

Adult Social Bonds and Use of Internet Pornography*

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Objective. Sociological theories of deviant behavior have not been systematically applied to the problem of who uses and who does not use cyberpornography on the Internet. The present study contributes to the literature by providing the first systematic application of selected sociological theories of deviance to the problem of explaining use of cyberpornography. It tests a blended theoretical perspective, which includes measures from social control and opportunity theories of deviance, as well as measures of broader deviant lifestyles, as possible predictors of use of cyberporn. A key hypothesis is that persons with the strongest ties to conventional society will be less likely than others to use cyberporn. *Methods.* Complete data on 531 Internet users are taken from the General Social Surveys for 2000. Social bonds measures include religious, marital, and political ties. Measures of participation in sexual and drug-related deviant lifestyles, and demographic controls are included. *Results.* The results of a logistic regression analysis found that among the strongest predictors of use of cyberporn were weak ties to religion and lack of a happy marriage. However, past sexual deviance (e.g., involvement in paid sex) was also a strong predictor of cyberporn use. Overall the model explained 40 percent of the variance in porn use on the Internet. *Conclusion.* Traditional theoretical perspectives on deviance are apparently applicable to this new form of deviant behavior.

Pornography has become an enormous commercial success in the last two decades. For example, the number of hard-core video rentals has ballooned from 75 million in 1986 to 665 million in 1996. The United States has become the world's largest producer of hard-core videos with more than 150 titles produced per week. Further revenue is reaped from the sales of sex magazines, Internet porn, phone sex businesses, peep shows, and adult cable programming. In all, the industry grossed eight billion dollars in 1996, more

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than the entire receipts from all Hollywood's movies put together (Fisher and Barak, 2000; Thio, 2001).

Cyberporn, explicit sexual material available on the Internet, is a relatively new form of pornography. By 1997 there were about 900 pornography sites on the web. Just one year later this had grown to between 20,000–30,000. These websites vary considerably in the number of paid users, from a few hundred to many thousands of people. The sites are nearly as popular as travel and business sites. Cyberporn revenues reached \$700 million by the late 1990s (Elmer-DeWitt, 2001; Thio, 2001; Weber, 1997). Observers of cyberporn have speculated that the growth in its popularity is linked to the three "As": accessibility, affordability, and anonymity (e.g., Putnam 2000).

Cyberporn has received some scholarly attention in the literature, but most of this coverage has consisted of descriptive treatments of the subject. These analyses do not rigorously test major sociological theoretical perspectives of why some people use cyberporn and others do not.

The present paper makes several contributions to the literature on cyberporn. First, it supplements psychological and descriptive analysis of cyberporn by testing a sociological theoretical framework on the incidence of cyberporn use. In particular, it focuses on an integrated theoretical model that blends together elements from the social control, social learning, and opportunity theories of deviance (Cullen and Agnew, 2003). Second, the present article extends previous work on adult social bonds and deviance (e.g., Benson, 2002; Piqero and Mazzerole, 2000; Sampson and Laub, 1990), to include the neglected ties to religious and political beliefs. Third, the analysis incorporates the neglected knowledge-based dimension of opportunity theory (Kern, 2000). It argues that knowledge of computer techniques relevant to Internet use constitutes an opportunity factor that, in turn, increases the odds of cyberporn use. Fourth, the article also incorporates measures of deviant lifestyles. The use of cyberporn may, for example, reflect a broader engagement in a deviant lifestyle related to sexual freedom. This is the first systematic study to apply these theories to the specific problem of cyberporn.

Previous Literature and Theoretical Framework

Scholarly research on the description and explanation of cyberporn has been dominated by psychologists and clinicians (e.g., Fisher and Barak, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Quayle and Taylor, 2001, 2002; Stein et al., 2001). These have included works in three general categories: proposals to apply psychological antecedents of *pornography* use to the problem of cyberpornography, clinical studies of patients and convicted offenders, and descriptive studies.

