Internet and the chatrooms and IRC and all that, it was like a "perfect" world to me. . . . I didn't have to put up with people because it wasn't necessary. . . . If they liked me, they would message me, if not, they wouldn't . . . but there were no problems. And then, I started going to bi/les channels . . . and there I really felt free!

Eventually, as I grew older, I started to feel the need of something more than friendship, the Net was also my answer to it, or at least I thought it was.

At 15, I met a 27 years old woman who made the world look like heaven. . . . She wrapped me in lies and kept me in a phone/internet relationship until her girlfriend—who lived with her for 7 years—called me at my private number to insult me. . . . Even after that the woman I had met kept lying to me and I was so foolish to believe her lies and we were "together" for several months. That was my first "experience" on-line. After that one, I had many other experiences similar to this one, where I met women on-line who made me believe they loved me and that we would meet someday soon, but it never happened and I always ended with a broken heart and shattered dreams. . . .

Now . . . I know that I can't expect this to be "perfect" . . . but maybe I am expecting too much from an on-line relationship? . . . I've seen people who meet on-line and then meet in person and have a great relationship . . . so I am not sure what is my problem here. . . .

Please let me know what you think . . . and don't be too hard on me. . . . Believe it or not, I have only had one girlfriend off the net and it was over a year ago . . . I am what you could still call a naive virgin.

Best regards,
Annette

While this vignette is easy to dismiss as indicative of the gullibility of a young girl, many more mature or worldly women fall prey to the same kind of emotional rollercoaster, that is, believing that one has finally found a genuine soulmate, and then, either because of an actual face-to-face meeting or a chance discovery, find that their soulmate is actually married or has falsely represented critical aspects of himself. Of course, such disappointments are true of other venues as well, for example, personal ads, dating services, and pen-pals.

With some understanding of the reality of Net relationships, intentional fraud is detectable. People who are hoping to find a serious partner after meeting online should be told to conduct "reality checks" as soon as possible (exchanging photos, telephone calls, and face-to-face meetings) instead of remaining in a fantasy world for prolonged periods of time (e.g., months, years). Until recently, there have been few studies that system-

atically looked at which specific aspects of online encounters may be predictive of successful relationships offline. Recent research suggests that three factors are important (see Döring, in print):

1. The degree of cultural differences and geographical distance. In cyberspace, one usually meets individuals removed from one's immediate surroundings.
2. Differences in everyday habits and lifestyles. On the Net, relationships are based purely on communication and allow for no common or shared activities in real life.
3. Lack of genuine emotional and sexual intimacy. Intimacy and emotional closeness are often more difficult to sustain in real life than via e-mail or distant chatting.

Despite the various shortcomings of online relationships, they should not be dismissed as trivial. Often, for a socially isolated or inexperienced person, they activate repressed longings and desires and may stimulate valuable self-reflection. The special affinity of women for online relationships should be noted. Housewives or women who are restricted to the house or who are subjected to powerful social control may find meaningful social communities easily and inconspicuously. They may be able to cultivate and enjoy intimate relationships with both men and women without negative sanction from their immediate family or friends. Women have an opportunity to adopt a "new identity" which can liberate them from both heterosexual expectations and social conventions: They do not need to behave passively or modestly online, and if they are witty or wise or provocative or interesting, they will not be ignored.

In fact, women are often uniquely capable of cultivating online relationships since many women are especially competent in verbal exchange, that is, in sharing and expressing personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings. In some ways, Net relationships that consist solely of the exchange of intimate verbal messages over a period of time is a "female form of relationship." Similarly, for men, it is often easier to display emotional openness and vulnerability on the Net with the protection of anonymity, invisibility, and spatial distance.

The loss of inhibitions facilitated by computer-mediated communication is not just a new means for women to encourage men to become more emotionally expressive, but it permits women to reveal and express more aggressive and sexual aspects of themselves. Women and girls may use chat forums specifically to flirt and invite sexual contact, to verbalize their sexual preferences and fantasies directly, and to experiment with new sexual orientations, roles, and practices. Women who have an erotic affinity to words and are interested in sexual challenges (and who can

also type rapidly!) find that the Net provides an ideal arena for a safe exploration of their desires in terms of social, psychological, and physical dimensions (see Döring, 2000).

