

# PROFILING CYBERSEX ADDICTION AND TRUE ONLINE PEDOPHILIA AMONG VIRTUAL SEX OFFENDERS

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Poster presented at the 108th Annual Meeting  
of the American Psychological Association,  
Washington , DC , August 4, 2000.

Sexual offenses against children constitute a significant proportion of all reported criminal sex acts. Rather than playgrounds and schoolyards, cyberspace now provides an easy breeding ground for child sex offenders to engage and meet children. Pedophilia and paraphilia are the most common classifications with respect to sex crimes involving the Internet. Pedophilia involves sexual activity with a prepubescent child (generally age 13 year or younger). Pedophiles online demonstrate a past history of sexual conduct with children and transfer this sexual interest to cyberspace, this generally involves producing illegal images to trade online (i.e., child pornography) or making contact directly with children through chat rooms. Paraphilia involves recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors generally involving 1) nonhuman objects, 2) the suffering or humiliation of oneself or one's partner, or 3) children or other non-consenting persons that occur over a period of at least 6 months. A paraphile demonstrates a predilection for arousing fantasies that he or she sexually acts out in fantasy role-play chat rooms that cater to that particular sexual urge (e.g., Bondage Rooms, Foot Fetish Rooms, or Older Man for Young Women Rooms).

At an alarming rate, the legal system has seen an increase in the number of new cases involving online pedophilia and paraphilia prosecuted over the past several years. A disturbing number of these cases involve first time offenders with no previous psychiatric or criminal history. In fact, their sexual interest in minors occurred exclusively in cyberspace and stemmed from the ease of availability of this material on the Internet. In other words, these individuals are "fantasy users", who acted out child-adult sexual fantasies within adult *only* chat rooms (specifically designated for those over the age of eighteen). They do so without the intention of making direct contact with children. Fantasy users participate in these rooms with other adults who share this interest and believe that they are speaking with adults who *pretend* to be younger. This raises legal questions about the role of the cyberspace culture and Internet-enabled pathology in the development of sexualized online behavior and its ramifications on rehabilitation efforts and sentencing judgments.

Prior research on pathological Internet use shows that it is associated with significant psychosocial impairment such as increased depression, relationship discord, academic failure, financial debt, and job loss (Krant et al., 1999; Morahan-Martin, 1997; Scherer, 1997; Young, 1997, 1998b, 1998b, 2000). The Pew Internet & American Life Project has tracked the growth of Internet usage in the United States , from just under half of American adults in 2000 to about 59% of adults at the end of 2002. Emergent trends on pathological Internet use suggest that

nearly six percent of those online users suffer from Internet addiction (Greenfield , 1999). While this research primarily focused on the impact of online compulsivity on interpersonal and social development, none of the studies have examined how this contributes to criminal behavior.

Given the rapidly expanding Internet market and its implications to the legal and psychiatric communities, this paper examines the psychological perspective of virtual sex offenders and the role of cyberspace in the development of deviant and illegal behavior. Specifically, the article explores clinical issues related to psychiatric evaluation of virtual sex offenders. The clinical issues discussed here include: (1) how to assess online sexual compulsivity among virtual sex offenders, (2) understanding the stages of online sexual compulsivity and how the cyberspace culture provides an outlet for sexually deviant behavior to develop, and (3) profiling characteristics of pedophilia from online fantasy role-play. Most important, this articles shows how these issues are used to determine if a virtual sexual offender poses a threat to public welfare and his or her ability to benefit from post-offense rehabilitation. This paper will also assist law enforcement agencies and Cyber-Crime units to develop more accurate indicators for pedophile profiling online and facilitate greater understanding among the psychiatric community of Internet-enabled pathology and criminal conduct.

### **Assessing Internet Addiction**

It is important to first accurately define compulsive use of the Internet within the context of the existing body of peer-reviewed research available. Prior research has defined pathological Internet use as an impulse-control disorder which does not involve an intoxicant and Young (1998a) first suggested that the behavior is most akin to Pathological Gambling as listed under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - Fourth Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Based upon this work, the following eight-item screening instrument was developed to provide a workable definition of compulsive Internet use that has been accepted in court proceedings (e.g., State of West Virginia versus Scott Russell, 1998).

1. 1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous on-line activity or anticipate next on-line session)?
2. 2. Do you feel the need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction?
3. 3. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?
4. 4. Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?
5. 5. Do you stay on-line longer than originally intended?
6. 6. Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?
7. 7. Have you lied to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?
8. 8. Do you uses the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt,

anxiety, depression)?

