

# Public knowledge of cybersex from media discourse: What relationship exists between Internet and sexuality?

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This work aims to detect the cultural models that organize cybersex discourse, from an analysis of the Italian press, in order to overcome an individualistic and medicalized paradigm proposed by mainstream research. A text analysis based on social representation theory was conducted on a corpus of 52 articles from the major national newspapers and allowed the exploration of the social representation of the phenomenon. The study detected 4 cultural repertoires that refer to different functions of Internet technology on the development of online sexual practices, according to specific conceptualization of cybersex as a (1) substitute, (2) transitional, (3) protean and (4) mythical space. Overall, results suggest that the main function of cybersex does not aim at obtaining immediate gratification by sex consumption, but at experimenting with new roles and manifold identities within a dynamic and interactive social space.

Sexuality is a fundamental component of human life that is radically changing through Internet use (Cantelmi & Lambiase, 2005). Indeed, sex has been reported to be the most popular search topic on the Internet for a variety of personal reasons such as relaxing, having fun, staying in contact with a love and/or sex partner, reaching orgasm, or seeking a cyber- or real-time affair (Delmonico, 1997). In this regard, Online Sexual Activities (OSA) (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000) refer to any online activity involving sexuality which can range from looking for a partner, shopping for sexual products, chatting, viewing erotic or pornographic pictures or movies, seeking sexual support, having cybersex, seeking real life partners to have sexual relations with, and so on. Cybersex is a subcategory of OSA and is defined as when two or more people are engaging in sexual talk while online for the purposes of sexual pleasure and may or may not include masturbation. This interaction could be exchanging sexual e-mails, using chatrooms, instant messaging or Web cameras (Cantelmi & Lambiase, 2005; Delmonico, 1997).

Most of the scientific literature conceives cybersex as an early form of sex addiction disorder (Schneider, 2000), which is diagnosed as Internet Related Psychopathology (Cantelmi & D'Andrea, 2000; Caretti & La Barbera, 2001; Delmonico, 1997; Delmonico & Carnes, 1999) as well as other addictions and abusive behaviors connected to several functions of Internet use (cyber addictions), such as gambling, compulsive shopping or Internet overuse for information search. However, apart from risks and consequences of compulsive virtual sex, the current widespread techno-mediated sexual practices among both men and women, because of the growing pornography industry, make it quite difficult to distinguish between normality and pathology (Giusti & Di Nardo, 2008) and seem to require a more complex cultural analysis of the cybersex phenomenon.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This paper aims at exploring the cultural models that organize cybersex discourse from a content analysis of Italian newspapers. By “cultural models” we mean the collusive dynamics, in terms of shared emotional and symbolic components, through which people represent a specific topic or “object” of investigation (Carli & Paniccia, 2002) in our case cybersex. This is in order to detect the main dimensions defining the different functions of cybersex and the role of new technology for the development of virtual sex practices. The adoption of a socio-cultural approach, based on an individual-context paradigm (Carli, 1990), may provide support needed to overcome the individualistic and medicalized perspective currently proposed by mainstream research. In detail, we refer to Moscovici’s theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1988, 2005) according to which meaning is created through a system of social negotiation from discursive productions, rather than being a fixed and defined thing. In this sense, mass media (newspapers, radio and television) have a fundamental role in the formation and communication of social representations through the rapid communication of ideas and images, because commonsense knowledge is directly related to how people interpret or translate the knowledge that is socially transmitted by means of public information system (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983; Sommer, 1988). The analysis of cybersex discourse within newspapers could thus provide a portrait of public knowledge regarding this phenomenon.

In short, the present study has a double-faceted aim: 1) to explore the social representation of cybersex in the Italian cultural context; 2) to detect the social demand for cybersex consumption, in terms of expectations and meanings referred to in the relationship between sexuality and Internet.

## **METHOD**

### **Newspapers and collection of articles**

For the current project it was decided to consult Italian newspaper articles through the archives of the main three national newspapers: *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*. The research was carried out by using the word “cybersex” as a search term in each of the search engines, which retrieved all the articles containing the word in the body of the article or in the headline. A careful reading allowed us to select only the articles focusing on the topic discarding those in which “cybersex” was only mentioned briefly, the word was just listed, or used in a metaphorical sense. The result was a sample of 52 articles produced between 1993 and 2010 (20 from *La Stampa*, 11 from *La Repubblica* and 21 from *Corriere della Sera*), which formed a text of 74 pages.

### **Emotional Text Analysis**

Emotional Text Analysis (AET) (Carli & Paniccia, 2002) is a psychological tool for the analysis of written texts that allows the exploration of specific cultural models structuring the text itself, thus outlining the “emotional construction of knowledge” of a certain research object, in our case cybersex. According to this methodology, emotions are not considered as individual responses but as shared categorization processes

through which people symbolize the reality and are expressed through language, consistently with the social representation theory.

