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New Study Links Compulsive Porn Abuse and Sexual Dysfunction

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A recent study by Aline Wéry and Joel Billieux, both from the Université Catholique de Louvain, published in the journal, *Computers in Human Behavior*, sheds light on the characteristics, usage patterns, motives, and consequences of addictive online sexual activity.

Wéry and Billieux conducted a large-scale online study of French speaking men recruited on a university messaging service, social networks, research networks, and sexuality related forums. Anonymity of participants was guaranteed in an effort to achieve more honest answers. In the end, there were 434 qualified participants—men aged 18 or older (mean age 29.5) who'd engaged in online sexual activities during the previous three months.

Each participant completed a 91 item survey subdivided into six sections.

1. Socio-demographic variables (14 items), including age, education/occupation, relationship status, sexual orientation, number of sexual partners in the last year, and type of sexual partners (ongoing romance, sex buddy, sex worker, etc.)
2. Online sexual activities and related behaviors (25 items), including weekly time devoted to online sexual activities, types of online sexual activities, money spent, frequency of masturbation during online sexual activities, viewing sexual content previously considered uninteresting or disgusting, and feelings of shame related to online sexual activities.
3. Problematic use of online sexual activities, assessed using a 12 item Internet Addiction Test adapted for online sexual activities, primarily

looking at addictive patterns of use, loss of control, and negative impact on daily life.

4. Motives to engage in online sexual activities (23 items), including sexual satisfaction, curiosity/information, mood regulation, anonymous fantasizing, socializing, improving offline sexuality, etc.
5. Sexual dysfunctions, assessed using the 15 item International Index of Erectile Function (IIEF), which assesses for erectile function, orgasmic function, sexual desire, intercourse satisfaction, and overall sexual satisfaction.
6. Self-perceived problematic involvement with online sexual activities, including whether the study participants subjectively considered their online sexual activities to be problematic, and, if so, whether they had thought about seeking professional help.

To me, a certified sexual addiction treatment specialist with more than 20 years of experience in the field, the findings of this study are pretty much as expected. In short, the research team found that test subjects spent an average of three hours per week engaged in online sexual activities, with answers ranging from 5 minutes per week to 33 hours per week. The most ubiquitous online sexual activity was viewing pornography, engaged in by 99% of participants, with subject matter ranging from "vanilla" to hardcore, including kinks and fetishes.

The findings listed above are not exactly earth shattering, as numerous studies have produced similar results. Where this particular research gets interesting is when it looks at men's motivations to engage in online sexual activities and the specifics of problematic usage.

As for impetus to use, sexual satisfaction (94.4%), feeling arousal (87.2%), and achieving orgasm (86.5%) topped the list. That is unsurprising. However, attempts to regulate mood and emotions were also strong motivators, with test subjects listing relax/decrease stress (73.8%), alleviate boredom (70.8%), forget daily problems (53%), alleviate loneliness (44.9%), and combat depression/sadness (38.1%) as common reasons for their online sexual behaviors, clearly showing that a desire to escape and dissociate from stress and other forms of emotional discomfort can and very often does drive online sexual activity. Furthermore, regression analysis showed that the strongest link between reasons for going online and problematic usage was mood regulation. In other words, men who engaged in online sexual activities to self-soothe and regulate their emotions were significantly more likely to experience problems related to their online sex life than men who went online for sexual satisfaction, arousal, and orgasm.

These findings are very much in line with what we know about other addictions, where addicts are less interested in the experience of pleasure

and more interested in escape and dissociation. In other words, addictions aren't about feeling good, they're about feeling less.

Recognizing that a high percentage of test subjects were using online sexual activities for escape, and knowing that a desire for escape is present as a driver in all forms of addiction, we would expect a corresponding percentage of test subjects to report significant consequences and to self-assess their online sexual activities as problematic. And that is exactly what occurred.

- 61.7% stated they occasionally felt shame or similar negative feelings regarding their online sexual activities.
- 49% reported that they sometimes searched for sexual content and/or activities that were not previously interesting to them, or that they considering disgusting. ESCALATION OR 'TOLERANCE'
- 27.6% self-assessed their online sexual activities as problematic.
- Of the men who assessed their use of online sexual activities as problematic, 33.9% had at least considered asking for professional help.

Importantly, the men who assessed their use of online sexual activities as problematic reported lower erectile function and lower overall sexual satisfaction as a common consequence. In response to this finding, the authors of the study hypothesized that men with sexual dysfunction issues may be less confident in their sexual capacities and therefore less able to perform and less sexually satisfied with real world partners.

