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[Home](#) » [Articles Home](#) » The Internet and Human Sexuality

### The Internet and Human Sexuality

by Dyanna S. Culp Temos

Cyber reality is a fragmented reflection of our real world environment. It reflects basic truths found in the creating culture.



Human behavior always adapts to environmental changes and the Internet is a massive environmental change. Our creation has evolved into its own separate reality which, as an integral part of society, now exerts its own influence upon human behavior.

Online, we can ask the questions about our sexuality we're afraid to speak out loud. We can seek solace and advice on relationships, sexual health, or intimacy problems. We can find others that fit our unique profiles. We can explore multiple alternative cyber personalities. The shy can be bold, men can be women, the ugly can be beautiful... we are whatever we wish to portray ourselves as. But Psychologists and Social Scientists question how the amount of time we spend in this cyber reality is affecting human interactions and particularly human sexuality.

Will our cyber selves emerge into the harsh light of day? Or, will cyber reality create an ever widening chasm between the real world and our online lives? Online behaviors with the greatest potential to cross over into the "real" world surface in homes, workplaces, schools, and social relationships. Will having multiple online personalities alter our real personalities? If we practice online gender switching will our male/female roles become less rigid?

Will it make us more empathetic with the opposite sex and lead to increased intimacy? Or are eons of hard wired evolutionary male/female behaviors too entrenched to be altered by the Web?

***"Surveys show that men and women hold vastly different views of the Web and sexuality..."***

"Cybersex is the ultimate in safe sex, it intensifies self-stimulation, offers immediate gratification, provides an escape for stress and tension, and reduces performance anxiety."- Psychologist K. Young, director of the Center for Online Addiction and author of Tangled in the Web: Understanding Cybersex from Fantasy to Addiction. Individual attitudes about online sex and romance seem to closely parallel attitudes held toward sexuality in general. Surveys show that men and women have greatly different views toward the Web and sexuality. These views tend to follow trends found in real world sexual attitudes. Women make up the majority of health/ intimacy chat

rooms and more frequently visit health education sites. Both sexes utilize adult Web sites. Men make up a higher percentage of the visitors to adult sites, but are more likely to be passive viewers. A higher percentage of the women visitors actively engage in cybersex.

20 percent of all internet users engage in some type of online sexual activity. Reports show that these sexual activities include seeking advice about romance and relationships, viewing educational sexual health materials, sex talk in chat rooms, setting up real world erotic encounters, visiting adult sites, or purchasing erotic materials.

An MSNBC.com sexual survey produced some expected, and some surprising, results. The survey of 38,204 Web users in 2000 revealed that people spend a significant amount of time online exploring fantasies, relieving stress, and attempting to improve their real-world sex lives. 60% of men listed their primary reason for exploring sex sites as "distraction," compared with 37% of women. But the women who visited sex sites were more likely than men to engage in "cybersex" and to meet their Web partners offline. 45% of the women and 38% of the men had participated in cybersex. 30% of the women, and 26% of the men, took the relationship offline into the real world.

Two major positions have emerged on the affects of Internet sexuality. These opposing sides are filled with both laymen and scores of psychologists. Surveys and studies are analyzed and debated to determine whether the Internet is a positive influence on human sexuality or the beast that exposes the darkest corridors of our culture.

The first position to emerge was Internet sexuality as a pathological force full of addiction and compulsivity. The premise is that the Web increases isolation, reduces intimacy, and prompts deviant personalities to become more dangerous to the real world. Durkin and Bryant (1995) identified a variety of motivations for erotic computer communications, ranging from mild flirtation to sexual services to deviant sexual behavior. Their premise was that cybersex allows sexual fantasies that would otherwise remain latent to be indulged.

5-7% of the Web community may be addicted to OSA or Online Sexual Activity. These figures are consistent with studies in the "real world" showing compulsive sexual addictions for about 5% of the general population. Contrary to previous research, Psychologist and researcher A. Cooper has found that for the majority of people, online sexual pursuits do not lead to compulsive behavior. ([www.apa.org/journals/](http://www.apa.org/journals/)) Instead, the number of sex addicts online mirrors the percentages found in the population at large.