Psychological studies of pornography use have *speculated* that factors such as personality disorders (e.g., mood and anxiety disorders and depression), traumas (physical, sexual, family), biological factors (e.g., high testosterone),

and substance abuse may be related to cyberporn use (e.g., see reviews in Fisher and Barak, 2001:315–17; Putnam 2000:554). However, these arguments have been based primarily on studies of offline compulsive sexual behavior that includes rape and child molestation. Further, models of offline deviant sexual behavior may not apply to cyberpornography (Fisher and Barak, 2001:315). Psychological researchers have called for theory testing of their suggested models (e.g., Fisher and Barak, 2000; Putnam, 2000), but the one relevant study was unable to find support for most of the hypothesized psychological predictors of cyberporn use among college students (Fisher and Barak, 2001:315).

Clinical work includes case studies of how cyberporn use is related to hypersexual disorders or how continued use is related to deceit (e.g., Quayle and Taylor, 2001; Stein et al., 2001). Given the small, selective samples of the clinical studies, it is difficult to determine to what extent the antecedents of cyberpornography use found would apply to the general population of cyberporn users. Purely descriptive work includes classification schemes of cyberporn images (Mehta, 2001; Rimm, 1995), a content analysis of Internet rape sites (Gossett and Byrne, 2002), and an in-depth study of the motivations for collecting child pornography among 13 convicted offenders (Quayle and Taylor, 2002).

The present study first focuses on social control theory for building its theoretical framework (e.g., Hirschi, 1969; Hirschi and Gottfredson, 2001; Kornhauser, 1978; Sampson and Laub, 1990, 2001). According to control theory, all people are inherently predisposed to deviant behavior. Bonds or stakes in conformity lower the odds of deviance. Deviance threatens loss of such bonds. The bonds that are most salient vary across the life course (Sampson and Laub, 2001). Sampson and Laub (1990) suggest that the more important adult bonds that contribute to the prevention of adult crime and deviant behavior revolve around marriage, work, and ties to the greater community.

Marital Bonds

In particular, marriage per se may not prevent deviance. In extreme cases, for example, a marriage can be so unhappy as to be associated with substance abuse and other social problems such as domestic violence. A meaningful, happy marriage may be a better measure of a marital bond that is most likely to deter deviant behavior among adults (Sampson and Laub, 1990).

Religious Bonds

Among adults, a neglected feature of social control theory is religious ties. A meta-analysis of more than 50 studies on religiosity and deviance determined that there was a highly consistent relationship between the two

variables. However, only half a dozen studies are based on adults (Baier and Wright, 2001). Nevertheless, the related literature on attitudes toward pornography often finds a strong link between the strength of religiosity and greater condemnation of pornography (e.g., Hayes, 1995; Sherkat and Ellison, 1997). To the extent that attitudes predict behavior (e.g., Warr and Stafford, 1991), we would predict that condemnation of pornography would make its use less likely. In addition, religious organizations in the United States have often led moral crusades against pornography, and are well known for condemning sexual deviance (e.g., Sherkat and Ellison, 1997). Furthermore, members of organized churches may be under greater surveillance (e.g., by co-religionists), making them less likely to deviate from sexual norms (Tittle and Welch, 1983). Those individuals who attend services more often are most likely to be influenced by religious belief systems and co-religionists.

Some caution should be exercised in interpreting any association between religiosity and deviance in the present study. The effect of religiosity on deviant behavior can be interpreted from an alternative theoretical perspective (e.g., Tittle and Welch, 1983). In addition to acting as an external control to hold back individuals from deviance, religion may function as an internal control. From the standpoint of social learning theory (Akers, 2000), through the process of socialization, persons may learn from religious systems that the use of pornographic sexual materials is inappropriate, and eventually internalize negative definitions of pornography.

Bonds to Conservative Beliefs

A key dimension of the social bond is support for conventional beliefs. Deviance that runs contrary to these beliefs can result in costs to the individual, including guilt and ostracism from the group (Hirschi, 1969). Use of cyberpornography may be constrained by ideological ties to a broader conservative belief system. Political conservatives are more likely than liberals to support traditional behaviors in general (e.g., Peek, Witt, and Gay, 1982). Persons tied to conventional society in terms of their political beliefs may face ostracism and other informal social controls if they are discovered using the Internet for sexual gratification.