Hamman (1996) described a single woman who uses cybersex to resolve the conflicts between her sexual desires and moral reservations; in so doing, she establishes a sexual identity and her own sexual agency. Odzer (1997, p. 117) described how she herself used a video conference with her cyberlover quite deliberately as a form of self-therapy:

I was determined to seize the opportunity to overcome my gender conditioning. I wanted to break the barrier that made me embarrassed of my genitals. What a stupid emotion embarrassment was. After adjusting camera angle and lighting, I put on a wig to keep my face hidden—vanquishing shame didn't mean I was going to open myself up to blackmail or ridicule if the other person wanted to put a nude picture of me on the Web. That night I succeeded in further freeing my sexuality from the shackles of society. I let myself be the sexual being I am and let myself enjoy the pleasure my body was capable of without embarrassment or shame. What freedom! What power! I slew a dragon!

Whether cybersex and cyberromance are helpful and lead to satisfactory face-to-face relations or whether they simply provide temporary escape and avoidance of problems depends on a number of factors. If the appeal of text-based cybersex for a woman consists primarily of seeming desirable and sexually appealing to potential partners—a facade that contradicts a woman's real-life feelings—then they are probably of limited value. On the other hand, if cyberrelationships provide a needed boost to the woman's self-confidence and self-esteem, and thereby permit greater risks in face-to-face interactions, then they are therapeutically useful and should be encouraged. Often, this outcome is difficult to predict beforehand!

One divorced 48-year-old patient, for instance, was able to communicate with wit and assurance on a variety of discussion forums and chat rooms but could not be persuaded to make the leap into risking a face-to-face meeting with any of her chat buddies.

Another patient, a successful psychotherapist, chatted often and well with a variety of men, but found all of her face-to-face meetings disappointing and frustrating. "The men often talk a good game, but are so socially unskilled that meeting them in person shatters all of my illusions!" she remarked.

Sexual exploration in virtual communities of sexual subcultures (Palandri & Green, 2000) may be seen either as preparation for entry to offline scenes or as playful extensions of the existing sexual repertoire

without any desire for offline realization. When women in committed relationships use Net meetings for clandestine romantic or erotic contacts, problems usually arise in the primary relationship. As therapists, we should explore and discuss with our patients the likely aftermath of the discovery of these activities on both their partner and on their relationship. If partners can successfully agree on how they want to incorporate Net sex exploration into their life together and can negotiate which Net sex activities are acceptable (and which are not!), problems will be averted, and in some cases, the universe of sexual options and paraphernalia available on the Internet may enrich and revitalize their relationship.

☐ Conclusion

Sexual exploration on the Internet does pose risks for women: Partners can use the Net to betray or to establish relationships that exclude them, women can be forced to participate in online sex or can be sexually harassed or insulted; and online romances can endanger primary relationships. But none of these dangers is unique to the Internet. On the Internet, these common risks, assuming the user possesses some degree of technical competence, may be avoided and dealt with more readily than in many face-to-face contexts. In fact, real life poses greater risks for most women than the potential risks associated with Internet usage. In real life, sexual and physical violence is commonplace for many women, and gender and power inequities abound. Technology can not eradicate or heal the disappointment and bitterness of some feminists about the fact that computer-mediated communication does not abolish gender asymmetries or provide women an egalitarian cybertopia.

The sexual options available on the Internet offer women unique opportunities: Women can display themselves or their creations, find or establish supportive networks, engage in open sexual discourse, and explore sexual preferences and fetishes with other women and with men. These options provide genuinely new arenas for women to act assertively as sexual subjects and protagonists rather than as sexual objects. Over time, these opportunities for women to define and express their sexuality may have far-reaching consequences in enhancing and extending feelings of autonomy and empowerment. How and whether these goals are achieved will ultimately depend on a woman's unique circumstances, competencies, and goals.

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