

Internet Sex Addiction

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ABSTRACT

Internet sex addiction which is also referred to as cybersex addiction or online sex addiction or compulsive addiction, is that pattern of behavior characterized by excessive and compulsive use of online sexual content, such as viewing pornography, engaging in online sexual chat, video sex, online dating for sexual purposes, participating in sex-related forums or other forms of online sexual content regardless of its negative impacts or consequences. The advent of the internet has significantly transformed how people engage with sexual content, making it more accessible, affordable, and anonymous – this is often referred to as the “Triple A Engine”. This paper attempts to look into the issues around internet sex addiction and how it impacts the society at large.

KEYWORDS: *Internet sex addiction, pornography, video chat, video sex, online dating, hypersexuality, dopamine, behavioral addiction, comorbidities*

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INTRODUCTION

Internet sex addiction or cybersex addiction or online sex addiction, and or compulsive sexual behavior online, is the behavioral addiction characterized by excessive use of online sexual content, as shown in Figure 1. The internet today has significantly exposed people to sexual content, making it more accessible, affordable, and anonymous – the three features often referred to as the “Triple A Engine” [1].

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of “Internet sex addiction” emerged in tandem with the rapid rise of digital technology and the increasing accessibility of sexual content online. With the wide use of the internet in the 1990s, concerns began to emerge about its potential for compulsive or addictive sexual behavior.

Early Foundations: Sex Addiction Before the Internet

Before the internet era, compulsive sexual behavior was discussed under terms such as “hypersexuality” and “sexual addiction.”

- **1980s:** In the 1980s, Patrick Carnes popularized the term “sexual addiction” with his seminal book: “Out of the Shadows,” which laid the

foundation for understanding problematic sexual behavior through an addiction framework [2], and also described it as a treatable condition.

- These behaviors was said to include compulsive masturbation, as shown in Figure 2 , extramarital affairs, use of prostitution, and consumption of pornography – which was in offline contexts, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Emergence of the Internet and the Birth of Online Sexual Behavior

- **Mid-1990s:** This period marked the advent of widespread internet use. Netscape, one of the graphical browsers became common, paving the way for pornography and sexual content finding a new medium.
- **1998:** Dr. Kimberly Young, a pioneer in internet addiction research, published the first structure works on Internet addiction, including references to sexual behaviors as a subtype [3].
- **1999:** In 1999, Dr. David Greenfield introduced the “Internet Sex Screening Test” (ISST) and emphasized the “Triple A Engine” – which means

accessibility, affordability, and anonymity, making online sex uniquely addictive [4].

Early 2000s: Clinical Recognition and Case Studies

Early 2000s: In the early 2000s, therapists and researchers began reporting increasing numbers of clients seeking help for compulsive online sexual behaviors. Additionally, these were often accompanied by relationship issues, legal problems, or professional consequences.

Clinical literature also started framing these behaviors within the broader concept of “behavioral addiction,” drawing comparisons with gambling and video game addictions [5].

Integration with Behavioral Addictive Frameworks

- As the understanding of behavioral addictions matured, scholars began to align “cybersex addiction” with other non-substance addictions, focusing on “dopamine-driven reinforcement mechanisms” and “compulsive behavior loops.”
- Furthermore, research began to shift from anecdotal evidence to empirical studies using neuroimaging and psychological assessments [6, 7].

Mainstream and Academic Recognition (2010s)

- **DSM-5:** The DSM-5 (2013) did not include internet sex addiction or hypersexual disorder, but “Internet Gaming Disorder” was proposed as a condition for further study, paving the way for recognition of similar behavioral addictions.
- In 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially recognized Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder (CSBD) in the ICD-11, which includes behaviors like compulsive pornography use, potentially encompassing internet sex addiction [8], as shown in Figure 5.
- The studies during the 2010s highlighted links between problematic pornography use, mood disorders, and neurobiological changes [9].

Technological Expansion and Modern Trends

- With the rise of mobile devices, high-speed internet, and social media, the nature of internet sex addiction evolved.
- Modern compulsive behaviors include:
 - Sexting and exchanging explicit images via apps.
 - Hookup app addiction (e.g., Tinder, Grindr).
 - Webcam sex and live-streaming interactions.
- The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed a notable spike in pornography consumption, bringing renewed attention to online sexual behaviors as coping mechanisms for stress and isolation [10].

