

Online Sex Shops: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Ideological Perspectives on Internet Sexuality

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Abstract

Explosive growth in access to the Internet has created an unprecedented opportunity for the general public to acquire explicit erotic texts, images, services, and merchandise, but psychological scientists have not conceptualized antecedents or consequences of contact with Internet sexuality or conducted a significant amount of empirical research on these issues. The current analysis uses Internet sex shop sites as a case example of Internet sexuality, and offers a phenomenological exploration of the world of Internet sex shop sites, conceptualizes antecedents and consequences of use of Internet sex shop sites from the perspective of the Sexual Behavior Sequence, and suggests a conceptually based agenda for future empirical research in this area. Discussion concludes with consideration of ideological aspects of research on Internet sex shop sites and Internet sexuality broadly conceived.

INTRODUCTION

EXPLLOSIVE GROWTH in access to the Internet in recent years has created an unprecedented opportunity for the general public to acquire explicit erotic text, images, sounds, services, and merchandise.¹⁻⁷ As never before in human history, individuals of all ages, of both sexes, and of diverse sexual and personal inclinations now have essentially unlimited and essentially effortless access to sexual stimuli and sexual products by way of Internet technology. Accelerated use of sexual websites has been facilitated dramatically by the "three A's" of Internet use: access, affordability, and anonymity,⁸ which increasingly characterize the Internet scene across much of the globe. A recent sur-

vey⁹ conducted on the *ABCNEWS.com* website showed that approximately 50% of over 17,000 online respondents commonly visited explicit Internet sex sites, and that 6% have shopped for sexual merchandise at online sex shop sites.

In privacy and without cost, Internet users may browse a wide range of sexual stimuli and shop for diverse sexual merchandise, as a function of their personal characteristics and sexual and social relationships and inclinations. Sexual stimulation, sexual services, and sexual merchandise so obtained may act, in turn, to alter more or less profoundly the personal characteristics and sexual and social relationships that motivated the individual to seek out Internet sexuality in the first place. Despite the occurrence of these revolutionary changes, psy-

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chological theory has not been applied to conceptualize potential effects of access to Internet sexuality, and psychological research has not been conducted to provide objective information about the antecedents and consequences of contact with sex on the Internet, with few exceptions.¹⁰ The current analysis focuses on one aspect of Internet sexuality—the Internet sex shop—as a case example which, like most other aspects of Internet sexuality, has not been the subject of conceptual analysis or empirical research from the perspective of psychological science. A psychological discussion of Internet sex shop sites seems significant at the present time both because of growing concern about Internet sexuality in general^{1,10,11} and because of rapidly expanding interest in e-commerce across the board.^{12,13} In the sections that follow, we provide a brief phenomenological glimpse of the world of Internet sex shops. We then review what psychological theory can have to say about antecedents and consequences of use of Internet sex shops and create a research agenda for empirical study in this area. We conclude with consideration of ideological issues which will influence psychological theory and research and public debate concerning Internet sex shops and Internet sexuality in general.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON INTERNET SEX SHOPS: AN HOUR'S EXCURSION INTO INTERNET SEXUALITY

Lacking an empirically based atlas describing addresses, categories, or content of Internet sex shops (or of any other aspect of Internet sexuality, for that matter), I adopted the perspective of an Internet novice and embarked on an hour's excursion into the world of Internet sex shops. A report of the experience of Internet sex shop sites, from the perspective of a novice user, is offered in the following section.

Engaging the first search engine to appear on my screen (*Excite*), I search the term "sex shop," entered as a novice might without quotations, and I am alerted to the fact that some 3,463,766 hits have been registered. (Entering the search term "sex shop" in quotations, a more advanced search strategy, gives me 2,600 hits,

with the top matches of each search strategy similar in most respects). Examining a selection of top matches, I am impressed first with the geographic and linguistic diversity of Internet sex shops: within the first several websites, I visit sex shops in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Denmark, Britain, and Australia. Language offerings include English, French, Danish, Japanese, German, Chinese, and Italian. I learn that some sex shop sites are exclusively virtual and exist only in cyberspace (for example, "The Virtual Sex Shop" at <http://www.sexshop2000.dk>), while others exist as websites on the Internet but also represent physically extant sex shops at specified locations that I can readily visit from home (such as the www.goodforher.com store). The later type of site is in the minority, however.

After browsing sex shop websites for a short time, I realize that a majority of sex shops are designed to appeal to the full range of sexual tastes that might be present in the general public, and offer merchandise and services that is oriented to male and female heterosexuals, gays, and lesbians, and those interested in bondage and discipline. A good example of the omnibus Internet sex shop encountered early in my hour's excursion is The Web Sex Shop at <http://www.websexshop.com>, which takes me along virtual aisles devoted to "vibrators, dongs, stimulators/massagers, anal delights, harnesses/strap ons, masturbators, pumps/extenders, bondage/SM, love kits, lotions and potions, lingerie, fun and games, educational, and love doll" merchandise. In addition to sex shop websites serving the general public, I also visit sex shops specially tailored to women, which appear to my eye to be designed in a tasteful and discrete fashion. These sites directly offer assurances to female customers of the sensitivity of the site to women's needs (e.g., "of and for women") and offer merchandise that appears to comprise "what women might order for themselves" (e.g., electrical vibrators for clitoral stimulation), as opposed to "what men might order for women" (e.g., 12 inch dildo black or fleshtone vibrators with realistic veins). A good example of a woman-focused sex shop is the "Good Vibrations" website at <http://www.goodvibes.com>. Other sex shop

websites I encountered cater to a greater or lesser degree to homosexual men and women (at <http://www.gaymart.com>), watersports (urination and feces) enthusiasts (at <http://www.cascade-contacts.com>), and other specialized sexual tastes that I had previously known little or nothing about.

