

EDITORIAL

Smart Phones, Social Networking, Sexting and Problematic Sexual Behaviors—A Call for Research

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As Tiger Woods so effectively demonstrated by texting his mistress to “*give him some space*” while at the same moment fighting with his wife about infidelity, hypersexual behavior cannot be fully understood or managed today without dealing with the effect that Smartphones (iphone, droid) and social networks (Facebook, Myspace, craigslist) are having on those who struggle with compulsive and impulsive patterns of sexual behavior.

While traditional estimates suggest that only 3–5% of the online population has problematic sexual behavior (SASH), it appears that those numbers may now be rapidly escalating related to the increasing accessibility of online sexual content and the immediate connectivity now provided by Smartphones and social networks (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000). In the 1990s when the only way to access online sexual content was with a PC from the home or office, helping clients stay out of trouble was much easier. Problematic sexual behavior could be reduced with relatively simple behavioral tricks like by encouraging sex addicts to avoid being online when home alone and to face their office computers outward so that the screens would be seen by all who walked by, etc. When laptops with mobile online access came along just a few years later, bringing the Internet into coffee shops, hotel rooms, and airports, it started becoming harder for those in trouble to maintain behavioral change by simply avoiding online sexual content (a necessary component to the healing process). As always, those professionals trying to help recovery had to move along with the technology—for example by recommending laptop software that could screen out porn and sexual content. But what to do now when our clients often access people and information online 24/7 using more sophisticated hand held devices that are rapidly replacing our phones, televisions, and computers.

TABLE 1 Sexual Access Timeline

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1. Prehistory to approx 1890—cave art, prostitution, affairs, harems, compulsive masturbation to fantasy
 2. 1890 to late 1970s—photographic porn, film, porn theatres, strip clubs, bath houses, adult bookstores
 3. 1977–1990—VCR & Beta, Phone Sex
 4. 1990–2004—Bulletin Board (BBS) and newsgroups, Chat Rooms, Porn Websites, Web cams, Craig’s List, interactive online sex, online hook-ups and prostitution sites
 5. 2004 to the present—Smartphones with GPS locators, Social Networking (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), Virtual World Sex, Sexting
 6. And coming your way very soon—Virtual Sex/Teledildonics
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So, here is the basic issue: *as anonymous online connection to sexual content and access to willing partners increases—so do the problems*, i.e., the faster you can get to more material and more potential partners, the easier it is to get into personal or professional trouble. And wireless networks are all about fast connections. . . more profiles, more pictures, more messages. For some, it’s like a slot machine. With each click of an application, hit of the “refresh” button, and receipt of a new image, text or video, the possible “object” of his dreams awaits. And, these intermittently rewarding pleasures can be accessed from home, the office, in a cab, on the street, or even during air travel. Table 1 outlines the escalating history of access to sexual content over time.

There’s an “App” for That

Today—sitting in the food-court of a large urban mall (free wi-fi), Smartphone in hand, one can as easily locate a man/woman within 5 blocks or 5 miles who wants to have casual sex (paid or unpaid) as they can find a good Italian restaurant in their price range. A Smartphone doesn’t differentiate between searching for nearby prostitutes of any persuasion or finding a good local bargain on haircare. Whomever is wanted or needed nearby—with GPS on the phone—is available at the touch of a button. Once you click on the *sex app*—it’s blue dots to find heterosexual males, pink dots to find heterosexual women, lavender dots to find gay men—you get the picture. Click on the dot and the personal details come into view—age, type of sex desired, etc. For most people there is no inherent problem in being able to access recreational sex where or whenever they want it, provided no harm is caused and the parties are mutually consenting. But if you are someone struggling with impulsive or compulsive sexual behavior, instant access to sex is a very big problem currently without simple resolution.

To put this in perspective, GRINDR, an all-male mobile location-based networking service, reached 1,000,000 users this summer after being on the market in the United States just over a year and a half. On a daily basis,

GRINDR counts some 250,000 active users who log on approximately eight times per day and spend an average of 1.3 hours each day using the app. On a weekly basis, the number of active users grows to 400,000 and on a monthly basis that number climbs to nearly 600,000. Additionally, 3,000 new users continue to join the GRINDR community every day. The application now has versions in 180 countries around the world (PRNewswire, 2010). Many of the “adult” social networking sites have made mobile applications to allow users easier and faster access.

Face-hooked

Increasing numbers of our clients and their spouses are seeking treatment today not just for problems with porn, prostitution Websites or chats, but because they are challenged by obsessive searching of social networks like Facebook, Myspace, twitter, and the like. The same places many of us go to catch up on high-school friends, hear about good movies, and follow distant events, are where sex and love addicts can lose themselves to endless cruising for anonymous sex and/or affairs. As our personal selves increasingly become displayed and available online, these sites have become a new destination to peruse intimate photos, gain personal information, seek out hot chats, hook-ups, and the like. While their family, career, and personal life goes on without them, sex and relationship addicts increasingly describe the seemingly benign social networks as a primary source of their obsessive hunt for sexual intensity. A social psychologist recently found that sexual links were the most commonly shared sites on Facebook. Sex links were 90% more likely to be shared than other types of content (Lazar, 2010). And, a content analysis of teenagers' Myspace profiles demonstrated that 54% had reference to high-risk behaviors such as sex, drugs, and violence (Landau, 2009). Of course, there also has been much publicity about both Myspace and Facebook purging the accounts of thousands of sex offenders who use such sites to contact and prey upon underage minors. There are even case reports of individuals who have set up sexprofiles and within minutes had 50–100 partners express interest (Bosker, 2010).