Ongoing Debates and Current status

- Some critics argue that labeling sexual behavior as “addiction” may pathologize moral normal sexual expression.
- Others emphasize the “need for clear diagnostic criteria,” especially for youth and adolescents who are growing up in a digital environment.

DEFINITION AND DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA

The internet sex addiction is not officially recognized as a distinct disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) [11], but it shares many characteristics with other behavioral addictions. The DSM-5 includes “Internet Gaming Disorder” in its appendix for further study, which parallels many behavioral addiction symptoms such as:

- Preoccupation with sexual content
- Failed attempts to reduce or stop usage
- Tolerance (needing more content for the same effect)
- Withdrawal symptoms when not engaging
- Continuation despite negative consequences

Sexual addiction is broadly more sometimes identified under “Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder” (CSBD), included in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) by the World Health Organization (WHO) [8].

CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS

- **Accessibility and anonymity:** Easy access to sexual content is provided by the internet, and anonymity can facilitate addictive behavior.
- **Dopamine release:** Viewing sexual content can stimulate the brain’s reward system, releasing dopamine (known as the “feel good hormone”) and potentially leading to addiction, as shown in Figure 6.
- **Underlying issues:** Internet sex addiction may be linked to underlying mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, or trauma.

Symptoms and consequences: Some of the symptoms and consequences of internet sex addiction include:

- **Excessive use:** By spending increasing amounts of time viewing online sexual content, despite its negative consequences.
- **Withdrawal:** Experiencing withdrawal symptoms, such as anxiety or irritability, when unable to access online sexual content.
- **Negative impact on relationships:** It can result in damage relationships, as well as social isolation (i.e. leading to secrecy and deception), and negatively impact daily life (interference with daily responsibilities).

- **Mental health concerns:** This may lead to depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.
- **Preoccupation with online sexual activities:** This will result in persistent, intrusive thoughts about online sexual content, even when engaged in other daily activities, hence interfering with their ability to focus and complete other tasks, as shown in Figure 7.
- **Consumption of illegal or inappropriate materials:** This has to do with seeking out for and engaging with sexually explicit content that is illegal or morally questionable. This could have potential legal consequences, as well as exacerbate the addiction and complicate the recovery process [12].

CHALLENGES FACING INTERNET SEX ADDICTION

Internet sex addiction is faced with several challenges which include [13-15]:

1. Stigma and shame

- **Social stigma:** Individuals struggling with internet sex addiction often face social stigma, hence making it difficult to seek help.
- **Self-stigma:** The feelings of shame and guilt can prevent individuals from acknowledging their struggles and seeking help.

2. Access and anonymity

- **Easy access:** Because the internet makes room for easy access to sexual content, this makes it challenging for individuals to control their behavior.
- **Anonymity:** The anonymous nature of online interactions can facilitate addictive behavior.
- **Affordability:** Sexual content are easily affordable as Web keep prices low and there are many ways to access “free” sex as well (the “Three A Engine”).

3. Mental Health Concerns

- **Depression and anxiety:** It is known that internet sex addiction can contribute to depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.
- **Trauma:** Underlying trauma can also contribute to internet sex addiction, thereby making treatment more complex.

4. Relationship Problem

- **Relationship damage:** In this case, it can cause or lead to damaged relationships, or to social isolation, and hence negatively impact intimacy.
- **Partner distress:** The partners of individuals struggling with internet sex addiction may experience distress, feelings of betrayal, and relationship insecurity.

5. Treatment Challenges

- **Limited resources:** The issue of limited resources and specialized treatment programs can make it difficult for individuals to access effective help.
- **Comorbidities:** Internet sex addiction often co-occurs with other mental issues that may require comprehensive treatment approaches or plans.