Merchandise encountered while browsing Internet sex shops covers the widest imaginable range of products and a number of products I had never imagined. Vibrators abound, including a profusion of animal-named models such as the "Hummingbird," "Scorpion," and "Diving Dolphin," and at least one remote-controlled clitoral vibrator that can be worn by one party and activated at will and from a distance by the other. Dildos are also exceedingly popular and range from the diminutive "Pocket Rocket," "Junior," and "Slim Line" models to enormous behemoths equipped with air pumps for inflation after insertion, with a line of "Jelly Vibes"—soft, insertable, penis-shaped vibrators—apparently all the rage. Penis enlargement systems ("all natural") are on offer and briefly capture my attention with the promise of increased genital endowment. Bondage and discipline devices are sold at most of the general purpose websites and include the "double weight ball stretcher," a device referred to as the "universal gates of hell," wrist cuffs, thigh harnesses, a widely-advertised blow-up bondage bed ("completely washable"), at least four varieties of nipple clips, spanking apparatus (including the "fanny slapper" and specialized penis and nipple whips), and clitoris and penis jewellery (resembling earrings) for those who are pierced. Merchandise selections appealing to a range of tastes also includes a vast assortment of butt plugs (vibrating, inflating, and ejaculating), double-ended dildos and strap-on penises, anatomically faithful sculptured replicas of famous penises (including the 10-inch Stan Michaels and Rod Jeremy models), and several trapeze-like love swings for the adventurous and athletic. Sex sites I visit also market an array of lingerie (bras, garters, babydolls, bustiers, chemises, and teddies), and books ["Safe and Unusual Sex (Over 200 Pictures)," "The Clitoral Kiss (A Guide for Oral Sex for Men and Women)," and "The Complete Manual of Sex-

ual Positions."] An intriguing array of male-only masturbation accessories such as vibrating vaginas, lips, and anuses, in white or black flesh-tone, some with videos, and one with a glow-in-the-dark option, is also on offer. Importantly, I discover early in my sojourn that sex shop websites offer links to related services such as sex chat rooms, live sex telephone numbers, live sex video shows, erotic stories, and erotic still picture and movie websites which focus on sampling and ultimately selling access to erotica. Very rapidly, it becomes completely clear to me that there are no boundaries on the Internet, and that browsing a sex shop site will easily connect me with the full array of sexuality the Internet has to offer. Also important, as part of the list of top sex shop hits identified in my search, I encounter sites which directly offer all forms of erotic stimulation (e.g., sex telephone lines, sexual images, swingers lists, etc.) as well as access to a sexual search engine, *X-ahoo!*, which promises further access to "amateur, black, Asian, bondage, fetish, gay, hardcore, transsexual" sites. With one mouse click, I can apparently move from a sex shop site into an erotic site which serves as gateway to essentially all erotic stimulation available on the Internet. And, surfing erotic imagery sites, I find essentially limitless samples, at no cost and with no age verification, of male and female nudes, heterosexual oral, anal, and penile-vaginal sex (stills and videos), cumshot sites (specializing in breast or facial or swallowing sites, in still or video), gay male sites (nudes, oral sex, anal sex, cumshots, still and video), lesbian sites (including woman-on-woman oral sex and bondage and discipline and sadomasochism), fetish and bondage and discipline sites (insertion of bottles and fists into the vagina, "tit torture" sites, spanking sites, bondage sites, including caucasian and Asian women and less often including bound men), bestiality sites (including pictures of women engaging in oral and vaginal intercourse with dogs and horses), and urination and feces sites. At no point during my hour's excursion is it necessary to pay for access to any sexual merchandise site or for any erotic image mentioned herein; at only one point during my hour's excursion am I asked to provide a credit card number for age verification; at only one point is safer sex mentioned

(the book on "Safe and Unusual Sex"); in only one of the hundreds of intercourse stimuli accessed was a condom in evidence; and about the only sexual accessory not encountered for sale during my hour's sojourn were condoms.

From a personal phenomenological perspective, the naive browser of Internet sex shop sites experiences many reactions. He or she may be sexually aroused, or curious, or repulsed; the browser's existing sexual stimulation needs may be met by what he or she encounters, or he or she may discover enjoyable new sources of sexual stimulation, and new sexual needs may be established. The browser may also infer social tolerance and permission to contemplate or to practice a range of sexual options previously thought forbidden, given their acceptance and wide representation on the Internet. The browser may respond by returning every day to Internet sex shops and other Internet sexuality sites or by never returning; he or she may come to perceive sex shopping on the Internet as the ultimate in discrete and anonymous sex-related purchasing, or may perceive Internet sex shopping as leaving a clear and identifiable trail and rule out purchasing in this fashion in preference for the anonymity of a cash purchase at a store in another part of town. The naive browser may be educated about possible methods of sexual gratification (vibrators, dildos, nipple clips) about which they had never known, or they may be able to purchase aids to sexual gratification about which they had known but which had not been physically accessible or possible to purchase with anonymity. The browser may decide to utilize what has been acquired in a virtual sense—in his or her imagination; or to utilize what has been acquired in his or her personal autosexual repertoire; or to broach the issue of incorporating what has been acquired into the dyadic sexual repertoire of a couple. Finally, the browser also discovers that—although he or she initiated a search of Internet sex shop sites because it was felt to be a discrete and anonymous place to purchase sexual merchandise, or because they were physically remote from an actual sex shop, or simply because they were curious—they have gone far beyond sex shop merchandise per se and find that there are no boundaries on or within In-

ternet sexuality. A wider array of sexual stimulation and merchandise than ever imagined becomes instantly and anonymously available, in privacy and without cost, upon simple entry of the term "sex shop" into a search engine and with a single click of a mouse.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON INTERNET SEX SHOPS: CONCEPTUALIZING INTERNET SEXUALITY

