



Narratives of Suffering among Italian Female Partners of Cybersex and Cyber-Porn Dependents

Gabriel Cavaglione & Ety Rashty

To cite this article: Gabriel Cavaglione & Ety Rashty (2010) Narratives of Suffering among Italian Female Partners of Cybersex and Cyber-Porn Dependents, *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 17:4, 270-287, DOI: [10.1080/10720162.2010.513639](https://doi.org/10.1080/10720162.2010.513639)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720162.2010.513639>



Published online: 03 Dec 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 441



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 12 View citing articles [↗](#)

Narratives of Suffering among Italian Female Partners of Cybersex and Cyber-Porn Dependents

GABRIEL CAVAGLION and ETTY RASHTY

Ashkelon Academic College, School of Social Work, Ashkelon, Israel

This study analyzes narratives of Italian female spouses, partners and live-in friends of male cybersex and cyber-porn dependents. This qualitative study focused on 1,130 messages from female members and active participants in 2 Italian self-help groups on the Web that deal with the issue of male dependence (noallapornodipendenza and pornodipendenzaeamore). Major patterns of distress, primarily related to ambivalent emotions and the formation of an ambiguous loss are discussed as well as their implications on interpersonal, conjugal, and sexual life.

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to purchasing pornographic magazines and videotapes or sex with prostitutes, the Internet has several features which make it an ideal medium for anonymous and safe sexual activity (Cooper, Delmonico, & Berg, 2000a; Thomas, 2004). The key factors that make sex on the Internet a powerful medium are accessibility, affordability, and anonymity. This triad has been referred to as the *Triple A Engine* (Cooper, 1998). Young (1999) adapted these components to explain cyber-sexual addiction in terms of anonymity, convenience, and escape (ACE).

Virtual environments may have the potential to provide short-term comfort. It has been claimed that this might prove to be an advantage for self-expression and social support for disenfranchised groups such as homosexuals (Griffiths, 2004, p. 200), lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, and rape survivors (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000b; Durkin, 2004; Sanders, 2008). However the dark side of these activities has troubling implications

Address correspondence to Gabriel Cavaglione, PhD, Ashkelon Academic College, School of Social Work, Ben Tzvi 12, Ashkelon, Israel 90618. E-mail: gabi58@zahav.net.il

on the intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Use can become excessive, and lead to personal problems such as loneliness, shame, boredom, depression, social isolation, sexual dysfunction, powerlessness, anxiety, and addiction with tolerance-withdrawal symptoms (Cooper et al., 1999b; Greenfield, 1999; Orzack & Ross, 2000; Young, 1998).

In addition, cybersex and cyber-porn use may impact significant others when a male's major preoccupation is surfing, masturbating, chatting online, and consequently dating offline (Schneider, 2000; Young, 1998). This activity may decrease the user's involvement, care, and availability to his family, and can negatively impact marriage and sexual relationships (Cooper et al., 1999a). Spouses, in particular wives and live-in girl-friends, when discovering the behavior of their male partners—either passive cyber-porn, e.g., peeping, pornography, or interactive cybersex, e.g., chatting or virtual meetings and consequently offline dating—may experience strong feelings of betrayal, rejection, abandonment, devastation, loneliness, shame, humiliation, jealousy, and anger, as well as loss of intimacy in the relationship (Schneider & Weiss, 2001, p. 92). It is no accident that the discovery of cyber-porn abuse or cybersex affairs was found to be a major contributing factor to separation and divorce (Schneider, 2000; Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000).

If surveys are correct, 6%–10% of Italian adult male surfers frequently view pornography on the Web, and 5% are considered “addicted” (La Repubblica Correspondent, 2002; <http://it.groups.yahoo.com/group/noallapornodipendenza/messages/80>). If the pattern is similar to what has been found in other Western countries (Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, & Boies, 1999a; Greenfield, 1999), it is more than logical that many of these surfers have dealt with sexual addiction in other forms throughout their lives (Delmonico, 2002). The Internet simply becomes another way of acting out their addicted/dependent behaviors, with serious implications as regards their work and their social relationships.

For an *at risk or predisposed group*, the Internet may serve to foster the development of an already out-of-control sexual fantasy or urge that may not have developed into behavior until the introduction of cyber-porn and cybersex (Delmonico, 2002). Individuals at risk tend to complain about the gradual decline of their social and normal sexual lives, a loss of contact with friends, colleagues and partners and a growing lack of involvement and lower proficiency at work. Many distance themselves from their past identity and from relatedness with significant others.

Regardless of the typology or etiology (excessive use, compulsivity, dependence or addiction), when interactive cybersex or passive cyber-porn use take emotional and sexual precedence over a committed relationship the partner suffers (Schneider, 2002; Young et al., 2000).

This study does not rely on anecdotal literature, the more standard statistical online surveys (Schneider & Weiss, 2001), qualitative studies by

interviews (Waskul, Douglas, & Edgley, 2000), projective tests based on story completion tasks (Whitty, 2003; 2005), information provided by mental health professionals (Mitchell, Becker-Blease, & Fimkelhor, 2005), or on clinical-professional case study reports (Goodman, 1998; Schneider & Weiss, 2001). Although all the above have contributed to the field with their own different approaches, they have methodological limitations (Griffiths, 2004), in particular when many of these studies are conducted on academic students. By contrast, this paper directly analyzes the narratives of spouses and live-in friends of “cyber-porn dependents” (as they define themselves) to explore the major patterns of distress as expressed by these women in an Italian Web forum. Based on Grounded Theory, this research collected all data, i.e., all the content of the messages in the forum, as a first hand way to characterize them.