This list of questions modified the DSM criteria for Pathological Gambling and should only evaluate non-essential computer/Internet usage (i.e., non-business or academically related use). Clients are considered addicted when answering “yes” to five (or more) of the questions over a six-month period, when not better accounted for by a manic episode (Young, 1998). Associated features often include: (1) frequent time distortions, (2) neglect of routine duties, (3) increased social isolation, (4) sudden demands for privacy when online, and (5) significant changes in normal sleep patterns.

Similar to an alcoholic, whom consumes greater levels of alcohol in order to achieve satisfaction, clients routinely spent significant amounts of time online. Furthermore, the person will go to great lengths to mask the nature of his or her on-line activities, primarily to conceal the extent and nature of the behavior. In most cases of impulse-control disorder, an individual's compulsive behavior is often associated with increasingly painful states of tension and agitation which are relieved through the completion of the act. For example, an alcoholic is often driven to drink at moments of excessive stress or an overeater is often driven to binge on food during moments of tension. In each case, the compulsive behavior serves to reduce the underlying emotional pain and tension and serves as a reward for future behavior. In a similar fashion, the Internet addict will turn to the computer to find relief from moments of painful states of mental tension and agitation present in his or her life. In such instances, their use of the computer is less about using it as an information tool, and more about finding a psychological escape to cope with life's problems.

Therefore, forensic evaluations of virtual sex offenders should evaluate if the user exhibits the symptoms of pathological Internet use. Does the client demonstrate a significant and regular loss of impulse-control, a preoccupation with the on-line activity, conceal the nature of his on-line activities, and continue to engage in the same activity even despite knowing its potential consequences? If compulsivity is present, the exam should further evaluate the presence of psychosocial stressors such as marital discord, job dissatisfaction, or health concerns. The more extreme and extensive the stress, the more users will utilize the online world as a means to cope with those moments of mental discomfort in order to lose oneself into the online fantasy, thereby forgetting one's real life roles and responsibilities. In this manner, their computer use provides a psychological escape and a temporary relief from these stressful emotional states, but since the relief is only temporary, the act is frequently repeated.

As is also true of an impulse-control disorder, an individual's attempt to not act in accordance with the compulsion is often associated with increasingly painful states of tension and agitation which can generate mental suffering. Consistent with this, it is important to examine if the client reports failed attempts at self-regulation and an inability to control online behavior.

### **Understanding Online Fantasy Role Play**

Research has shown that inter-rely chat (commonly known as IRC or chat channels) are one of the most addictive applications available on the Internet or other web-based services (Cooper et

al, 1999, Young, 1998a, 1998b). A chat channel is a virtual community designated with a specific name where people with common interests can get together to exchange ideas or files. The theme of the room is designated by its name, and many Internet Service Providers (ISPs) permit sexually oriented chat channels to exist with names that clearly indicate the types of sexual practices which will be "discussed" by the participants. Those practices range from the most ordinary to the most deviant.

People communicate with each other in chat channels in real-time by typing messages to each other. These messages can either appear in the public forum for the entire room to read or an "instant message" that can be sent privately to a single member of the room. Online subscribers invent "screen names" or "handles" that permit persons to participate anonymously within all online activities. With respect to sexually explicit chat rooms, it is not uncommon to find handles such as "Married4Affair," "Kinkygirl," or "Sub4F". The idea of becoming someone different lures many users into excessive Internet use because of the fantasy escape the activity provides. Online users may go by several different "handles," changing their on-line persona according to their moods and desires. Others settle on one identity, either an ideal self that reflects the opposite of their everyday personality or a character that accesses a repressed emotion. For instance, a 15-year-old teenage female can utilize the handle "MrR1gh31" and lead others believe that she is a 31-year-old businessman or a 51-year-old man can use the handle "Lovetoy" and lead others believe that he is a 23-year-old female sex kitten.

People engage in erotic dialogue in sexually-oriented chat channels and this is often know as "cybersex" in which two online users engage in private discourse about sexual fantasies and the act may be accompanied by sexual self-stimulation. That is, cybersex allows two users to co-create an online erotic fantasy, typically tailored to each one's desires, and in many cases the assumptions for what is desired is taken from the nature of handle and chat room description.