Dependent personalities seek more online sexual thrills than independent personalities. Young (1997) indicated that "dependent" personalities used the Internet primarily to socialize and meet new people, but "nondependent" personalities use the Internet to collect information and maintain preexisting work or personal relationships.

"The internet will soon become the most common form of infidelity, if it isn't already," says B. Mileham, University of Florida researcher. The University study found that spouses enjoying cybersex or online relationships did not think they were doing anything wrong. But their partners felt otherwise, and viewed the online relationships as virtual infidelity, even when no physical contact occurred.

The positive camp for online sexuality emphasizes sexual exploration with improved intimacy and support from a global community. These psychologists and laymen see human behavior adapting in positive ways to the Internet

***"Their partners viewed the online relationships as virtual infidelity, even***

environment. Cooper and Sportolari (1997) coined the term "computer mediated relating" (CMR) and identified a variety of positive behavior aspects including a reduced emphasis on physical attributes as a criteria for establishing a relationship. Instead the focus is shifted to shared interests and values, resulting in more emotional intimacy than relationships based on physical attraction.

The Web allows exploration of alternative behaviors without the fear of social stigmatization. Whether we live in the heart of NYC or a conservative country town we can go online to explore our fantasies and anonymously purchase a wide range of sexual products. The benefits of cyberspace self expression and sexual exploration are particularly vital for the shy, the isolated, and those surrounded by right wing conservatives. Those who never dared walk the adult aisles at the video store or enter an adult "toy" store are able to experiment within the privacy of their homes without being observed by their neighbors.

Research indicates that 80-90% of adult site visitors attribute an enhanced real world sex life to their online play. "Cybersex has several positive affects. For one, it helps the sexually disenfranchised minorities, such as gay youths, find community and support. It also allows people to explore their fantasies or parts of their sexuality that scare them." -Psychologist and researcher A. Cooper

Who do you go to with questions about sexual health and intimacy? Teens with no one to talk to can learn the truth about how they really can, and cannot get pregnant, or catch sexually transmitted diseases. Education and support groups exist for prostate and breast cancer victims, quadriplegics, transsexuals, and the isolated Montana housewife. All major medical centers, universities and government health agencies offer free massive online databases. The Web is improving Sex education. 55% of women and 31% of men go online for some form of sexual education.

Online sex therapists offer counseling for the shy or geographically isolated. Web cams now link counselors to shy or distant patients. Reputable sex therapy sites typically have disclaimers stating that the content and interactions do not constitute therapy or medical treatment. Before baring your Web cam soul, authorities warn to check for a professional state license, certification by the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) or membership in other organizations such as the American Psychological Association or the American Psychiatric Association.

Has online dating replaced the bar scene? Meeting online provides time to develop a personal intimacy not based on physical attractiveness or immediate sexual gratification. Behind the shield of our computers, we're more likely to reveal our true personalities and disclose significant personal revelations. We can reach deeper levels of psychological and emotional intimacy than occurs with the posturing of first dates or bar pickups. Then, when we're ready, we schedule a face to face. Online dating resembles the slower, prolonged old fashioned courtship of centuries ago, but within the protection of cyberspace.

The Web offers sexual salvation for many unique minority groups. The disabled, the HIV positive, transsexuals, the computer geeks.....are meeting, joining virtual communities, forming relationships and exploring sexuality online. Each group finds answers to their unique questions, anxieties, and dreams. Whether you're quadriplegic, a herpes carrier, or a mad scientist, those in unique minorities are more likely to find a supportive community or a mate online than in the real world.

Cyberspace presents us with both positive and negative influences on our human sexuality. The Web can entangle us in addictions to our fantasies, deepen our isolation, reduce sexual intimacy and introduce us to the harm of strangers. But the Web can also help us safely explore our fantasies, gain a deeper understanding of our sexual health, meet the mate of our dreams, and embrace us within the arms of a supportive global community.

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