METHODOLOGY

Internet self-help groups, in particular those that eschew professional or academic involvement, are more than suitable for a grounded methodological approach. Analyzing self-help groups on the Web for the messages of spouses, partners or live-in friends of sex or porn-dependents provides first-hand material about the issue, and thus avoids academic and professional mediation or any sort of second hand interpretation/designation/pruning/classification.

These virtual self-help forums create an intensive virtual reality of engagement and involvement (Greer, 2004). In fact, members of an Internet self-help group interact in a crowded and intensive virtual space where they can express opinions and emotions directly without intermediaries, and where the forum elicits intense human feelings and networks of developing and changing personal relationships (Rheingold, 1994).

However there are other limitations to this methodology, including a lack of any information about true identity (gender, age, etc.) of the participants, and personal reports on a control group, such as women and partners of porn-dependents who do not express suffering and/or do not participate in the forum. Participants in the Web forum may act in an “unanchored state” when the basis of all social contract is uprooted (Reid, 1998, p. 36). However his “unanchored state” may have positive implications. The electronic forum, freed of the constraints of face-to-face communication, can create a resilient on-line community with significant human qualities such as equality, honesty, empathy, and friendship. The Internet allows for free expression of opinion with relative impunity, even if this does not conform to the rational and conventional standards of a well-ordered society. Sometimes immediacy, simplicity of form, and lack of face-to-face interaction do not detract from the social impact of these exchanges. Anonymity is often valued because it

creates opportunities to reveal one's true self and to engage in genuine, authentic forms of interaction, by expressing aspects of personality that social inhibition would generally encourage one to suppress (Baym, 1995). If, these attributes can be used for supporting disenfranchised communities (Sanders, 2008, pp. 79–87), they also can be used for advancing personal or group relief and healing (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Cavaglion, 2009; Grohol, 1998; King & Moreggi, 1998). The *Triple A Engine* characterized by accessibility, affordability and anonymity can thus be co-opted for a positive activity of group sharing and support (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999b, p. 96).

This study is based on narrative analysis and an interpretive approach to support-groups' messages collected and reviewed from two different Italian sites in Yahoo! on the Web: the Italian *noallapornodipendenza* (site for mostly male porn-dependents), and *pornodipendenzaeamore* (site for female partners of porn-dependents) support groups on the Internet (<http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/noallapornodipendenza> and <http://www.it.groups.yahoo.com/group/PornodipendenzaeAmore>).

It employs narrative analysis and an interpretive approach (Agar & Hobbs, 1982; Riessman, 1993). Narrative analysis aims at understanding cognition, culture and community. It has been defined as a field that is emerging from several disciplines as a way to understand human experience, memory, and personal identity from the point of view of a person in a social context. In its simplest form, the narrative approach means understanding life as a constructed story (Rappaport, 1994). Using coding procedures that clustered sentences in the messages in analytically relevant ways (Grinnell, 1997), similarities in the messages were mapped and conceptual themes and patterns were identified to buttress the interpretation of symbols and concerns about issues related to the subjective distress of the female participants.

The Character of the Self-Help Groups on the Web

The first group, *noallapornodipendenza* (transliterated loosely as *no-porn-odependence*), was founded in April 2003 by Vincenzo Punzi, under the username of Marco, an economist in his sixties who suffered from cyber-porn dependence for 10 years and decided to create a self-help group on the Web, following the advice of his psychotherapist. Later he wrote a book on his experience (Punzi, 2006). As of February 2010, after almost 4 years of activity, the group has 3,352 registered members. It is one of the biggest and most resilient self-help group in the Italian Yahoo!. It had an average of 270 messages per month in 2006, which doubled in 2007 (to 644). During 2009 the site had an average of 300 messages. Separate studies have been published on voices of suffering from male cyber-porn and cybersex users (Cavaglion, 2009) and coping strategies by participants in this group

(Cavaglion, 2008). This project focused on female voices in this group. In fact, from the very beginning, this Italian site for porn-dependents, who are mostly male adults, allowed and encouraged wives, partners and girlfriends of cyber-porn and cybersex dependents to share their experiences, take part in the discussions, give and receive advice, and express their feelings. Moreover, the homepage of the site has a special link titled “the woman of the porn-dependent” (in Italian *la donna del pornodipendente*), which collects the most significant messages sent by female partners. It includes a total of 384 messages from 104 women who, according to the subtitle of the link “are desperate, humiliated, going crazy, afraid, and sick of all his lies.” The messages were collected by the moderator, Vincenzo Punzi, until September 28, 2007. The content of all these messages in this link were analyzed.