As psychological scientists, we gain important advantage by bringing to bear organized psychological theory in efforts to understand phenomena of social and behavioral significance such as Internet sexuality and the case example at focus, Internet sex shops. A number of well-articulated and well-researched psychological theories could reasonably be applied to conceptualize Internet sexuality and the antecedents and consequences of experience with Internet sex shops. For example, the Theory of Reasoned Action^{14,15} would alert us to the significance of personal attitudes and social norms as determinants of motivation to access Internet sex shops, and could be extrapolated to explore potential effects of contact with Internet sex shops or Internet sexuality more broadly on future development of personal attitudes and social norms in this regard. An Information—Motivation—Behavioral Skills model^{16,17} analysis would focus on informational, motivational, and behavioral skills factors which would incline and enable an individual to access Internet sex shops, or which would deter and hinder the individual from experiencing Internet sexuality. An Information—Motivation—Behavioral Skills model analysis could also be extended to explore the effects of experience with Internet sex shops on future development of information, motivation, and behavioral skills regarding Internet sexuality. It is the Sexual Behavior Sequence,^{18–20} however, which has been chosen for the current conceptualization of Internet sexuality and antecedents and consequences of experience with Internet sex shop sites. The Sexual Behavior Sequence is one of the few current psychological theories that was created

specifically for the purpose of understanding antecedents and consequences of *sexual* behavior. It provides us with a basis for exploring arousal, affective, and cognitive factors that incline an individual to access Internet sexuality, and specifies a feedback mechanism whereby experience with Internet sexuality alters arousal, affective, and cognitive responses, and future sexual behavior, in a predictable fashion. The following section applies the Sexual Behavior Sequence to conceptualize antecedents and consequences of experience with Internet sexuality as seen in the case example of Internet sex shop sites.

The Sexual Behavior Sequence

The Sexual Behavior Sequence,^{18,20,21} depicted in Figure 1, is a general psychological model of the antecedents and consequences of sexual behavior. As can be seen in Figure 1, moving from left to right, the Sexual Behavior Sequence asserts that individuals respond to unlearned (unconditioned erotic stimuli) and learned (conditioned erotic stimuli) sexual cues. Such cues can elicit sexual arousal (physiological sexual arousal), affective responses (affective and evaluative responses), and cognitive responses (informational, expectative, and imaginative responses).

Sexual arousal, affect, and cognition may motivate and guide instrumental activities (preparatory sexual behavior) which increase the likelihood of overt sex acts (sexual behavior). Sexual behaviors can have positive or negative consequences (outcome) that will influence future probability of the responses that led to the sexual behavior in question, via the feedback loop which is depicted at the bottom of the figure.

Sexual stimuli—sexual arousal—sexual behavior

According to the Sexual Behavior Sequence (Fig. 1), individuals respond to certain sexual cues—unconditioned erotic stimuli—with unlearned sexual-physiological arousal. For human beings, unconditioned erotic stimuli may include tactile stimulation of the genitals, exposure to sexual scents or pheromones, and possibly, visual sexual cues such as the presentation of the receptive genital region (e.g., erect penis or swollen vulva) or observation of copulatory behavior.²² The Sexual Behavior Sequence also asserts that any other stimulus that is repeatedly and distinctively paired with an unconditioned erotic stimulus will eventually acquire the ability to elicit sexual arousal itself and become a conditioned erotic stimulus.

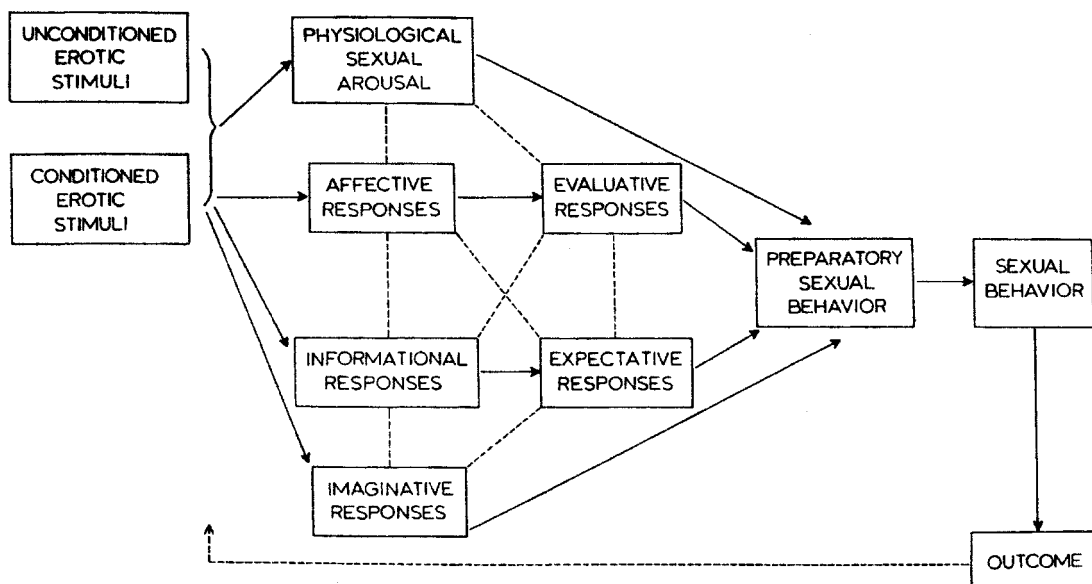


FIG. 1. The Sexual Behavior Sequence.