AET allows to get a representation of textual corpus contents through few and significant thematic domains. It does not derive the internal structure of a corpus from ad hoc categories established by the researcher, but rather from the distribution of the words in the corpus itself, because the sense of a text can be represented in terms of its semantic variability. Some analysis procedures can be carried out on the text thanks to specific IT programs for text analysis (in our case the software used is T-Lab) (Lancia, 2004) which function to obtain groups of words (clusters) co-occurring in the same set of text segments with the highest probability.

Each cluster consists of a set of elementary contexts (i.e., sentences) characterized by the same patterns of key-words and can be described through the lexical units (lemmas) and the most characteristic context units (sentences) from which it is composed. Chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ) allows the assessment of the significance of a word recurrence within each cluster. The function of the co-occurrence of words in the same cluster is hypothesized to reduce the association of meanings attributable to each word, thus allowing a thematic domain to be constructed.

These clusters of words, that we call *Cultural Repertoires*, can be considered as the main symbolic areas, which refer to the cultural representation of cybersex and social demand for its consumption. The interpretative process of each repertoire (that is labeled by the researcher) is also based on an in-depth qualitative analysis of the text segments derived from the newspaper articles (i.e., the elementary context units) that are grouped in each cluster.

## RESULTS

The analysis detected four Cultural Repertoires (clusters) shaping the social representation of cybersex. Table 1 shows both the percentage of the textual corpus of which each cluster is composed of and a list of the most characteristic lemmas. For each cluster that we discuss as follows, we also report an example of text segment (elementary context unit) derived from the newspaper articles analyzed.

Table 1.  
*The most characteristic lemmas in thematic domains*

Cluster 1 (7.32%)		Cluster 2 (20.33%)		Cluster 3 (52.50%)		Cluster 4 (20.16%)	
Lemma	$\chi^2$	Lemma	$\chi^2$	Lemma	$\chi^2$	Lemma	$\chi^2$
Find	44.21	Safe	27.27	Site	31.94	Beautiful	34.20
Friend	32.88	Breast	22.59	Internet	27.13	Access	24.09
Counsel	31.34	Touch	12.11	Net	26.85	Romantic novel	23.39
Chat	27.83	Sex	11.82	Movies	18.08	Erotic	20.88
Control	26.68	True	11.63	CD-ROM	13.26	Woman	19.00
Real	24.22	Experiment	11.08	Information	11.21	Sale	15.02
Telephone	21.77	Human	10.34	Free	8.36	Protagonist	11.67

Encounter	16.79	Desire	8.90	Transgender	8.36	Believe	11.21
E-mail	12.21	Caress	8.90	Public	8.21	Trade	9.03
Stranger	10.89	Sense	8.10	Play	7.28	Enjoy	7.52
Loneliness	10.82	Naked	7.43	Social	6.48	Ideal	7.52
Risk	7.94	Body	6.82	Association	5.55	Story	7.52
Help	7.94	Pleasure	6.66	Interactive	5.55	TV	7.52
Dependence	6.07	Intimacy	4.90	Common	4.05	Money	4.97
Relationship	4.72	Experience	4.49	Link	3.99	Actor	4.83

The threshold value of Chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ) for each lemma is 3.84 ( $df = 1$ ;  $p = 0.05$ ). Textual data were translated into English only for the purposes of the paper.

### Cultural Repertoire 1: Substitute space

*“They are shy, inhibited, anxious and phobic people, with serious communication problems. They are used to chat to compensate for this deficiency and replace the real world with the virtual world. The cyberspace makes them safe because, thanks to anonymity, they feel able to control every relationship, every encounter”* (La Repubblica, May 26, 2001, p. 36).

This Cultural Repertoire provides a representation of cybersex as a sort of non-place that facilitates a highly involved communication with other individuals without implying a sincere exchange and mutual benefit. Internet use seems to satisfy a need for affiliation and deep emotional closeness, rather than a sexual contact desire, in terms of being cared for and being important for someone. Thus, confidential and anonymous relationships can be established, consistently with one’s own expectations and fantasies, by means of techno-mediated tools used as control and avoidance strategies. Cybersex mainly refers to a *substitute space* that replaces the real world with a virtual one, which allows a comfortable relationship deprived from the anxiety associated to a direct bodily encounter.

### Cultural Repertoire 2: Transitional space

*“I think about robot sex, the sexbot: a virtual creature that will dialogue with people through the screen, recognizing them by name, whispering sweet words, reacting to their taste and personality, even offering an intelligent conversation”* (La Stampa, January 13, 1999, p. 25).

In this repertoire cybersex is represented as a *transitional space*, extension of the psychic world, which recalls the intermediate zone between Self and Non-Self, as well as it happens in mother-child relationship. Internet serves to provide a condition of subjective omnipotence by translating the need for immediate sexual gratification in pleasant experiences that might be defined as *protomental*. These experiences are characterized by a substantial lack of differentiation between the physical and mental dimension. In this sense, cybersex is a medium encouraging sexual experimentation within a safe environment, through a partial and regressive erotic contact simulating face-to-face interaction, without completely perceiving the Other as a real whole person separated from the Self.