The second and more recent site (*pornodipendenzaeamore*, the closest English is *porndependenceandlove*), was founded in Italian Yahoo!, in August 2007, by a woman, nicknamed “Ursula,” who was an active female participant in the male group and decided to create and administer a group for female partners. The homepage of this new site stresses that:

This should be a place where partners of porn-dependents can continue the path started in the group of *noallapornodipendenza*, a place where we can develop themes that may seem obsolete for those in the male group, a place where porn-dependents can become aware of the feelings and states of mind of their partners, a place to express the anger and frustration we feel while escorting our partners down this troublesome path, a place to cry, ask and give, to cope with doubts and fears. . . . A place which frees us from the responsibility which we erroneously took on ourselves, a place to try to reconstruct an identity and new strength to start again on the side of the person we love.¹

This female group remained small in terms of its number of active participants (an average of 2 dozen, in total 96 registered members), and the average number of messages per month. During 2009 only 14 messages were sent and unlike the “life expectancy” of the male forum counterpart, this group could have lost its momentum and may gradually disappear.

The content of all 746 messages on this site (last accessed on February, 2010) was reviewed since despite its short life and its size, this group elicited a chronological analysis of messages from participants from the time they discovered their partner’s behavior. Notwithstanding the differences between male and female groups, in the identities and the contents of their participants, in their size and in their histories (and personal stories), both Italian sites started “from scratch” in an inductive and spontaneous way, from a shared feeling of crisis and despair. Porno-dependent males relate their journey of soul searching and self-discovery. In their metaphors, male participants often talk about being “lost navigators” (navigator in Italian also

means a surfer on the Web) or survivors of a “shipwreck.” On the other hand, female partners of addicted men mostly used terms like “lost companions,” “being on the same boat,” or escorting their partners on a common troubled journey.

Another common characteristic of both sites is the involvement of the moderators (Vincenzo Punzi and “Ursula”) to maintain an atmosphere of safety in the group. Both groups are carefully protected by the moderators through established healthy boundaries and norms. Vitriolic flame wars that include teasing, mocking, or humiliating members of the group are censored. The same can be said about hackers and *agents provocateurs* from porno sites who, as found in other studies, can cause the immediate collapse and the dissolution of support or self-help groups and the destruction of the site (Reid, 1998).

Coding the narrative and clustering sentences in the messages in analytically relevant ways revealed many similarities in the women’s messages. The postings were more on the level of distress and suffering and less on the level of coping and recovering. Many of the male partners’ activities were not clearly defined by the participants (cyber-porn, cyber-sex etc.) and these messages were not clustered under specific headings of sexual online or offline infidelity/betrayal, emotional infidelity, pornography, etc. However, regardless of activity it has been reported that women perceive men’s emotional involvement in online activities as authentic acts of infidelity (see Whitty, 2003).

The differing nature of behavior on the Internet versus face-to-face interaction can create a sense of ambiguity in terms of what kinds of interactions constitute acceptable and unacceptable online behavior. However for many women, mental exclusivity might be considered as important as sexual exclusivity. Roscoe and colleagues (1988) identified gender differences in what participants considered to be violations of fidelity. Men were more likely to state that a sexual encounter with a different partner was an example of infidelity. By contrast, women were more likely to state that spending time with another and keeping secrets (both typical behaviors of porn/sex-dependents) from a partner were acts of infidelity, even without any sexual involvement.

Voices of Suffering among Partners: Emotional Ambivalence and Ambiguous Loss

Cybersex and cyber-porn activity, mostly viewed by men, can be seen as a factor in a dysfunctional relationship that lacks mutual recognition and sharing. It enables surfers to be involved in a relationship with a real woman while simultaneously being involved in an emotional or sexual relation with many virtual women. It is likely that pornographic dependence defines a

struggle for control. The man's need to negate his partner's identity finds a different outlet via virtual images or acts with women. This activity may enable men to feel strong, powerful, and satisfied in a comfortable fashion and without any disturbance. By using pornography, such users create a bond with women by looking at them, taking possession visually, and conquering them. In this way users create an act of destruction and annulment, an act which makes them feel power, strength, and satisfaction and in this way allows them to reach an ephemeral sense of self-soothing. This effect is unfortunately achieved by controlling, humiliating, and decreasing the worth of women in general.

As researchers have pointed out, a virtual relationship is clean and perfect: it always involves a good looking partner, free from blemishes and tailored to the person's tastes; there is no need to resolve differences because there are many other available and desiring partners out there, and a virtual relationship is available any time (Parker & Wampler, 2003, p. 417). A male cyberporn addict does not require a partner who is a full person living a full and independent life. Rather, he needs an object that can be totally conquered and controlled. As only a virtual object can fulfill such a demand without complaint, a situation is created in which a couple lives in a false relationship as a "supposed couple." In this relationship, the real female partner can feel objectified. This relationship often impairs the couple's ability to communicate truthfully (Young et al., 2000, p. 67). The following passage from the Italian forum depicts this situation (*marzietta*):

Here comes the weekend, and it is so difficult to be near him and see he is not attracted to me. Boys! He is treating me like a Teddy Bear. What anger! He is very sweet, and talks to me as though I were a tender Teddy Bear. He hugs me all night ... and I should punch him in the face ... He makes me sick, you don't have any idea how vilified I feel ... how helpless I feel.