According to the Sexual Behavior Sequence, individuals who are sufficiently sexually aroused will engage in preparatory sexual behaviors in efforts to deal with their state of sexual arousal. Preparatory sexual behaviors can involve efforts to terminate contact with unconditioned or conditioned erotic stimuli (e.g., click on an alternative website) or efforts to counteract sexually arousing consequences of stimulation (e.g., contemplating the boss's discovery that one is using the company's Internet connection to shop for dildos). Preparatory sexual behaviors can also involve actions that are instrumental in bringing about orgasmic sexual release (e.g., purchasing a dildo from an Internet sex shop site in anticipation of using it on a lonely Saturday night). Assuming that preparatory sexual behavior eventuates an overt sexual behavior, the Sexual Behavior Sequence asserts that sexual behaviors have hedonically positive or hedonically negative outcomes that will condition the future probability of the chain of events which led to the sexual behavior in the first place.

Let us consider, for example, an individual who accesses an Internet sex shop site. He or she becomes sexually aroused by unconditioned erotic cues (e.g., explicit pictures of masturbatory activity) seen on the website accompanied by illustrations of the use of electric vibrators for sexual stimulation. After several pairings of images of masturbatory activity and images of electric vibrators, images or thoughts of vibrators may acquire the ability to elicit physiological sexual arousal and to trigger preparatory sexual behavior (for example, buying a vibrator on an Internet sex site), overt sexual behavior (plugging the vibrator in and stimulating one's self to one or more orgasms), and positive (overwhelming pleasure) or negative (overwhelming guilt) outcomes that feed back into the system to condition the greater or lesser future probability of such behaviors. Another example would be the Internet sex shop browser who is exposed to the repeated pairing of sexual arousal and bondage and discipline images and themes. Across time, wrist cuffs and bondage bed imagery may acquire the ability to sexually arouse the individual and thoughts or images of bondage and discipline may trigger preparatory sexual behavior (ac-

quiring bondage and discipline paraphernalia from an Internet sex shop site), actual sexual behavior (bondage activities accompanied by orgasmic sex integrated into couple sexual activity), outcomes (sexual pleasure or guilt), and feedback that conditions the greater or lesser frequency of such sexual behaviors in the future. Whether such a cascade of outcomes of contact with Internet sex shop sites—such as the acquisition of a preference for the use of a vibrator or for the use of bondage and discipline devices—is regarded as “good” or “bad” is judged in terms of individual and social beneficence and in terms of ideological positions to be discussed in a later section of this paper.

Sexual stimuli— affective responses— sexual behavior

The Sexual Behavior Sequence asserts that individuals respond to sexual stimuli with affective and evaluative responses, in addition to sexual-physiological responses, and holds that affective and evaluative responses to sexual cues will affect preparatory sexual behavior, sexual behavior, and the nature of the outcome of sexual behavior (Fig. 1). According to the theory, individuals acquire affective and evaluative responses to sexual cues by way of the association of sexual cues with reward or punishment over the life span.^{20,23} An individual who has experienced repeated pairings of sexual cues with rewarding outcomes (e.g., physical pleasure, social acceptance) will develop an erotophilic trait disposition to respond to sexual stimuli with relatively positive affect and evaluations. Positive affective and evaluative responses to sexual stimulation will incline the individual to engage in preparatory sexual behavior and overt sexual behavior and to experience the outcomes of this behavior as positive, which will condition an increased likelihood of such behaviors in the future and strengthen the individual's erotophilic disposition. In contrast, an individual who has experienced repeated pairings of sexual stimuli with punishment (e.g., guilt, social rejection) will develop an erotophobic trait disposition to respond to sexual cues with relatively negative affect and evaluation. This will incline the in-

dividual to avoid preparatory and actual sexual behavior, to experience the outcome of any such behavior as negative, condition the lesser likelihood of such behaviors in the future, and strengthen the individual's erotophobic disposition.

Consider for example an erotophilic individual who experiences positive affect and evaluations in relation to sexuality. All else being equal, the erotophilic individual should enjoy Internet sexuality and evaluate it positively (affective and evaluative responses), browsing at and buying from Internet sex shop sites (preparatory behavior) and integrating virtual (e.g., imagery and ideas) and actual (e.g., merchandise) acquisitions from sex shop sites into his or her sexual behavior. The erotophilic individual will experience this sequence of events positively (outcome), be more likely to engage in this sort of activity in the future, and might become a bit more erotophilic in the bargain. In contrast, consider an erotophobic individual who for one reason or another finds himself or herself at an Internet sex shop site. The erotophobic individual should experience contact with Internet sexuality as emotionally negative and should evaluate it accordingly (affective and evaluative responses), terminate contact with the Internet sex shop site (preparatory behavior), code his or her contact with Internet sexuality negatively (outcome), be less likely to engage in such behaviors in the future, and possibly become somewhat more erotophobic as the result of this experience.