It is common for users to quickly move from cybersex to phone sex and even request real life meetings. It is also common for a person to have multiple and random cybersexual encounters going on at once. That is, multiple "partners" are made available via private message screens that are displayed on the desktop all at once and the online user will move back and forth from one user/sexual scenario to the next. To help stimulate the fantasy, it is also common for users to ask to view photographs from a cyberlover and/or to post their own picture online. Often these photographs are erotic in nature, with nude pictures of oneself or exposed body parts such as a penis, breast, or vagina. It is also commonplace to hide on-line interactions from significant others and despite feelings of guilt or shame that stem from the behavior, continue to engage in such acts.

Based upon new research into online sexual compulsivity, it is important to emphasize that what an online user says and does online does not necessarily represent what one desires in real life (Young, 2001). A woman who role-plays a rape or bondage fantasy does not desire to be raped or tortured in real life and a man who role-plays a homosexual or incest fantasy does not desire a homosexual or incest experience in real life. Users progress gradually into these type of deviant fantasies such that topics and interests that they normally find reprehensible becomes acceptable,

and after continued use become “desensitized” to the experience.

### **Stages of Online Sexual Compulsivity**

It is important to evaluate a client's criminal offense in the context of observed online behavior. The largest industry on the Internet is adult entertainment with over 100,000 commercial pornography sites documented and an estimated 200 new sites online every day (Cooper et al., 1999). Trends in the field reveal how pornographers often use free “teasers” and send frequent email Spams to market their sites. Furthermore, Internet service providers allow chat rooms to be created with names that clearly indicate the types of sexual practices which will be “discussed” by the participants, which range from the ordinary to the most deviant. It is not uncommon to find pedophilic chat room themes such as “WantF under 15,” “dadndaughter,” “Incest Room” and “Teenpic Trade” that freely allow users to exchange fantasies related to sexual themes that involve adult-child interactions. But how do users arrive in such chat rooms? The gradual descent into online sex addiction sexual follows five interdependent stages:

1. **Discovery** – For many users, the discovery that this type of material is openly available in cyberspace is the first stage of addiction. In the discovery stage, a man doing research online may accidentally bump into a pornography web site or a woman enters a social chat room and meets a man who entices her to have cybersex with him. In either case, the person discovers the sexual thrill of the act, which opens the door for further exploration.
2. **Experimentation** - Encouraged by the anonymity of electronic transactions, an online user will secretly begin to explore and experiment in erotic chats or view cyberporn without the fear of being caught. In the experimentation stage, a user tries out different chat rooms to see which are the most exciting and learns the inner-workings of chat room conduct. Eventually, the user develops a proclivity for a particular room, or set of rooms, or types of porno sites that provide the best virtual experience. In this stage, users believe that they can control their urges and deal on their own terms with their virtual experimentation.
3. **Habituation** – The concept of habituation is akin to tolerance in alcoholism. The alcoholic requires larger and larger doses of the drug to achieve the same sensation and pleasure from the experience as they first did when they drank. In the Habituation Stage, the online user becomes bored with routine fantasies and now looks for the next big virtual thrill. A user may engage in bolder chat fantasies such as bondage or threesomes or use more graphic online handles so the handle “Jonboy” changes to “Hardon” or “Pamela” changes to “Cyberslut”. The online persona and sex chat experience heightens as the user engages in more adventurous, daring, and even deviant erotic themes. The user becomes saturated with a continuous stream of sexual content that can take on riskier and riskier forms.
4. **Compulsivity** – The habit develops into a compulsive obsession. In this stage, life becomes unmanageable as relationships or careers are jeopardized because of the compulsive behavior. Longer periods of time are spent searching for new pornographic images or mingling in adult chat rooms. Cybersex no longer seems to be a voluntary act,

but a sexual act that must be completed. Patrick Carnes best explains sexual compulsivity in his pioneer book, *Out of the Shadows*, "The sexual experience is the source of nurturing, focus of energy, and origin of excitement. The experience turns into a relief from pain and anxiety, the reward for success, and a way to avoid addressing other emotional issues in the person's life. The addiction is truly an altered state of consciousness in which „normal sexual behavior pales by comparison in terms of excitement and relief from troubles that is associated with cybersex."