In sociological terms, the condition of many of these women can be defined as a condition of being/not being, in betwixt and between, present/absent, subject/object, in other words a *liminal state*. Liminality, (from the Latin *limen*, "threshold"), was defined by Victor Turner (1967) as a social state characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. Adolescence, mid-life stages, hospitalization, pilgrimages, or near-death experiences can be seen as periods of transition or liminal periods, when one's sense of identity dissolves to some extent, bringing about personal or group disorientation. In this period, a transition between two states (child/adult, life/death, departure/arrival) may not be fully possible. Those who remain in a state between two other states, "hanging by a thread" may be defined as liminal.

Many of the emotional patterns of female partners could be said to derive from an ambivalent situation of liminality, which on the psychological level can be termed *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 1999). Boss suggests that in the human life cycle there are two basic kinds of ambiguous loss (1999). In the first type, people are perceived by family members as physically absent but psychologically present, because it is unclear whether they are dead or alive. Missing soldiers and kidnapped children illustrate this type of loss in its catastrophic form (p. 8). In the second type of ambiguous loss, a person is perceived as physically present but psychologically absent. This condition is illustrated in the extreme by people with Alzheimer's disease, addictions, and other chronic mental illnesses. In more everyday situations, people who are excessively preoccupied with their work or other outside interests also fit this category (p. 9). Hence the definition can be extended to relatives of porn-dependents, many of whom can be defined as addicted and excessively busy and preoccupied with their online and offline emotional and sexual activities.

In both types of ambiguous loss, those who suffer the loss have to deal with something out of the ordinary because there is no closure. Ambiguous losses can traumatize, as does unresolved grief. This type of loss is a psychologically distressing event that which is outside the realm of ordinary human experience. But with ambiguous loss, the trauma provoked by this ambiguity continues to exist in the present. It is typically a long-term situation that immobilizes, not a single event that later has flashback effects (pp. 23–24). Clearly living alongside a porn-dependent is a condition without any social or cultural designation, meaning, or recognition.

The messages show that the discovery of partners' activities in cybersex and cyber-porn became a stressful and devastating event for most of the women that eroded their sense of integrity and well-being. Like a complex and continuous traumatic event, many felt a real catastrophe had happened in a sudden and very unpredictable way. Women expressed "a sense of inadequacy and impotence" (Ursula), that they were "going to die" (Ursula), "just crying and sleeping" (Daniela), "being pressed by a rock," "death and death," "with a broken heart" (Maria Rossi).

Others, like in any traumatic experience, expressed their shock by physical pain: "I have terrible stomach pains and I smoke a lot . . . I am destroying myself I cannot get out of it" (ausika), "I feel bad, I want to disappear forever" (annalisa). And also: "I lost 12 kg. I am losing my hair, I smoke three times more and I even drink" (Roberta Calace).

Ambiguous loss can cause personal and family problems, not because of flaws in the psyches of those experiencing the loss, but because of situations beyond people's control or outside constraints that block the coping and grieving processes. Perceiving loved ones as gone when they are physically present can make women feel helpless and thus more prone to depression, anxiety, and relationship conflicts. The ambivalence in this loss is confusing,

and women indicated that they had become baffled and immobilized. They do not know how to name, define, or make sense of the situation. They cannot problem-solve because they do not yet know whether the problem (the loss) is final or temporary. Moreover, the uncertainty prevents women from adjusting to the ambiguity of their loss by reorganizing the roles and the rules of their relationship with the loved one, so that the couple freezes in place. Many participants stated that they were living in a separate life with their partners. The emotional and sexual relationships become “mechanic, cold, sad. A squalid and rare formal obligation . . . that made me feel more and more alone” (Maria Rossi).

It has been shown elsewhere that spouses who lose interest in sex with the cybersex user report being repulsed by the user’s sexual activities with cybersex, phone sex, live encounters, etc. (Schneider & Weiss, 2001). This generally does not cause a problem for the cybersex user, who has already substituted cybersex for sex with spouse. On the other hand, when it is the user who loses interest in sex with spouse, this is definitely a problem for the spouse, who feels angry, hurt, rejected, and often sexually unfulfilled. This complicated relationship with the partner can lead to forms of isolation from the social world (p. 126): “feeling of shame, self-blame, and embarrassment about having sexual problems accompany the early days of dealing with a partner’s cybersex addiction.” These feelings may prevent the spouse from talking with others and asking for help. The resulting isolation only serves to worsen the situation. As Boss (1999) indicates, in other cases of ambiguous losses, the lack of social and cultural recognition of this condition, and the absence of grieving rituals contributes to the feeling of isolation.

One woman stressed: “Because of his double life I have to handle a double life too. I was used to talking in a transparent way with everybody and sharing with my best friends without inhibition. They see that I feel bad but I cannot talk to them about it. With anybody. I feel like I am living with a person that I don’t know, I am desperate” (Sweet Eyes).

Female participants feel helplessness in this ambiguous condition, in particular when their partners express detachment, aloofness and lack of relatedness in marital, sexual and familial life. As many women stated, the harm is not only the use of pornography but its side effects: “It is terrible not existing anymore for a man to whom I have dedicated 21 years of my life” (Minnie). Most interpreted the warning signs of an end of their love relationships in their partner as a sign of real betrayal (see also Young, 1998, pp. 124–130). These include changes in sleep patterns, demands for privacy, ignoring household chores, evidence of lying, personality changes, declining investment in the marital relationship, and in particular loss of interest in sex.

