

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

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