5. 5. **Hopelessness** – The person hits that metaphorical "rock bottom" only to realize the extent of damage done because of his or her addiction. Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness develop, especially as the addict becomes fully aware how out of control life has become because of the Internet. In this stage, addicts realize the unhealthy excess of the behavior only to attempt total abstinence. Users will cancel their Internet service, disconnect the modems, or install filtering software in the attempt to stop the compulsive behavior. The addict struggles with staying clean and sober and feels desperate to put his or her life back on track. Since relapse is only a mouse click away, they may relapse back into old patterns beginning the cycle once again. In the hopeless stage, negative thinking about oneself making such self-statements as: "I am helpless because I can't control my use", "I am weak", "I am defective", "I am worthless or disgusting because of my „dirty habit", "Everything I do is wrong", "I am a failure".

It should be noted that several legal cases against certain ISPs have indicated that they neglect to monitor chat room activity, fail to respond to public complaints, and do not provide warnings informing subscribers that looking at or downloading these images is a crime in the prevention of these events. It has been argued that in this manner, those ISPs act as "enablers", similar to that of a person providing alcohol to an alcoholic, by allowing virtual environments that serve to encourage and validate the potentially criminal behavior.

### **Cyberspace as an Enabler**

Clinical research suggests that deviant sexual fantasies carried out online do not always originate from individuals with a pre-existing disposition for deviancy, but cases document how once pro-social citizens will engage in this same behavior. The **ACE Model** was developed to explain how cyberspace creates a cultural climate of permissiveness that actually serves to encourage and validate the deviant behavior. The ACE Model proposes three variables, anonymity, convenience, and escape unique to this population that can lead to virtual deviancy among nonspecific populations (Young et al., 2001).

First, online experiences often occur in the privacy of one's home, office, or bedroom, facilitating the perception of anonymity and that Internet use is personal and untraceable. The anonymity associated with electronic communication, and the general milieu of the Internet often facilitates more open and frank communication with other users. Anonymity can also increase the online user's feeling of comfort since there is a decreased ability to look for, and thus detect, signs of insincerity, disapproval, or judgment in facial expression, as would be typical in face-to-face interactions. Within the anonymous context of cyberspace, conventional messages about sex are eliminated allowing users to play out hidden or repressed sexual fantasies in a private

lab. For anyone who has ever been curious about a particular deviant fantasy, cyberspace and the abundance of sexually explicit adult web sites offers a private and anonymous way to explore and indulge in those fantasies. Therefore, individuals are more likely to sexually experiment online as users feel encouraged and validated by the acceptance of the cyberspace culture, and when cloaked behind the anonymity of the computer screen feel less accountable for their actions over the Internet.

Next, the convenience of interactive online applications such as email, ICQ (a popular online interaction program which stands for "I seek you"), chat rooms, newsgroups, or role-playing games provides a vehicle to meet others. Research has shown that sex is the number one searched topic and as many as one third of all Internet users visit some type of sexual site (Young et al, 2000b). The proliferation of special interest rooms, groups, and games contributes to easy access for a curious person's initial exploration. Most people do not yet realize that there is any risk involved in engaging in online sexual pursuits. While in some ways it may seem like a journey into "foreign territory," online sexual behaviors occur in the familiar and comfortable environment of home or office thus reducing the feeling of risk and allowing even more adventurous behaviors. A curious person may be completely unprepared when they step into one of many rooms specifically designed for the purposes of facilitating sexual experimentation. Titles such as the "Dominance and Submission Room", the "Fetish Room", or the "Bisexual Room" may intrigue a casual browser who is initially shocked, but at the same time titillated by the permissiveness of others engaged in virtual sex. Such virtual environments are more seductive than most people anticipate and may lead down a path providing short-term comfort, distraction, and/or excitement.

In addition to the convenience of sexually explicit interactive chat channels, it is important to examine the proliferation of online pornography readily available over the Internet. Cyberspace, with its lack of restrictions, also is laden with hard-core porn banned in many parts of the world, such as child pornography. The peddling of illegal images and the easy access of children to all forms of online pornography have become serious concerns that parents, law enforcement, and politicians need to continue to tackle. The uncensored nature of cyberspace coupled with its seeming anonymity provides child pornographers with a new medium to pursue potential contacts and clients (both in terms of children and fellow traders). Child pornographers will not only create their own web sites but frequently *spam* (send child porn pictures to multiple and random online users) in hopes of finding others who share their interests for trade. It is may typical to receive unsolicited adult site web addresses and even file attachments containing anything from computer viruses to illegal pornographic images. Users do not know what an unsolicited file attachment will be until *after* they have opened the file. The process is similar to receiving direct mail and not knowing what you received until you open the letter.