These points can be identified in the following passages: “I can pardon him, but every time he masturbated in front of that PC, he betrayed me. I always told him that, and I will tell it forever” (pdaniela). And also: “what hurts us is not the porn-dependence by itself, but the lie that goes with it”

(paola). For others, having a double life even without any real sexual relation with women is in itself a form of betrayal (giov._d'arco). In the narratives of the participants there is a significant split between past and present, as though the "discovery" became the watershed between perfect past life and present crisis, with its "shattered assumptions" of integrity, love, and safety, after the sudden traumatic experience (see also Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Another form of mental dichotomization can be found in their antithetic attitudes toward their "good" and "bad" partners. These attitudes cannot be integrated into a new form, leaving the woman in a state of ambivalence: "He was a good husband, a good father, we had a good relationship etc., but now . . ."

In general the messages rarely recount the relationship before the discovery, but when doing so the period is mostly idealized. When remembering the past, women briefly described their partners as having been handsome, kind, and sensitive ("*magnifico*"). The relationship with their partner either on the emotional or the sexual levels was satisfying. But at some point the female partner learns of the cyber-porn or cybersex user's activities. The idealized image of their perfect partner collapses, and the women have to come to terms with unknown negative aspects of their partner they had not known before: "where is my old male gone who deserved to be called a man?" (dicobasta 69).

This change of attitude, from a "good" to a "bad" man, past and present can happen suddenly or gradually. It can happen accidentally, when the partner comes upon activities in progress or turns on the computer and discovers pornographic pictures, or it can happen as a result of deliberate investigation. In either case, the partner's ignorance and denial are over (Schneider, 2002). A few participants stressed that the writing on the wall was obvious. They noted that the use of pornography was present when they first met, but they colluded with this behavior or did not pay any attention because they considered this behavior typical to any open-minded single man.

Thus negative attributes in the present do not integrate with past perceptions of the partner; rather, they replace the former "over-idealization" of the male partner. From a handsome, kind, altruistic, mature, and adult man, he becomes an insane, immature, wayward, shameful, dishonest, cheating, irresponsible, and sadistic child, a "clumsy adolescent" (giov._d'arco). From a past depiction of a whole and healthy man he becomes a sick person, suffering for "a dependency, an obsessive-compulsive disorder" (giov._d'arco).

These feelings of impotence are exacerbated by the male users' behavior of concealing, lying, dissimulation, promising, or overt anger toward the partner. Similar to what was found by others (Schneider, 2002), in most of the stories, when confronted by the female partner, the male user denied or minimized the significance of the behavior and even suggested that the real problem was the partner's lack of sex appeal or lack of a liberal or

open mind toward pornography: “I discovered that he downloads videos with incestuous themes. There are no signs of shame. [He says]: ‘what’s the matter, tomorrow we will look at them together’” (Francesca). This dynamic of collusion fuels more tension and clashes in the conjugal relationship, leaving the women in an unbearable state of ambiguity: “at the beginning I had a fight with him, but Andrea made me feel guilty saying that everybody does it and it is just for fun and curiosity. He asked me to join him but I felt embarrassed. All I got was feeling unsafe with my man, afraid of not being attractive anymore” (Ausika). Moreover, in most cases this negative escalation in the relationship is maintained by the tendency for the user to return to cyber-porn or cybersex activities even after discovery by the spouse, no matter how sincere the initial intention to quit: “then I discovered that whores are also involved in this nice picture . . . at that point I felt real death . . . and disgust” (Maria Rossi). A common result is a cycle of discoveries, promises made and broken, and additional discoveries and promises. Again there is no clear definition of the problem, no clear cut resolution or closure, and the situation remains ambiguous and ambivalent. The feeling of inadequacy and powerlessness is enhanced as well by the fact that in most of the cases of cyber-porn the third party is not always a real person: “I thought I had a transparent relation with him then it came. . . . The PC. Fighting another woman to save a marriage is understandable . . . but fighting all this . . . I am powerless” (Annacento). The sense of powerlessness and inadequacy is also expressed on the sexual level: “when I discovered it . . . I started asking what is missing in me, or rather, what was I unable to perform (sexually)” (Maria Rossi). “Ursula” felt clumsy, awkward and inadequate. “Lamured82,” one of the last participants in the group, stressed that the roles had changed: “he always makes the excuse of having a headache. . . .”

As Schneider indicated (2000), cyber-porn and cybersex are seen as so destructive because of their adverse effects on women’s self-esteem: “I feel a lack of self esteem and trust from the dearest people” (cateblue). Cyber-porn and cybersex tap into partners’ deepest insecurities about their ability to measure up or to compete with images of young girls and porn stars. The knowledge that the addict’s head is full of erotic images inevitably produces a comparison in his partner between the spouse and the fantasy woman in terms of appearance, desirability, and repertory of sexual behaviors. The spouses feel they are competing with computer images and cannot win in a never-ending competition (Schneider, 2000). As stressed (Schneider & Weiss, 2001, p. 92): “the result is often confusion: on the one hand, a desire to emulate and be as desirable as the cyber-image, and on the other hand, revulsion at the lack of intimacy and mechanical nature of the sex.” Here are a few of these comments by Italian participants:

“I don’t have a perfect body like those porn stars” (Minnie). “I will never compete with the women I see in his pc” (attoride). “After we had a fight nothing changed. I cannot compete with these extreme images. I

am afraid” (violanavi). “Yes I feel jealous” (Ausika). “I feel inadequate and unwanted” (Laura 280170). “I feel I am competing with these women who obviously look different from me ... I would like to feel I had better arguments” (fede). “I thought that the problem is me, I am not sexy and pretty enough, (moreover I am pregnant), and I felt it was justified to think that he was looking elsewhere for what I was not able to deliver ... I discovered that he was chatting with these ‘nice madams’... I felt betrayed, offended and humiliated..” (yayita). “Our sexual life does not exist, it has less fantasies, he rushes through it and doesn’t want to make real love” (preoccupata05).

For many women the causes of their mate’s cyberporn are related to their own physical appeal, and these women may feel that they exist only if they can attract their partner:

for him it is not a problem. Is a hobby, a form of play, a pleasure ‘because men are like that’ ... I suffer from depression, I am fat ... and for seven years we did not make love ... I thought it was my fault, because I am not attractive and not feminine ... this became his alibi ... he doesn’t feel guilty for what he is doing, he doesn’t feel distress (frecong).

In this type of situation, women mostly express a feeling of disgust and a sense of being contaminated by a dirty and filthy partner, a sort of contaminating enemy suddenly found in their bedroom. “Ursula” states that female partners may therefore suffer from porn-dependence by osmosis. “giov...d’arco” added that: “the porn-dependence fills the brain not only to those who are suffering, but also, even more to those who are standing on their side, impotent and powerless waiting for the earthquake.” The continuous dynamics of anger, hurt, rejection and sexual dissatisfaction in an unresolved ambiguous situation, can be seen in this narrative:

it is a continuous vilification, I fell ugly and unattractive ... We rarely make love ... and we have been together less than one year ... at the beginning I thought he didn’t like me ... then I discovered that every day, as a habit, at the same time he used to view porn-sites ... and do it alone [masturbate]. It is humiliating ... I am really suffering but he doesn’t see that. Those rare times when he get close to me he does it as a duty, because, probably he realizes that for 20 days he has not touched me, and I feel that when we do it [sex] he has to concentrate on other things in order to [sexually] perform. I feel annihilated. What should I do? I tried to talk to him when I found [on the computer] links to those sites ... but he says that all men do it and it is just curiosity ... we do not have any intimacy and I feel more insecure (Marzietta).

Female partners express guilt as well in their attempts to take control of the situation. They feel bad about being the ones who spied, discovered

and confronted their spouses. They feel bad when they are accused of behaving in ways that exacerbated their partners' behavior (scoobydo): "I am convinced by what he says to me, that I am the cause of 80% of the tensions that push him to porn-dependence." In fact, ambivalence is also present in the role female partners try to take in their attempts to solve the problem by being involved and caring, snooping, and controlling, or remaining passive and detached. On the one hand, there is a tendency to snoop after the partner's activity, but on the other this behavior aggravates confidence and mature communication among the couple: "in substance our story is over, because I control, and I don't let him live. At the age of 26 a person should not get crazy, by snooping I am harming my sleep and my health" (Ricciariccia78).

The ambivalence in making sense of the problem is also exacerbated by attempts at problem solving. Many think that their partners should be treated as mature adults. There are female partners who define this as immoral behavior by adult and responsible people who have the will to decide and determine their life: "we have to stop treating them like children" (giov._d'arco). For others, like "Carrie.Brashaw," the medical excuse seems more than plausible: at the beginning she was convinced that her partner was undergoing some physical weakness: "I tried to be sexier, but nothing. Should I try to help him, encourage him to recover his physical fitness?"

Some express an attitude of justification or excuse for the male's behavior by defining it as a disease ("dependence," "sexual addiction," "obsessive-compulsive disorder"), which is beyond the male's control and responsibility, and therefore can be justifiable or excusable: "I love him very much, he made me feel bad . . . but I want to stay on his side. I need something that will prevent me from falling down too" (sbrilluccichina). Another participant in a similar condition of moral ambivalence in her problem solving attempts stated: "I oscillate between a desire to help him and disgust for what he is doing, and I cannot forget all the money he spends, which could be useful for our future life" (pornobasta).

As stressed by Schneider (2002), there is a paradox when the partner at this stage believes that additional information will enhance her or his ability to manage the situation. Partners who are computer-savvy learn how to trace the user's activities, and in some cases may even try to entice their partner by logging onto the same chat rooms themselves under false names. Rather than a mature confrontation, this dynamic leads to a game of (female adult) seek and (male childish) hide, which does not provide a solution and may even exacerbate the state of ambivalence and ambiguous loss.