### **Cultural Repertoire 3: Protean space**

*"Have you ever dreamed of having experiences with strangers in unusual places (elevators, service stations, cinemas)? On the Internet you can do it" (Corriere della Sera, November 2, 1998, p. 16).*

In this cluster the cybersex discourse is grounded on the centrality of multimedia industry in shaping mass desires for technological products consumption. Cybersex is considered as an opportunity to create new spaces for socializing and sharing experiences, information and materials about sexuality, because of the high convenience and easy access regarding online sexual practices in the Internet. Indeed, cybersex can be seen as a sort of *protean space* where forms of creativity and transgression are possible. This enables the postmodern capacity for the construction and deconstruction of identities reflecting existing hierarchies of class, ethnicity and gender. The net becomes a social and public space where it is possible to develop a feeling of community belonging and participation and to break down barriers of time and space, as well as limitations and prejudices of society.

### **Cultural Repertoire 4: Mythical space**

*"How beautiful it is to fall in love in front of a computer. This is the incredible revolution of online eroticism: the image disappears, the sound disappears, all we can do is writing. It is not the future, it is a return to the old habits, to those French novels without illustrations that dad kept on the top shelf of the library" (La Repubblica, April 8, 1999, p. 29).*

The last Cultural Repertoire offers a vision of cybersex as a medium of excitement that can provide a powerful escape from real life by engaging in erotic or romantic affairs with partners who meet online. The main role of Internet is to satisfy a need for self-fulfillment and ensure an idealized conception of one's own sexual life. Cybersex is considered as a different form to live eroticism, rather than a substitute for real sex. In this perspective, it represents a *mythical space* where it is possible to act out the most secret and genuine fantasies without responsibility and consequences. This enables to reassure about one's own personal abilities and attractiveness, without the risk of the partner's refusal. The object of desire is conceived as something able to evoke intense imaginative responses, a product that can be possessed, used and consumed in relation to egocentric needs.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The aim of this study was to provide a cultural analysis regarding the main social representations of cybersex and the meanings associated to online sexual practices from a portrait offered by the Italian press.

The results showed that the Cultural Repertoire 3 was the most prevalent, including over than 50% of the textual corpus analyzed. This seems to highlight the strong centrality and development of new technology in shaping mass desires to consume cybersex and share sexual experiences, information, materials with others within a wider virtual community. In this sense, cybersex is demonstrated to be a complex social phenomenon rather than something that can be simply explained in terms of personal

sexual preferences and individual behavior. Most previous research has sustained that the integral nature of the Internet that currently is a constituent part of everyday life is one of the main factors promoting cybersex, as well as higher accessibility, affordability and convenience of online sexual contents made possible by the use of e-mail, chat, newsgroup and other online tools (Cantelmi & Lambiase, 2005; Carnes, Delmonico, Griffin, & Moriarity, 2001; Cooper, 2000; Delmonico & Carnes, 1999; Delmonico, Griffin, & Moriarity, 2001). The relevance of this cultural model also seems to suggest that the main function of cybersex does not aim at obtaining immediate gratification by sex consumption, but at experimenting new roles and manifold identities within a dynamic and interactive space. In this perspective, the motivation that leads to cybersex addresses a need for individuation as possibility to empower the self and to experience a condition of freedom and social legitimization (Cantelmi & Lambiase, 2005). Some examples of this are online role-playing games where subjects are replaced by their *alter ego* making it possible to create a parallel reality (Dryer & Lijtmaer, 2007) or virtual communities supporting certain lifestyles, culturally minority and non-conventional (homosexuality, transsexualism, etc.), as normal and permitted behaviors also thanks to the possibility of making them exist on the Internet (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999).

On the contrary, the Cultural Repertoires 2 and 4 refer to a substantial eroticization of the cybersex discourse where Internet does not allow opportunities to socialize with others, rather it is a way to establish dual regressive and undifferentiated relationships. The interlocutor is not perceived as a whole person but is fragmented and objectified, as a mere source of sexual stimulation that can evoke intensive responses at bodily (cluster 2) and imaginative (cluster 4) level. This aspect suggests that virtual sex mostly tends to propose a primitive vision of sexuality according to a growing individualistic and narcissistic demand, rather than a creative alternative way to live sexuality by revitalizing the concepts of intimacy and sharing with someone else. This hypothesis is further confirmed by the Cultural Repertoire 1 where it more clearly emerges as the difficulty to explore, confront oneself with reality and construct meaning with other individuals. The feeling of distrust and fear evoked by relationships seems to lead to control dynamics in which the role of techno-mediated practices aims to gradually generate distance from the other, rather than proximity. The virtual space thus facilitates a progressive isolation, within a sort of ambivalent non-place (Augè, 1992; Rheingold, 1991, 1993), because anonymous communication does not create an actual exchange with the other (Davis, 2001).

We conclude that a careful consideration of these cultural areas may provide a key to a social contextualization of the phenomenon of cybersex, in order to stimulate further discussion about the relationship between Internet and sexuality in a dynamic and cultural perspective.

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