According to the Sexual Behavior Sequence, then, contact with Internet sex shop sites and with Internet sexuality in general will be a self-regulated activity that will take place as a function of an individual's erotophilic or erotophobic disposition to respond to sexual content with positive to negative affect and evaluations. All else being equal, erotophilic individuals should seek out and enjoy contact with Internet sex shop sites and Internet sexuality in general, should utilize Internet sex sites with increasing frequency, and incorporate what is learned or acquired in sexual behaviors that are experienced as enjoyable and repeated in the future. This sequence of events should strengthen the erotophilic disposition that inclined the individual to access Internet sexual-

ity and to enjoy it in the first place. Erotophobic individuals in contrast will experience contact with Internet sexuality as an emotionally negative event, will be unlikely to continue contact with Internet sexuality, to incorporate acquisitions made there into personal sexual behavior, or to engage again in whatever behaviors resulted in contact with Internet sexuality. This sequence of events should also condition and strengthen the individual's erotophobic disposition and his or her inclination to avoid Internet sexuality in the future.

Sexual stimuli—cognitive responses—sexual behavior

According to the Sexual Behavior Sequence, individuals acquire certain types of cognitive responses to erotic stimuli, and these responses are assumed to mediate preparatory and actual sexual behavior and outcomes, along with the physiological and affective responses discussed earlier. Cognitive responses to erotic stimuli include informational responses, expectative responses, and imaginative responses (Fig. 1). Informational responses involve beliefs about the attributes of sexual phenomena and, whether accurate or inaccurate, are assumed to guide preparatory and actual sexual behavior and to affect the nature of the outcome of such behavior. Informational responses are often correlated with expectative responses or subjective probabilities concerning the occurrence of consequences of a sexual activity or behavior. For example, in relation to Internet sex shop sites, an individual may believe that Internet sex shop sites are discrete (informational response) and that there is a very high probability of anonymity if one purchases merchandise from such a site (expectative response). Other individuals, however, may believe that Internet sex shop sites are not discrete (informational response) and perceive a very high probability of exposure (expectative response) if they were to make a purchase at such a site. In addition to relatively specific informational and expectative responses, the Sexual Behavior Sequence also holds that individuals possess coherent and organized sets of related information and expectancies which come together to form sexually relevant ideologies such as

sexual conservatism, sexual permissiveness, authoritarianism, and the like. Finally, the Sexual Behavior Sequence proposes that individuals acquire imaginative or fantasy responses to sexual stimulation, which are script-like representations of entire sexual events. An individual might imagine an entire sequence of events resulting from an Internet sex shop site purchase, including the stimulating and enjoyable integration of sex shop merchandise into sexual play with a willing partner, or the horrified reaction to such an event by a repulsed and disgusted partner.

According to the Sexual Behavior Sequence, informational, expectative, and fantasy responses to sexual cues will influence the occurrence of preparatory sexual behavior, sexual behavior, outcomes, and the future likelihood of associated events. Thus, for example, the individual whose informational and expectative responses anticipate an anonymous purchase at an Internet sex shop site might also fantasize about receipt of a purchase in the proverbial plain brown wrapper and subsequent enjoyment of the purchase in sex play with an excited partner. Such an individual might make a purchase at an Internet sex shop site—say, a blindfold for a partner who enjoys acting out fantasies (a preparatory sexual behavior)—incorporate the purchase into sexual behavior, experience the outcome of this sequence of events as positive, and engage in related such behaviors more often in the future. In contrast, the individual whose informational and expectative responses lead to doubt of the anonymity of an Internet sex shop site might well imagine the horrifying social consequences of exposure at work (when corporate information technology administrators summon the individual for punishment for use of company Internet resources for sex shop purchases), or when a horrified spouse receives unsolicited pornographic E-mail as a result of the sale of the individual's E-mail address by the Internet sex shop site to hundreds of sex-related Internet businesses. Such an individual will be unlikely to access sex shop sites and or to be in a position to incorporate sex shop site acquisitions into actual sexual behavior.

The Sexual Behavior Sequence also directs our attention to the effects of experience with

Internet sexuality on the body of sex-related information, expectations, and fantasy that an individual develops across time. Consider, for example, a first-time visitor to one of the Internet sex-shop sites discussed earlier. This individual is very likely to acquire a vast store of new informational responses, concerning, for instance, dozens of different types of dildos, vibrators, anal plugs, restraint devices, whips, nipple clips, and sexual acts. Contact with sex shop sites may also modify the individual's expectancies about sexuality, including expectancies concerning the commonness and acceptability of sexual activities previously thought to be rare and unacceptable,²⁴ such as the use of vibrators, dildos, whips, and the like. And, the individual has some degree of likelihood of incorporating such information and expectancies into his or her sexual fantasies. If the individual has acquired sexual arousal responses to cues such as vibrators, dildos, whips, and the like, and if the individual approaches Internet sexuality with an erotophilic disposition, it is relatively likely that information (about the existence of a wide array of sexual activities and merchandise) and expectancies (about the commonness and acceptability of these sexual activities and merchandise) will find their way into the individual's sexual fantasies. And, there is also some degree of likelihood that these informational, expectative, and fantasy responses will influence preparatory and overt sexual behavior (say, acquiring sexual merchandise from a sex shop site and personally using it or proposing the use of such merchandise to a partner), the positive or negative outcome of such behavior, and the likelihood of such behavior in the future. Once again, judgement of the "goodness" or "badness" of this chain of events may be evaluated in terms of its individual and social beneficence or harm and in relation to a variety of ideological positions.