Recovery

This paper mostly focused on a transition from a stage of ignorance/denial to a stage of shock/discovery. The participants' messages say less about

constructive problem-solving, namely the stage of pre-recovery and recovery (Schneider & Weiss, 2001, p. 128–129). In describing the phases of pre-recovery of partners of sex addicts (co-addicts) in the pre-cybersex era, Milrad (1999) found the end of the pre-recovery phase and the beginning of recovery to be related to the awareness that they are in crisis and need help. Similarly, partners of cybersex addicts enter the crisis stage when they realize that their problem-solving efforts have been unsuccessful and when the cost of remaining in the status-quo become intolerable. Examples include depressive symptoms, isolation, loss of libido, a dead marriage, their own dysfunctional behaviors in some cases (extra dyadic affairs, excessive drinking, violence), as well as awareness of the effects on the children of the family dysfunction. This is the stage when the partner seeks help for herself rather than assisting the cybersex user. Once the partner is in therapy and getting help, the equilibrium of the system is disrupted, which will force some type of real change. Either the problematic behavior will change as the cybersex user too becomes engaged in treatment, or the relationship will end.

As said, the life expectancy of the forum examined in this research was too short, and few messages indicated successful cases of problem solving. Only a few women reported attempts to start any sort of therapy, and only one woman was left by her partner. This suggests that awareness of the ambivalent condition and the capacity to share this feeling, even in an anonymous forum can be a significant step towards improvement. Women capable of breaking through the defense of denial can take the first step toward recovery (Canning Fulton, 2002). In these messages, anger toward the partner is sometimes expressed as an attempt to problem-solve the condition of ambiguous loss or at least the stagnation of the relationship: “We cannot suffer forever, they should understand that we have our needs. They want to sink, so let them sink, but we will not follow them” (Roberta Calace). And more directly: “sometimes I become very aggressive. I cannot control myself and he doesn’t understand me, he says that he needs his space” (ausika). Others express anger directed against the computer and the cyber-porn industry: “They are whores, bitches, sick ugly women (ausika).

Other expressions of awareness of the state of ambivalence and ambiguity can be found in the level of solutions, as captured in the following message: “Where is my mistake? . . . I am afraid to justify his behavior . . . which approach should I use? . . . be angry? . . . understanding? . . . should I judge him? . . . talk? . . . pretend that nothing happened?” (laura280170).

The following message shows that beside emotional ambivalence and confusion about steps to be taken, there is also an attempt to recognize the ambiguous condition and avoid antithetic attitudes toward present-absent, good-bad male partners, accusation vs. excuses, etc. As “Lieve” schematically stressed, her ambivalence has many facets, and she can see the ambivalence which is making her traumatized:

- “I love him” vs. “He did a terrible thing to me”
 “I love him very much” vs. “How can I forgive him?”
 “He exaggerated” vs. “Is it really so severe?”
 “Leave him on the spot” vs. “He is so perfect that I forget all his evil deeds”
 “I go there [when he is on the computer] and humiliate him” vs. “I don’t want fights”

Hence defining the problem, identifying its ambivalence and ambiguity, and sharing distress with other women, even in an anonymous (but accessible) forum can be seen as a significant step toward self-awareness and improvement.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the narratives of spouses or live-in girl-friends in an online Italian support group of partners of male porn-dependents. It stressed the participants’ difficulty to name, make sense of the problem, share with others, and receive cultural recognition (meta-narrative) of the new condition. Women perceived emotional ambivalence and ambiguous loss when their partner was physically present but psychologically absent. There is a split in their perception of the past and the present, a difficulty integrating the porn-dependent “bad” behavior with the good sides of their porn-dependent mates. Because of the nature of the behavior of porn dependence women oscillate between moral accusation and medical excuse, between neglecting and denying and snooping. The third presence of the computer in virtual life is unclear, and creates a sense of contamination and unbearable competition in the bedroom and in real life.

By clustering messages in analytically relevant ways, this paper mapped similarities and identified themes and patterns under the concepts of emotional ambivalence and ambiguity loss (Boss, 1999). Further studies of first hand narratives of female partners of porn-dependents in other countries should focus on the liminal condition and ambiguous loss perceived by these women and the importance, in therapeutic settings, of self awareness about this condition of emotional split.

NOTE

1. All messages were translated from Italian by the co-author, G.C.

REFERENCES

- Agar, M., & Hobbs, J. (1982). Interpreting discourse: Cohering and the analysis of ethnographic interviews. *Discourse Processes*, 5, 1–32.