SOLUTIONS TO INTERNET SEX ADDICTION CHALLENGES

- The solutions to addressing Internet Sex Addiction or dependency require a multifaceted approach such as [13-19]:

1. Treatment and Support (Therapy and Counseling)

- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT):** This is used to help individuals identify and change negative thought patterns and behaviors associated with internet sex addiction.
- **Support groups:** Joining support groups such as Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), can provide a sense of community and accountability. SAA is a fellowship of individuals who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other so they may overcome their sexual addiction and help others recover from sexual addiction or dependency.

2. Self-help strategies: This is the use of self-help strategies, such as:

- **Blocking software:** Using blocking software or apps can help individuals limit access to certain websites or online sexual content.
- **Accountability partners:** This will help provide support and encouragement in recovery.

3. Treatment Programs

- **Specialized treatment programs:** This is to provide comprehensive care for individuals struggling with internet sex addiction.
- **Online therapy:** It provides convenient access to treatment for individuals who may not have access to in-person services.

4. Support for Partners and Family

- **Couples therapy:** This helps partners work through relationship issues related to internet sex addiction.
- **Family support groups:** This helps to provide a safe space for family members to share their experiences and receive support.

5. Digital Literacy/Education and Awareness

- **Public education:** Raising awareness about internet sex addiction can help reduce the stigma and encourage individuals to seek help.
- **School-based programs:** Educating children and adolescents about healthy online behaviors can

help prevent internet sex addiction, as shown in Figure 8.

6. **Monitoring and Parental Controls:** This will help prevent exposure to inappropriate content and reduce the risk of developing cybersex addiction. There is also the need for parents to maintain open communication with their children about safe internet use and the potential dangers associated with online sexual behaviors,
7. Visit or see a counselor.
8. Consult a health care provider for information and treatment.
9. Monitor and limit your internet habits.
10. Develop other interests by being involved in campus clubs and organizations.
11. Take good care of yourself e.g. eat regular meals and sleep at night. Be mindful of your moods and behaviors that lead you to use the internet. Identify your rituals and what triggers you to go online.

CONCLUSION

Internet sex addiction or dependency is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing its root causes, symptoms, consequences, and treatment. By acknowledging the potential risks and negative consequences of excessive online sexual behavior, individuals can take steps towards recovery, promote/develop healthier online habits and seek support when the need arises.

More information on Internet Sex Addiction can be obtained in the books in [20-24], and in the following journals:

- Journal of Behavioral Addictions
- American Behavioral Scientist
- The Journal of Treatment & Prevention
- Journal of Psychosexual Health
- The Journal of Sex Research
- Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy
- The Journal of Early Adolescence
- Journal of Adolescent Health
- Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity
- Journal of Personality and Social Psychology

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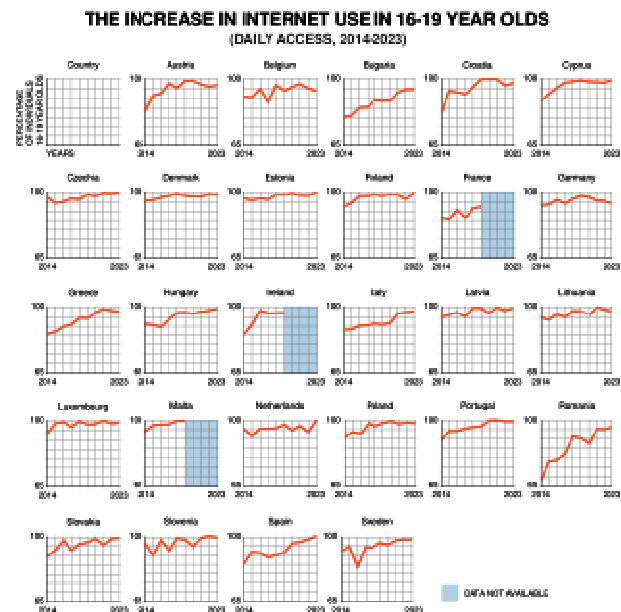


Figure 1. Internet addiction disorder

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Figure 2. History of masturbation

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Figure 3. Effects of pornography