Interactions among constructs of the Sexual Behavior Sequence

We have thus far considered separately the affective and cognitive subsystems of the Sexual Behavior Sequence, but it is critical to appreciate the fashion in which these subsystems

may interact to influence preparatory and overt sexual behavior and the outcome of such behavior. According to the Sexual Behavior Sequence, for example, affective and evaluative responses acquired relatively early in life should exert a profound and pervasive influence on the acquisition of informational, expectative, and imaginative responses to sexuality. Erotophilic and erotophobic individuals are likely to seek out and retain information and expectancies that are consistent with their affective disposition to sexuality and are likely to utilize information and expectancies to formulate sexual fantasies which are also consistent with their affective-evaluative dispositions in relation to sex.²³ For example, erotophilic individuals will be likely to seek out Internet sexuality and to utilize Internet sex shop sites in part because such activities are intrinsically affectively rewarding to them. Erotophilic individuals will therefore be likely to acquire information and expectancies as a result of contact with Internet sex shop sites, and this information will likely consist of facts about a previously unknown array of sexual merchandise and sexual activities and an expectation that such merchandise and activities are common and acceptable. Such affect, information, expectancies, and fantasy may well trigger preparatory behavior (e.g., purchases at sex shop sites) and actual sexual behavior (e.g., integration of sex shop purchases into sexual behavior), and affect outcomes of sexual behavior and the future frequency of such behavior. By the same token, an erotophobic individual will not be inclined to access Internet sexuality. If the erotophobic individual does come into contact with Internet sexuality, he or she should seek out and retain information and expectancies that are consistent with his or her affective disposition ("Sexual merchandise and activity of a depraved nature are common on the Internet"). The erotophobic individual should import such information and expectancies into fantasies consistent with his or her affective predisposition (e.g., imagery of depraved sexual behavior with unwilling victims that resulted from a pervert's contact with the Internet). The erotophobic individual should experience contact with Internet sexuality to be a negative outcome and should be less likely to

engage in the sequence of behaviors that eventuated this contact in the future.

In summary, then, the Sexual Behavior Sequence conceptualizes Internet sex shops sites as sexual stimuli that are arousing and that trigger a relatively coherent and homogenous set of affective and cognitive responses. Such affective and cognitive responses affect the likelihood of preparatory and actual sexual behavior in response to Internet sexuality and affect the experience of the outcome of such behavior and its likelihood of occurring again in the future. Relatively positive or relatively negative affective and cognitive responses to Internet sexuality should reciprocally reinforce the individual's existing affective and cognitive disposition to sexuality and strengthen approach or avoidance tendencies to Internet sexuality in the future in a self-reinforcing and self-regulating fashion.

A psychological research agenda

The Sexual Behavior Sequence serves as a conceptual basis for establishing an agenda for psychological research on antecedents and consequences of experience with Internet sex shops and Internet sexuality broadly conceived. Based upon the current analysis, for example, it would be of considerable interest to examine affective and cognitive dispositions as antecedents of the inclination to utilize the Internet to access sex shops sites or other sexual content. According to the Sexual Behavior Sequence, individuals who have stable and positive affective and evaluative responses to sexuality—erotophilic individuals—should be very likely to seek out Internet sexuality, but this strong prediction has received little empirical study. By the same token, individuals with stable and negative affective, evaluative responses to sexuality—erotophobic individuals, should be very unlikely to seek out Internet sexuality, but again this strong prediction has received little research attention. And, the Sexual Behavior Sequence would also clearly predict that affective responses to Internet sexuality will influence the likelihood that individuals will engage in preparatory sexual behaviors on the Internet (e.g., acquire merchandise at an Internet sex shop site), actual

sexual behaviors (e.g., integrate such merchandise into sexual activity), and influence the outcome of such behaviors (positive or negative) and their future frequency. Again, however, such research remains to be conducted.

The Sexual Behavior Sequence would also predict that individuals who have positive or negative informational, expectative, and fantasy responses to Internet sexuality or to sexuality in general should be differentially likely to seek out Internet sex shop sites or other Internet sexual content. Discrete beliefs about Internet sex shop sites (e.g., "Internet sex shop sites are anonymous places to purchase sexual merchandise," "Internet sex shop site purchases leave a clear and identifiable trail"), correlated expectations concerning Internet sex shop sites (e.g., expectations for anonymity versus discovery), and imaginative responses in this regard (e.g., fantasies of enjoyable or frightening Internet sex shop purchasing experiences) should influence the inclination to access Internet sex shop sites and the outcomes of such behaviors. Similarly, coherent patterns of informational and expectative responses relevant to sexuality such as sex guilt, authoritarianism, sex roles, and other such ideologies should also affect inclination to utilize Internet sex shop sites and the outcomes of such behaviors, but again, research on each of these issues remains to be undertaken.

Based upon the current analysis, it would also be of considerable interest to examine arousal, affective, and cognitive *consequences* of experience with Internet sex shop sites or other sexual content. Obvious predictions from the perspective of the Sexual Behavior Sequence include the proposition that experience with Internet sexuality will condition sexual arousal to previously non-arousing or less arousing stimuli, the proposition that experience with Internet sexuality will add considerably to an individual's store of informational, expectative, and imaginative responses to sexuality, and the proposition that experience with Internet sexuality will strengthen existing erotophilic and erotophobic dispositions and existing positive and negative informational, expectative, and fantasy responses to sexuality. Still another focus for future research will involve the explo-

ration of sex differences in Internet sex shop and sex site utilization, as a function of sex differences in antecedent arousal, affective, and cognitive responses. The study of sex differences in arousal, affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences of Internet sex shop site utilization is also another important research focus.

In addition to exploring individual experiences with Internet sexuality, the Sexual Behavior Sequence alerts us to the fact that sexuality is very often a dyadic enterprise, engaging, in a sense, the arousal, affective, and cognitive responses, preparatory and sexual behaviors and outcomes of two or more individuals. It would be especially important to conduct research to map out effects of experience with Internet sex shop or other sexual sites on the part of one individual on the arousal, affective, cognitive, and other responses of the individual's partner. The study of importation of Internet sex shop acquisitions by one individual into a dyadic sexual relationship will be a most significant research focus in this regard.