- Amichai-Hamburger, Y. & Furnhan, A. (2007). The positive net. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23, 1033–1045.
- Baym, N. (1995). The emergence of community in computer-mediated communication. In S. Jones (Ed.), *CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated communication and community*, (pp.138–63). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Canning Fulton, M. (2002). Breaking through defenses. In P. Carnes & K. Adams, (Eds.), (*Clinical management of sex addiction*, (pp.31–44). New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Cavaglian, G. (2008). Narratives of self help of cyber-porn dependents. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 15, 195–216.
- Cavaglian, G. (2009). Cyber-porn dependence: voices of distress in an Italian Internet self-help community. *International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction*, 7, 295–298.
- Cooper, A. (1998). Sexuality and the Internet: Surfing into the new millennium. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 1, 187–193.
- Cooper, A., Delmonico, D. & Burg, R. (2000a). Cybersex users, abusers, and compulsive: New findings and implications. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 7, 5–29.
- Cooper, A., McLoughlin, I., & Campbell, K. (2000b). Sexuality in the cyberspace: Update for the 21th century. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 3, 521–536.
- Cooper, A., Putnam, D., Planchon, L., & Boies, S. (1999a). Online sexual compulsivity: Getting tangled in the net. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 6, 79–104.
- Cooper, A., Scherer, C., Boies, S. & Gordon, B. (1999b). Sexuality on the Internet: From sexual exploration to pathological expression. *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice*, 30, 54–164.
- Delmonico, D. (2002). Sex on the superhighway: Understanding and treating cybersex addiction. In P. Carnes & K. Adams (Eds.). *Clinical management of sex addiction*, (pp.239–254), New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Durkin, K. (2004). The Internet as a milieu for the management of a stigmatized sexual identity. In D. Waskul (Ed.) *Net.seXXX: Readings on sex, pornography and the Internet*, (pp.131–147), New York: Peter Lang.
- Goodman, A. (1998). *Sexual addiction: An integrated approach*. Madison: International Universities Press.
- Greenfield, D. (1999). *Virtual addiction: Help for Netheads, Cyberfreaks, and those who love them*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Pub.
- Greer, C. (2004). Crime, media and community: Grief and virtual engagement in late modernity. In J. Ferrell, K. Hayward, W. Morrison & M. Presdee (Eds.), *Cultural criminology unleashed*, (pp.109–118), London: Glass House Press.
- Griffiths, M. (2004). Sex addiction on the Internet, *The Janus Head*, 7, 188–217.
- Grinnell, R. (1997). *Social work research and evaluation: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Itasca: Peacock.
- Grohol, J. (1998). Future clinical directions: Professional development, pathology, and psychotherapy on-line. In J. Gackenbach (Ed.): *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal implications*, (pp.111–138), San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

- Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Towards a new psychology of trauma*. The Free Press: New York.
- King, S., & Moreggi, D. (1998). Internet therapy and self-help groups—the pros and cons. In J. Gackenbach (Ed.): *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal implications*, (pp.77–106), San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- La Repubblica Correspondents (2002). Sessodipendenza: ne soffre il 5% degli uomini italiani. *La Repubblica*, March 15, p. 3 (in Italian).
- Milrad, R. (1999). Coaddictive recovery: Early recovery issues for spouses of sex addicts. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 6, 125–136.
- Mitchell, K., Becker-Blease, K., & Finkelhor, D. (2005). Inventory of problematic Internet experiences encountered in clinical practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 36, 498–509.
- Orzack, M., & Ross, C. (2000). Should virtual sex be treated like other sex addictions? *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 7, 113–125.
- Parker, T., & Wampler, K. (2003). How bad is it? Perceptions of the relationship impact of different types of Internet sexual activities. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 25, 415–429.
- Punzi, V. (2006). *Io pornodipendente sedotto da Internet*, Milan: Costa & Nolan (in Italian).
- Rappaport, J. (1994). Narrative studies, personal stories, and identity transformation in the mutual-help context. In T. Powell (ed.) *Understanding the self-help organization: Frameworks and findings*, pp. 227–247, London: Sage.
- Reid, E. (1998). The self and the Internet: Variation on the illusion of one self. In J. Gackenbach (Ed.): *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal implications*, (pp.29–42), San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Rheingold, H. (1994). *The virtual community: Finding connection in a computerized world*. London: Minerva.
- Riessman, C. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park CA: Sage.
- Roscoe, B., Cavanaugh, L., & Kennedy, D. (1988). Dating infidelity: Behaviors, reasons and consequences. *Adolescence*, 23, 35–43.
- Sanders, T. (2008). *Paying for pleasure: Men who buy sex*, Portland: Willan.
- Schneider, J. (2000). Effect of cybersex addiction on the family. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 7, 31–58.
- Schneider, J. (2002). The new “Elephant in the living room”: Effects of compulsive cybersex behaviors on the spouse. In A. Cooper (Ed.): *Sex and the Internet: A guidebook for clinicians*, (pp.169–186), New-York: Brunner/Routledge.
- Schneider, J. & Weiss, R. (2001). *Cybersex exposed: Simple fantasy or obsession?* Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden.
- Thomas, J. (2004). Cyberpoaching behind the keyboard: Uncoupling the ethics of “virtual infidelity.” In D. Waskul (Ed.): *Net.seXXX: Readings on sex, pornography and the Internet*, (pp.149–177), New York: Peter Lang.
- Turner, V. (1967). Betwixt and between: The liminal period in rites de passage. In V. Turner (Ed.): *The Forest of symbols*, (pp.93–111), Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Waskul, D., Douglass, M., & Edgley, C. (2000). Cybersex: outcourse and the en-selfment of the body. *Symbolic Interaction*, 23, 375–397.

- Whitty, M. (2003). Pushing the wrong buttons: men's and women's attitudes toward online and offline infidelity. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 6, 569–579.
- Whitty, M. (2005). The realness of cybercheating: men's and women's representation of unfaithful Internet relationship. *Social Science Computer Review*, 23, 57–67.
- Young, K. (1998). *Caught in the Web*. New York: John Wiley and Son.
- Young, K. (1999). *Cybersexual addiction*. Retrieved from: http://www.netaddiction.com/cybersexual_addiction.htm
- Young, K., Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, A., O'Mara, J., & Buchanan, J. (2000). Online infidelity: Relationship with implications for evaluation and treatment. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 7, 59–74.