Socioeconomic Bonds

Socioeconomic bonds can provide another link to conventional society that may prevent adults from engaging in deviant sexual behavior. Previous research has demonstrated that meaningful work was a key predictor of low adult involvement in a host of deviant behaviors. These behaviors ranged from felony crime to alcohol abuse (Sampson and Laub, 1990). If all else is

equal, Internet users (who have higher income, higher educational levels, and more prestigious jobs) might be expected to have lower involvement in cyberpornography. However, given that Internet users are relatively affluent, there may not be enough variation in SES, in this select population, for SES to be related to cyberporn use.

Deviant Sexual Lifestyles

Cyberporn use may be, in part, a derivative of (1) membership in deviant subcultures, including those emphasizing sexual freedom, and (2) a more individual-based sex-drivenness. Deviant subcultures affect individual behavior through shared values, norms, and beliefs (Vold, Bernard, and Snipes, 2002:164–71). A deviant sexual subculture might involve persons engaged in deviant sexual behavior in more general terms. Wysocki's (2001) descriptive work indicates that sex chat rooms attract a high proportion of sexual deviants; in particular, 22 percent of the users reported that they were bisexual and 3 percent reported being transsexuals.

Research on forcible rape has often found that generalized sex-drivenness is a predictor of forcible sex (e.g., Malamuth et al., 1991). In a study of 2,652 men, Malamuth et al. (1991) determined that the number of sex partners (index of sex drive) was the best predictor of rape even after controls were introduced for alternative theories. Sex-drivenness, or hypersexuality, has been hypothesized to be related to the use of cyberporn (e.g., Putnam, 2000:554). The present study cannot resolve the debate over the role of sex-drivenness in sexual deviancy. Nevertheless, it will include indicators of sex drive and deviant sexual behaviors in its model. However, these indicators may be interpreted in other ways besides relying on the concept of biological sex-drivenness. For example, persons with previous exposure to adultery and paid sex may simply have learned a positive attitude toward such behavior, which may contribute to their attraction to cyberpornography. If forms of sexual deviance are related to cyberporn use, the present article cannot determine the exact nature of this association due to data limitations.

It is also possible that involvement in other forms of deviancy and membership in other deviant subcultures may increase the likelihood of cyberporn usage as a pattern of deviance. Various forms of deviance and health risk behaviors are often found to be highly interrelated (Bachman et al., 2002). The general phenomenon of hypersexuality has often been related to substance abuse (Putnam, 2000:554). The present study will incorporate measures of drug use as a possible lifestyle predictor of cyberporn use.

Opportunity Factors

Criminal opportunity theory argues that criminality is most likely to occur at the intersection of three conditions: the presence of a class of

motivated offenders, the absence of guardians and other deterrents to crime, and the presence of a suitable target. To date, opportunity theory has been applied mainly to explaining variation in “predatory crime” (e.g., Akers, 2000; Cohen and Felson, 1979; Felson, 1994; Stack, 1982). However, Kern (2000), in a study of motivations of prostitute clients, shows that opportunity can be applied to nonpredatory and/or victimless crimes. It is argued that in place of capable guardians or a lack of suitable victims to block opportunity, a lack of necessary tools, knowledge, and/or expertise can act as similar obstacles to engaging in a chosen criminal or deviant activity.

Internet users vary in the level of their knowledge of computers and software capabilities. To fully utilize cyberporn, for example, it helps if one has the appropriate software and knowledge to download images and video. Hence, persons with greater computer skills and with ownership of the relevant software might be more apt to take advantage of cyberporn opportunities than ones lacking in these resources. Further, the presence of children in the home may reduce opportunities for cyberpornography. Children can act as guardians and report the use of pornography to other adults in the home; children also can reduce opportunities for viewing porn on the family computer by increasing demand for limited Internet time. They may need to use the family’s computer for school assignments, computer games, chat rooms, email, and other uses. In particular, the presence of teenage children may represent the greatest threat to discovery and the greatest competing demand for computer time for potential adult cyberporn offenders.