A special interest in examining antecedents and consequences of experience with sexual media has been and will continue to be the possibility that individuals with antisocial sexual inclinations will seek out sexual media that strengthens these antisocial inclinations,²⁵⁻²⁹ and the possibility that individuals who do not now have antisocial sexual inclinations will develop them as a result of contact with sexual media.^{10,30,31} Overall, the Sexual Behavior Sequence suggests that exposure to Internet sexuality will be a self-regulating affair in which those who are inclined to seek out sexual stimulation will do so via the Internet, which will supply experiences that strengthen their original inclinations, while those who are not inclined to seek out Internet sexuality will not do so, and will remain unaffected. Following the self-regulating suggestions of the Sexual Behavior Sequence, Fisher and Barak^{31,32} have also proposed that exposure to imagery of antisocial sexuality is unlikely to be of interest to those not already inclined in this direction. Transitory exposure to antisocial sexual imagery is also held to be unlikely to affect in an antisocial fashion the sexual behavior of some-

one who has a lifetime learning history concerning acceptable versus unacceptable social and sexual behavior. By the same token, for those already inclined to antisocial sexual expressions, or for those profoundly lacking in internal restraints, exposure to antisocial sexual imagery may strengthen existing tendencies in this direction. Transitory exposure to antisocial sexual imagery, or any other antisocial imagery, may reinforce the aberrant sexual behavior of someone who has already developed an appetite for such behavior and whose internal restraints permit the expression of such behavior. While empirical research has detected an association between anti-woman attitudes and selective use of Internet sexual content,¹⁰ it has not demonstrated that such contact has any strengthening effect on initial misogynist dispositions.^{10,31,32} There is also a lack of evidence to suggest that widespread availability of traditional forms of pornography affects sexual criminality in epidemiological research.³¹

Importantly, the Sexual Behavior Sequence directs our attention to the content of Internet sex shop sites and to the content of Internet sexuality in general for clues as to possible effects on arousal, affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Based on our own experience with Internet sexuality, explicit sexual images and consensual sexual behavior predominate, and explicit scripts for coercive sexual activities are rare. It follows from this observation that arousal, affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences of contact with Internet sex shop sites or Internet sexuality might involve changes in relation to consensual sexual activities but not in relation to coercive activities.

Interest in antecedents and consequences of children's experience of Internet sexuality is a related concern. According to the Sexual Behavior Sequence, children would be in a sense "ideal" candidates for the acquisition of arousal, affective, and cognitive responses to sexuality as a result of experience with Internet sexuality because existing and potentially countervailing normative arousal, affective, and cognitive responses would not be well developed and the Internet would be expected to

have a correspondingly great impact on children.³³

In order to empirically test these conceptually based propositions concerning antecedents and consequences of contact with Internet sex shop sites or Internet sexuality in general, it will be necessary to develop appropriate research methodologies. One such methodology involves collecting data on psychological antecedents and consequences of experience with Internet sex shops or other sexual sites, before and after participants are permitted to access such sites.¹⁰ This methodology might be applied and expanded as a research strategy for future work in this area. Essentially, researchers could assess arousal, affective, and cognitive dispositions and preparatory and actual sexual behaviors of interest and provide a context in which participants could peruse the Internet for extended periods of time. Data can be collected on the nature and extent of access to Internet sex shop sites or other Internet sexual sites, and post-test measures of arousal, affective, and cognitive dispositions, and preparatory and actual sexual behaviors, would then be taken. Such a research strategy could begin to provide empirical answers to the set of propositions articulated earlier concerning antecedents and consequences of experience with Internet sex shop sites, including the incorporation of virtual and actual acquisitions at Internet sex shop sites into autosexual and dyadic sexual activities. Such a research strategy could also provide data on questions concerning the study of sex differences and personality differences in antecedents and consequences of experience with Internet sex shop sites and Internet sexuality in general. These procedures could also begin to provide information on the development or strengthening of antisocial sexual tendencies as a function of experience with Internet sexuality. While such a strategy would also be amenable to studying effects of Internet sexuality on children, the ethical obstacles to studying antecedents and consequences of children's experiences with sexuality have not yet been successfully addressed in any area of sex research and at present would serve as impediments to such research concerning Internet sexuality as well.

IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNET SEX SHOP SITES: MORALIZING INTERNET SEXUALITY

An initial analysis of Internet sex shop sites and Internet sexuality would not be complete without explicit discussion of ideological perspectives on this subject.¹¹ As asserted by the Sexual Behavior Sequence, sexual stimuli—in this case Internet sex shop sites (and Internet sexuality in general)—can be expected to trigger powerful arousal, affective, and cognitive responses in individuals who have contact with this medium, and to eventuate preparatory and actual sexual behavior and outcomes which will affect future performance of sexual behavior. Within seconds of viewing Internet sex shop merchandise, services, and images, the individual may find him or herself aroused (or repulsed); may evaluate the Internet as the ultimate tool of sexual liberation (or of the destruction of family values); may learn about new and apparently acceptable sexual behaviors (which are either candidates for inclusion into the individual's sexual repertoire, or evidence of the widespread moral decay of society). The individual may also imagine use of merchandise on offer at Internet sex shop sites, engage in preparatory sexual behaviors (such as purchasing such merchandise) and sexual behaviors (incorporating sex shop merchandise in novel sexual activity with a partner), and experience outcomes (feelings of sexual exhilaration) that will affect the probability of such behaviors in the future. And in relation to all of these possible events, a chorus of social commentators, jurists, legislators, clergy, and the general public turn to psychological scientists to ask for an opinion. Is Internet sexuality, considered here in the case example of Internet sex shop sites, a good thing or a bad thing? Should Internet sexuality be regulated or obliterated? Should educational programs be devised so that the general public becomes increasingly literate concerning Internet sexuality and capable of coping with its messages?⁸