People may mistakenly assume that the primary reinforcement to engage in online sexual deviancy is the sexual gratification enjoyed by the participants. However, as previously mentioned, addictive behavior typically serves the purpose of providing temporary escape from negative affect or unpleasant situations. Interestingly, males and in particular men who are highly successful in their career, tend to gravitate towards more erotic, graphic, and deviant online sexual behavior that serve as an escape from their duties associated with job performance

and pressures (Young, 2001). With the 24-hour, seven-day a week immediate access to the Internet, cybersex serves as a convenient escape mechanism during moments of stress.

### **Profiling Online Pedophilia from Fantasy Users**

In order to differentiate pedophilia from “fantasy users”, one should observe the behavior within the context of three key components, (1) the chat channel theme, (2) handles utilized, and (3) the level of intimacy and engagement between the alleged predator and child.

The chat channel theme utilized by an online user is indicative of his or her intent. Pedophiles tend to frequent chat rooms designated exclusively for children and adolescents (e.g., Pokeman, Kidsusa) and often pose as younger children themselves through the use of descriptive handles such as “John12” or “Claire10”. They pretend to be younger in order to gain trust and acceptance from other children in the room. Pedophiles groom children through information about a child's favorite music, hobbies, and interests and often agree to enjoy the same interests in order to establish an intimate relationship with the child. As trust is further established, a pedophile will slowly reveal his (or her) true identity, often making statements such as “I will be your special friend”. Their goal is to visit where actual children tend to frequent online, then establish a bond and slowly encourage the child to meet in real life.

In comparison, fantasy users often meet in adult chat channels with names like “incest room”, “dad& daughtersex” or “olderman4ynggrl”. These rooms clearly specify that participation in the room is limited to those over the age of eighteen and that in-room discussions are for fantasy only. While pedophiles may frequent these rooms, they typically look for others to trade in child pornography not to meet young children. Pedophiles learn as mentioned above that the main types of “children” in these rooms are in reality “of-age” women or men, for which they have little interest. This is not to say that in some instances, actual teenagers may experiment inside these types of adult chat rooms and that is certainly a concern both for parents and law enforcement agencies.

While pedophiles initially disguise their true identity, fantasy users often reveal their true identity such as age, appearance, and employment status, and possibly posting an electronic picture of oneself for others users to see. In some cases, fantasy users ask for the person's measurements, ask to see a picture, or ask if they have a webcam within the first few seconds of their virtual meeting. Such blunt discourse suggests that fantasy users believe that they are talking with another adult, as this type of online behavior would scare away a child or teenager.

In comparison to pedophiles who try to establish a close, intimate, and special bond with a child, fantasy users appear indifferent towards their online relationships and often speak in a detached tone throughout their conversations. Fantasy users may abruptly end the conversation, take phone calls or conduct business in between instant messages, or forget what he or she was just saying (often evidenced that multiple sessions are taking place). These behaviors are inconsistent of a person trying to cultivate a close, trusting, and special online relationship.



## Summary and Conclusions

The article explores clinical issues related to psychiatric evaluation of virtual sex offenders to determine a virtual sexual offender poses a threat to public welfare and his or her ability to benefit from post-offense rehabilitation. To guide clinical judgment, how to assess pathological Internet use among virtual sex offenders, understand sexually deviant behavior within the context of cyberspace culture, and how to differentiate characteristics of pedophilia from online fantasy role-play are examined. Levels of virtual sex offenders are presented to differentiate true pedophiles from fantasy role-play users. Such categorization has been developed to assist law enforcement agencies and Cyber-Crime units to develop more accurate indicators for pedophile profiling online and facilitate greater understanding among the psychiatric community about the impact of fantasy role-play adult chat rooms in the development of deviant and criminal behavior.

Online addiction and the involvement of otherwise pro-social and law-abiding persons in illegal pornography and paraphilia have distressingly been on the increase as availability of the Internet has grown. Research has confirmed that traditional notions about this type of person involved in pornography or related activities frequently do not apply to such Internet utilization. My research and that of my colleagues seek to document the recently evolving phenomena and to provide insight in relation to it for use by treating professionals, academia, and the general public. With new and continued research will also assist the courts in achieving learned, accurate and just evaluation of such matters as they become presented with increasing frequency.

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