Methods

Data are taken from the General Social Survey for the year 2000 (Davis, 2001). The analysis is restricted to persons who reported having used the Internet and for which complete data were available ($N = 531$). The dependent variable is a dichotomous variable. The respondents were asked if they had visited a sexually explicit website during the last 30 days. Persons who reported that they had are coded as 1, all others are coded 0. Given that the dependent variable is a binary variable, logistic regression techniques are appropriate (Borooah, 2002).

Social Bonds

Religious bonds are measured in terms of three variables. (1) The frequency of church attendance on a seven-point index from never to several times a week or more. The higher the level of attendance the greater the ties to a religious group. (2) Conservative religious orientation is measured by a dichotomous variable, the respondent identifying himself or herself as

a fundamentalist (0, 1). (3) The religious dimension of belief is measured as a dichotomous variable, belief in an afterlife (0, 1). Some caution should be exercised in interpreting the results of the present study as it is based on self-report data. Religious persons may be less likely to admit to using cyberporn than their counterparts, unless they have been socialized to value honesty more than their counterparts. However, a meta-analysis of research on religiosity and deviance found that the relationship holds across self-report studies (such as the GSS) and studies based on third-party or official data (Baier and Wright, 2001).

Bonds to a Spouse

Bonds to a spouse refers to the presence of a happy marriage where 1 = respondent reports being very happily married and 0 = all others.

Bonds to Liberal Beliefs

The measure of conservative beliefs is self-reported political liberalism. This is measured on a seven-point index from 1 = very conservative to 7 = very liberal. This variable is predicted to be positively related to cyberporn usage.

Socioeconomic Bonds

Socioeconomic bonds are measured in relation to years of education. Income and occupational status were also used in results not reported here. However, they never emerged as significant predictors of cyberporn use and so were dropped from the analysis. This may be due to a problem of restricted ranges. Given that Internet use requires computer technology, the Internet users are disproportionately from higher socioeconomic groups to begin with. There may not be enough variation in some measures of SES levels to affect deviant behavior.

Opportunity Factors

Opportunity factors are measured in two ways. First, knowledge of computer technology is measured as the sum of four variables: how to download a file from the worldwide web, how to send a file to someone, knowledge of what a virus is, and knowledge of the name of a search engine. Responses were coded as yes/no (0, 1). Scores ranged from zero to four (Davis, 2001:822–23). The alpha reliability coefficient was 0.74, indicating

that the measure possesses internal consistency. Second, we measure the presence of a teenage child in the home as a binary variable (0, 1).

Deviant Lifestyles

Three available measures of deviant sexual lifestyles are incorporated into the present analysis. First, lifetime prevalence of ever having strayed (committed adultery) in marriage is coded as a binary variable (0, 1). Second, lifetime prevalence of ever having paid for or been paid for sex (prostitution) is coded as a dichotomous variable (0, 1). Third, the number of sex partners the respondent reported having had in the last five years is a measure of sex-drivenness. A second deviant lifestyle is measured in relation to drug use. Two measures are available in the General Social Survey. These are lifetime prevalence of crack use (0, 1) and lifetime prevalence of intravenous drug use (0, 1).

Demographic Controls

Demographic controls thought to have a bearing on use of cyberporn are taken from the related literature on the correlates of attitudes toward pornography (e.g., Sherkat and Ellison, 1997; Tibbetts and Blankenship, 1999; Wood and Hughes, 1984). Gender is measured as a dichotomous variable where 1 = male. Race is measured as a dichotomous variable where white = 1 and all others = 0. Rural residence is measured as a binary category (0, 1) where 1 = living in open country or in unincorporated and/or incorporated places of less than 2,500 persons. Region of residence is measured as a series of binary variables: Pacific (0, 1), South (0, 1), and the remaining regions serve as the benchmark category.

Analysis

Table 1 presents the results of a logistic multiple regression analysis of the predictors of cyberporn use. Gender (male) is a strong predictor of cyberporn use. From the odds ratio (OR), males are 6.43 times more likely to use cyberporn than females. Three indicators of adult social bonds bore significant relationships to cyberporn use net of controls. A unit change in church attendance was associated with a 26 percent decrease in the odds of cyberporn use (1.00 – OR 0.74). Further, persons who were reportedly happily married were 61 percent less apt to report cyberporn use. Finally, for the relatively unexplored belief dimension of political liberalism, a one-unit increase in liberalism was associated with a 19 percent increase in the odds of using cyberporn.