Psychological scientists are accustomed to evaluating the goodness and badness of social phenomenon in terms of demonstrable individual advantage or disadvantage and demonstrable social advantage or disadvantage that a

phenomenon in question bestows on individuals and on society. What individual advantages or disadvantages does experience with Internet sex shop sites and Internet sexuality in general afford the individual? On one hand, Internet sexuality can provide an enormous amount of information concerning consensual sexual possibilities that the individual may find pleasurable and import into his or her intimate relationships.^{34,35} While the distinct possibility exists that experience with Internet sexuality will make many individuals dissatisfied with their current sexual repertoire, it is not at all clear that dissatisfaction is a social evil, for dissatisfaction can breed aspiration and positive change as well as depression and frustration.³⁶ On the other hand, individual disadvantage is clearly possible as a result of experience with Internet sexuality. Given the paucity of countervailing normative information about sexuality which characterizes many individuals,³² it is entirely likely that individuals will uncritically accept the sexual "facts" presented at Internet sex shop sites concerning the normativeness of a variety of non-normative sexual behaviors, concerning the lack of need to concern one's self with safer sex, or with carefully discussing sexual repertoire revision with a partner before attempting to import what was acquired at a sex shop site into a relationship, and similar problematic consequences of experience with Internet sexuality.

The social advantages and disadvantages to be conferred by experience with Internet sex shop sites and Internet sexuality are similarly various. Society could accrue useful additions to the generally acceptable pleasurable sexual repertoire, and in this sense the Internet could become the great sex educator of the information age, and have a profound effect on sexual practice.^{37,38} On the other hand, Internet sex shop sites sell erotic adventure, but they do not sell safer sex, they do not sell contraception for the prevention of unwanted pregnancy, they do not sell the need for a consenting partner, and they do not sell the ethic of sexuality and children within a stable family unit. In all these respects, Internet sexuality may be judged to have potential negative social effects.

From the perspective of psychological theory and research and legislative and judicial in-

volvement in the closely related area of erotica and pornography, we have several suggestions to contribute to the ideological debate that will accompany each new research and technological development in the area of Internet sexuality.

First, research and theory in the area of pornography's effects on behavior^{31,32} strongly suggest that we avoid the "monkey see, monkey do" model of media effects when considering Internet sexuality. As noted earlier,^{31,32} the monkey has a brain and a lifelong learning history concerning acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors, and it is unlikely that exposure to media models will fundamentally alter the individual's network of internal restraints. And, to the extent that the individual lacks sufficient internal controls, is not clear how the world could be sanitized of images dangerous enough to trigger an antisocial outburst by an unrestrained person. Thus, our first suggestion is that, as indicated by the Sexual Behavior Sequence, contact with Internet sexuality is likely to be a self-limiting experience, which will surely lead to the acquisition of additional sources of arousal, affective and cognitive responses, and behaviors, but probably all within the grander envelope of the individual's entire socialization history and existing internal restraints and not beyond this envelope.

Second, when conducting research on effects of Internet sexuality that is intended to contribute to policy debates in this area, it will be critical to create ecologically valid research methodologies that permit individuals to choose to access Internet sexuality or to avoid it, and that permit individuals to make socially benign as well as antisocial responses to their experience of Internet sexuality. Further, it will be critical to provide for the publication of null effects of experience with Internet sexuality as well as for the publication of significant effects. In none of these areas does the four-decade long history of psychological research on effects of erotica and pornography provide a good research role model.^{31,39}

Third, when contemplating individual and social costs of Internet sex shops and sexuality in general, and the wisdom of regulating access to them, we suggest carefully considering the

individual and social costs of regulatory strategies that may be proposed. Points to consider include the fact that, on the individual level, the regulation of Internet sex shop sites and sexuality in general can firmly shove sex back into the closet, reinforcing erotophobia and the sexual dysfunction and reproductive health neglect that characterizes those with significant sexual anxieties.²³ And, on the societal level, any attempt to regulate the free flow of ideas, however repulsive they may seem, has at least the theoretical possibility of being an endorsement of antidemocratic suppression of expression. Research should not only empirically evaluate the effects of experience with Internet sex shops, it should empirically evaluate the effects of remedies and regulatory solutions that are proposed to control them and other outcroppings of Internet sexuality.

Fourth, among solutions to anticipated negative effects of experience with Internet sex shops should be research on educational immunizations to reduce such negative effects. Theoretically based educational interventions to sensitize individuals to detect and reject antisocial messages in sexual media have been proposed³² and can be experimentally evaluated⁴⁰ as a democratic response to negative effects of Internet sexuality.

Finally, we would caution everyone not to expect too much from our data. Research on effects of erotica and pornography has been pouring forth for decades and has arguably done little to help decide the matter of sexual media and social harm.³¹ When the debate takes place in legislatures and courtrooms, it is fundamentally an ideological debate in search of data congenial to preformed ideological positions. More than one of us has wished that the entire debate take place on a purely ideological basis so that society can explicitly decide on a set of philosophical ideas—and not on a set of data—that it finds to be a better guide for public morality in the realm of the sexual media.

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