Adult “Services”?

Want tickets to the sold out concert? A new apartment? A roommate? Or how about anonymous unprotected sex with three people in a basement? It's all there. Craigslist has recently come under fire for its 36-million dollar income related to *adult and erotic services* advertising. While the Website has taken measures to end commercial sex business, sections such as “men seeking women,” “men seeking men,” and “missed connections” remain for those

individual who “mutually” want to engage in adult activities. Perusing these ads, one can find any “service” one desires. Profiles give a name, location, age, type of sexual activity desired, sexual preferences of the poster, and body statistics along with disclaimers (e.g., “Looking for now. No long e-mail conversations. No old people. Anonymous. PnP [“Party and Play”] Let’s do this.”) Unlike social networking sites, no membership is required and there are no monthly fees. Traceable information like a real e-mail account is not even required. Simply post an ad and wait. Someone is sure to grab the bait.

Sexting

A recent Supreme Court ruling that employers can examine the electronic contents of employees’ Smartphones and similar devices stemmed from a police officer who used his work pager to send/receive racy communications from his wife (Lyon & O’Neill, 2010). While the effects of text messaging on work productivity remain unknown, harms such as increased automobile accidents are well documented (Richtel, 2009). Now add some graphic photos or explicit text. Of course, “sexting” is not just an adult phenomenon. Polls have indicated that up to 20% of teens have sent nude photographs of themselves or others via text images (Smith, 2010). Sexting has challenged society’s definitions of normal adolescent behavior, problematic sexual behaviors, and a felony sex crime. Several teenagers are now serving time for sending and receiving photographs of their peers. This obviously has the potential to be problematic for the average person—imagine the impulse-driven nightmare sexting brings to those predisposed to sexual problems.

It’s Not All Bad News

Just as media has evolved, public responsibility is catching up. Craigslist’s closure of human trafficking advertisements and Myspace’s monitoring of sexual offenders represent initial steps of self-regulatory behavior. Manhunt, popular gay cruising site, has even hired public health officials to promote safer sexual behaviors and improve access to HIV care. And research on online sexual behaviors have shown mixed results with some studies showing increased risk-taking behaviors (McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2002) while others show more open and transparent discussion about HIV status (Young & Rice, 2010). It is unclear whether the Internet encourages risky behaviors or if those who are more likely to engage in risky behaviors seek out the Internet for meeting sexual partners (Tsui & Lau, 2010).

The new technologies also offer support. Today there are alternatives to a losing yourself to porn-obsession, compulsive masturbation, or anonymous sex. All of the 12-step sexual recovery support groups (like SA, SAA, SCA,

SLAA, etc.) now offer not only Websites that explain the nature of the problem, along with meeting and phone support lists—but also entrée to chat room-based 12-step meetings, sponsors, and social support for recovery. As readily as you can employ the Internet to search for porn and prostitution, you can also find therapy organizations and individuals skilled in sex addiction treatment, those dedicated and trained to help guide behavior change and healing. The Internet also offers concrete, specific information about addiction problems and recovery/healing, information about sexual addiction in particular. The most recent advent is recovery tools that can be loaded right to a Smartphone. Needed info that would rarely have been found before via the library, in phonebooks or at the doctor's, pastor's, or psychotherapist's office, even if one had been brave enough to talk about these potentially shameful problems.

A Call for Research

As sexual content and casual sex becomes increasingly accessible and anonymous, there appears to be a marked increase in the numbers of psychologically distressed clients seeking help for lives lost to a secretive, desperate, and hidden search for sexual content and hook-ups. While most of us find comfort in our increasing interconnectivity, those who struggle with sexual problems are capable of turning our technological advances into the kinds of personal nightmares from which there is little escape and even less understanding. The Internet has already challenged classic theories that our “love maps” of to whom and what we are attracted are established during our formative years and become durable and less malleable in adult life. There appears to be a set of individuals for whom the Internet opens the doors to exploration and discovery and potentially changes sexual arousal patterns (Delmonico, Griffin, Moriarity, & Carnes, 2001). One only needs to look at the emergence of individuals being prosecuted for child pornography who have no history of prior sexual fantasy or behaviors with children prior to adult life online.

This editorial serves as a call for research and empirical studies on this phenomenon. Most of the data have been gathered from polls, small uncontrolled studies, and the media. It is critical we look at what roles technology plays in fostering fantasies, acting out behaviors, and unsafe sexual practices. We need to know better who is at risk for developing problems with technology and what prevention and treatment strategies work best. And of course, just as our social networking technology has increased, so has medical technology; it will be interesting to see if we can merge the two to better understand the neurobiological underpinnings of these problems.

As the experts in this field, it is time that we conduct and report research about the consequences of the new technology. Hypersexual disorder, if

adopted by the DSM-V, will include a cybersex specifier (Kafka, 2010), hence signifying the clinical significance of this topic. In 2011, we will devote a special issue to this very matter. We welcome your case reports, research studies and contributions.

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