TABLE 1

The Influence of Adult Social Bonds, Opportunity Factors, Deviant Life Styles, and Demographic Controls on Use of Cyberpornography, Logistic Regression Results, Odds Ratios, General Social Survey, 2000 ($N = 531$ Internet Users)

Independent Variable	Odds Ratio
Gender (M)	6.43*
<i>Adult Social Bonds</i>	
Church attend.	0.74*
Fundamentalist	1.91
Religious belief	1.09
Happy marriage	0.39*
Beliefs: political	1.19*
Education	1.03
<i>Deviant Lifestyles</i>	
Adultery	3.18*
Paid sex	3.70*
No. sex partners	1.00
Crack use	0.62
IDU drug use	0.85
<i>Opportunity Factors</i>	
Teen children	0.55
Knowledge PCs	1.12*
<i>Demographic Controls</i>	
White	1.50
Rural	2.49
Pacific region	2.44*
Southern region	1.19
Age	0.96*
<i>Model Fit Indicators</i>	
Model chi-square	140.5*
Nagelkerke R^2	0.40

*Associated logistic regression coefficient significant using Wald chi-square test, $p < 0.05$.

Two indicators of deviant lifestyles had significant relationships to cyberporn use. Both indicators of a deviant sexual lifestyle were predictive of cyberporn usage. Persons ever having an **extramarital affair** were 3.18 times more apt to have used cyberporn than ones who had lacked affairs. Further, those ever having engaged in **paid sex** were 3.7 times more apt than those who had not to be using cyberporn. Indicators of drug use were, however, unrelated to cyberporn use.

Opportunity theory was supported by the findings on the relationship between knowledge of the Internet and computers. For a one-unit **increase in PC knowledge**, the odds of cyberporn use rose by **12 percent**. Finally, two demographic factors were predictive of cyberporn use net of controls. Persons residing in the Pacific region were 2.44 times more likely than those in other regions to be using cyberporn. Turning to **age**, for every additional year, the odds of cyberporn use **decline by 4 percent**.

Three indicators of model fit suggest that the present model represents a strong fit to the data. According to the Nagelkerke R^2 (Borooah, 2002), the model explains 40 percent of the variance in cyberporn use. Further, the model chi-square also indicates a good model fit ($p < 0.000$). Finally, the full model correctly predicted the classification of 87.6 percent the 531 Internet users as either users or nonusers of cyberporn.

In results not reported here, the independent variables from Table 1 were run as predictor variables for predicting several variables with close associations with cyberporn use. The results of the analysis, where church attendance is the dependent variable and the remaining x-variables are the independent variables, determined that controlling for the other variables, the strongest predictor of attendance is being a fundamentalist. Although having no direct effect on cyberporn use, this variable has a powerful indirect effect on cyberporn through promoting church attendance. Other strong predictors of church attendance include education, being happily married, and being politically conservative. The significant predictors of being happily married included political liberalism (negative association), being a parent of teens, being white, and age. Adultery is best predicted by having engaged in paid sex and age. Paid sex is best predicted by gender (male) followed by adultery. Finally, the greater the education level, the greater the knowledge of computer techniques. Although insignificant in Table 1, education has a significant indirect effect on cyberporn use through its association with knowledge of computer techniques.

Discussion

Previous literature on cyberpornography has been dominated by psychological models and descriptive work. Little empirical work has been done on the predictors of cyberpornography use and, in particular, no systematic study has been done on the sociological predictors of cyberporn use. The present study tests a sociological model of cyberpornography use. It finds strong support for the linkages between social control variables and cyberporn use. These direct links include those involving religious, marital, and political bonds. Although religious bonds have been neglected in control theory as it applies to adults, they had a stronger negative influence on cyberporn use than the indicator of marital bonds—being happily married.

The results on religious bonds are consistent with a descriptive study by Wysocki (2001) of a sex chat room on the Internet. Wysocki (2001) briefly mentioned that half the users reported that religion had no influence on their lives and also that half reported no religious affiliation. These figures represent a lower than average level of religiosity (e.g., Davis, 2001). The results of the present study on religious bonds among adults are also consistent with a large body of evidence on the effect of religious bonds on deviance among juveniles (Baier and Wright, 2001; Stack, 1994) and sexual deviance among adults (Stack and Gundlach, 1992).