I, however, believe a more accurate hypothesis, developed after working with countless men (porn addicted and sometimes merely porn conditioned), is that men who spend the vast majority of their sexual lives looking at and masturbating to an endless, constantly changing supply of intensely arousing sexual imagery, getting jolt after jolt of adrenaline from this experience, are likely to find a lone real world partner considerably less stimulating than porn, perhaps to the point of sexual dysfunction. In other words, a porn user's brain can be conditioned over time to expect hyper-stimulation as part of sexual arousal to the point where a single in-the-flesh partner simply cannot provide the needed neurochemical rush. Hence, with real world partners the user may experience erectile dysfunction (ED), delayed orgasm (DE), and anorgasmia (inability to reach orgasm).

And this is not the first study linking variations of sexual addiction to erectile dysfunction. A 2012 survey of 350 self-identified sex addicts found that 26.7% reported issues with sexual dysfunction. A smaller study looking at 23 male sex addicts found that 16.7% reported erectile dysfunction. Another small study, this one looking at 19 male sex addicts, found that 58% reported issues with sexual dysfunction. So regardless of the study, we are clearly and consistently seeing a link between addictive online sexual activities, in

particular compulsive porn use, and sexual dysfunction.

Typical signs of porn-induced male sexual dysfunction include:

- A man is able to achieve erections and orgasms with pornography, but he struggles with one or both when he's with a real world partner.
- A man is able to have sex and achieve orgasm with real world partners, but reaching orgasm takes a long time and his partners complain that he seems disengaged.
- A man is able to maintain an erection with real world partners, but he can only achieve orgasm by replaying porn clips in his mind.
- A man increasingly prefers pornography to real world sex, finding it more intense and more engaging.

Without doubt, linking erectile dysfunction to compulsive porn use is the most important (and the sexiest) conclusion of this particular study. However, the finding that men engage in online sexual activities because they are seeking mood regulation almost as often as they seek sexual pleasure is also significant, as is the link between attempts at mood regulation and problematic use. After all, we know from other research that the desire for self-soothing is present in addictions of all types, so much so that the most efficacious forms of treatment focus not on stopping addictive use with willpower, but on developing healthier coping mechanisms that addicts can turn to when feeling depressed, anxious, lonely, bored, fearful, abandoned, etc. In fact, learning to cope with emotional distress in healthy ways (usually by connecting with supportive and empathetic others) is generally regarded as a key element of lasting sobriety and a better life.

Addiction to online sexual activities, especially porn, is no exception to this general rule. And today it is more important than ever that clinicians recognize this fact. After all, porn grows more ubiquitous and easily accessible by the day, with people of all ages, all over the world, finding anonymous, unfettered, mostly free access to pretty much anything they can imagine. And people are definitely taking advantage. For instance, one excellent study analyzing Internet searches found that 13% of the study's 400 million analyzed searches (coming from approximately 2 million people) sought some form of erotic content. The authors of this study, Ogi Ogas and Sai Gaddam, discuss the Internet's impact on porn use in detail in their book, *A Billion Wicked Thoughts*, at one point writing:

In 1991, the year the World Wide Web went online, there were fewer than 90 different adult magazines published in America, and you'd have been hard-pressed to find a newsstand that carried more than a dozen. Just six years later, in 1997, there were about 900 pornography sites on the Web. Today, the filtering software CYBERSitter blocks 2.5 million adult Web sites.

Even more astounding is the fact that Ogas and Gaddam conducted their research in 2009 and 2010, long before “user-generated pornography” became a thing. Today, sexy selfies are almost as prolific as professionally generated porn. And these images and videos are available on social media, dating sites, and all sorts of other sites that don’t officially qualify as “adult.” So the amount of online porn that is currently available 24/7/365 is pretty much unmeasurable. Porn is being generated so quickly and posted in so many places that there is no possible way for researchers to accurately track it.

Sadly, those who have become emotionally dependent on porn are often reluctant to seek help because they don’t view their solo sexual behaviors as an underlying source of their unhappiness and/or they are simply too ashamed. And when they do seek assistance, they often seek help for related symptoms—depression, loneliness, relationship troubles, sexual dysfunction, and the like—rather than the porn problem itself. Many take medications and/or attend psychotherapy for extended periods without ever discussing (or even being asked about) pornography and masturbation. As such, their core problem remains underground and untreated, and their symptoms do not abate.

For more information about porn addiction (and sexual addiction in general), check out my recently published books, *Always Turned On* and *Sex Addiction 101*. If you think you, a client, or someone you know may need clinical assistance with sex, porn, or love addiction, therapist and treatment referrals can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

APA Reference

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