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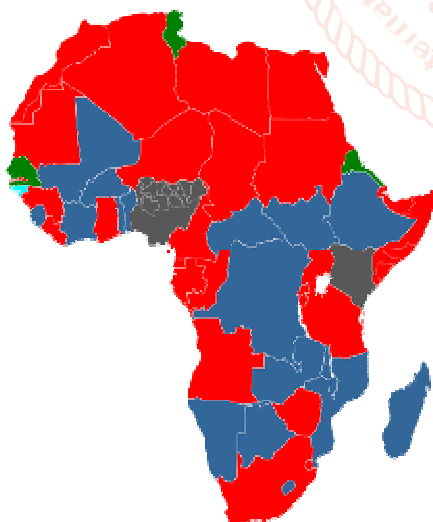


Figure 4. Prostitution in Africa

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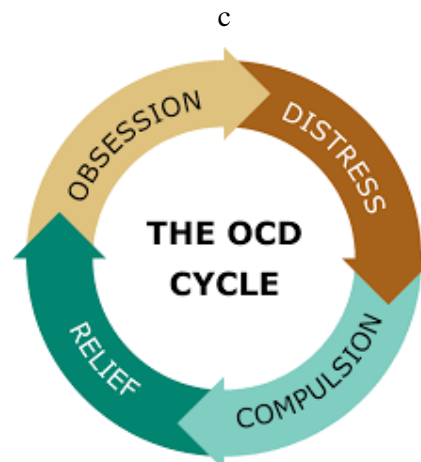


Figure 5. Obsessive-compulsive disorder

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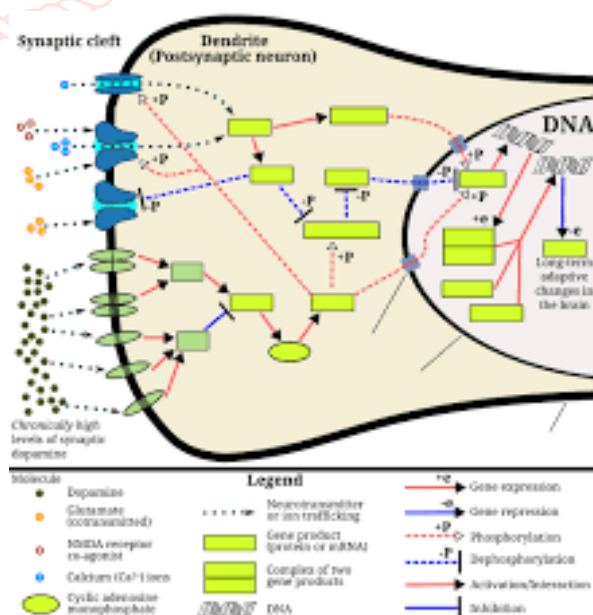


Figure 6. Addiction

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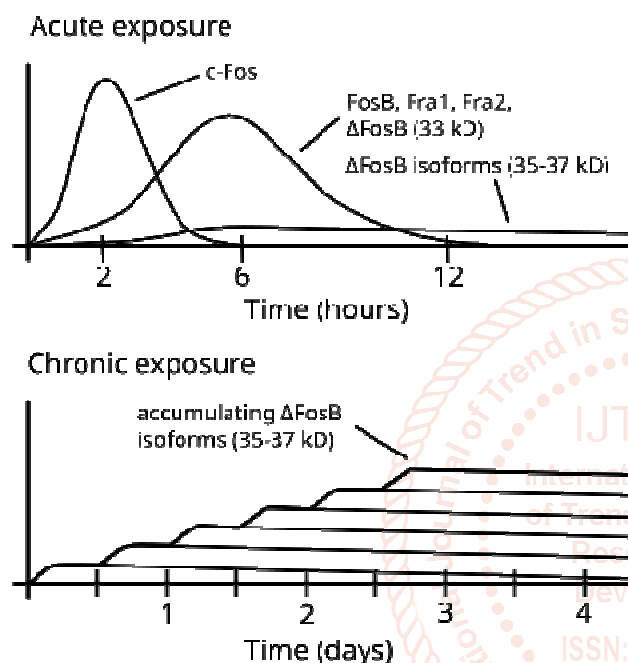


Figure 7. Addiction

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Figure 8. Effects of pornography on teens

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