Past sexual deviant behavior had, however, an even more powerful impact on cyberporn use than religious bonds. In particular, involvement in paid sex was a somewhat more powerful factor in predicting cyberporn use than any significant measure of social bonds. Caution needs to be exercised in interpreting this finding. Due to the lack of relevant data in the GSS, we cannot adequately determine the root cause of this association. One possibility is that cyberporn users may be part of a broader subculture of sexual deviance that legitimizes various forms of deviant sexuality. However, such involvement in a deviant sexual subculture cannot be measured in the data at hand.

There was some support for an opportunity theory of deviance. Persons who reported greater knowledge of Internet-oriented computer techniques were more likely to have used cyberporn. Although having no direct association with cyberporn, being a parent of teenage children influenced cyberporn use through its positive associations with church attendance and marital happiness. Opportunity theory, then, applies to the victimless deviant act of cyberporn use.

Finally, the present study documented a strong relationship between gender and cyberporn. Males were more than six times as likely to use cyberporn than females. Previous work on attitudes toward pornography has shown that men are more approving of pornography than women (e.g., McCabe, 2000:75). To the extent that attitudes are predictive of behavior, a premise central to differential association theory (e.g., Warr and Stafford, 1991), we would expect men to be more involved in the consumption of pornographic materials, including cyberporn. Further, testosterone level is predictive of hypersexual behavior (e.g., Putnam, 2000:554). So from a biological standpoint, to the extent that use of cyberpornography is a sign of hypersexual behavior, we would expect men to be more likely than women to use cyberpornography. Further, to the extent that women are more involved in religion than men, and religion represents a source of sanctions against sexual deviance, we would expect men to be more apt to consume cyberpornography. However, we cannot rigorously test some of these possible interpretations of the gender factor since we do not have data on testosterone level or attitudes toward cyberpornography. Nevertheless, gender continued to influence cyberporn usage even after controls for many covariates of gender. Further work is needed on data sets containing additional theoretically relevant covariates of gender. Such work could determine which covariates account for the strong association between being male and using cyberporn.

The present study is one of a few that try to explain the use of pornography—why some groups may be more apt to use it than others. The results of the present study tend to be consistent with a related theory-testing subfield: the study of factors affecting the formation of *attitudes* toward pornography. These studies generally find that acceptance of pornography is associated with such factors as religious affiliation, self-perceived

conservatism, and attitudes toward morality (e.g., Miller, 1994; Sherkat and Ellison, 1997; Tibbetts and Blankenship, 1999; Wood and Hughes, 1984).

The other major theory-testing area in pornography studies concerns the effects of exposure to pornography. This area centers on the question of pornography's effect on sexual violence and sexual aggression. Many studies have reported a positive association between pornography use and sexual violence (Bergen and Bogle, 2000; Boeringer, 1994; Ford and Linney, 1995; Howitt, 1995; Lavoie, Robitaille, and Herbert, 2000; Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1984; Perse, 1994). Future research might explore the effects of exposure to cyberporn on aggressive sexual behavior. The present study could not accomplish this goal, given the limitations of the data in the General Social Surveys.

There has been discussion on the need for more regulation of cyberpornography, especially child pornography, which is a criminal offense (e.g., Durkin, 1997; McCabe, 2000). Children who are sexually molested tend to suffer a variety of negative consequences, including psychological, physical, and social damages. The Internet, which is increasingly the main disseminator of child pornography (Quayle and Taylor, 2002:332), may intensify the incidence of child molestation in two ways. The Internet makes depictions, both pictorial images and films, easily available. Further, the emergence of sexual chat rooms can heighten sexual fantasies and also facilitate actual person-to-person exploitative sexual encounters offline (Durkin, 1997; Quayle and Taylor, 2002). The present study suggests that the strengthening of adult social bonds, especially those to religion and marriage, might reduce the attraction to cyberpornography in general, and, perhaps, child cyberpornography in particular.

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