



PsychLaw

Internet sex offending.

“..anonymity is probably the most significant factor that facilitates deviant online sex offending.”

Australian research¹ examined the impact of Internet problematic behaviours on the potential for recidivism in the population of online sex offenders. The growth in the use of the Internet for deviant sexual purposes has been attributed to what has been termed the ‘Triple ‘A’ Engine’: Accessibility, Affordability and Anonymity. Previous research suggests the Internet allows for more marginally deviant driven individual to engage in illegal sexual behaviours who would not normally engage in such activities. While accessibility and affordability make it easier to explore deviant sexual behaviour online, anonymity is probably the most significant factor that facilitates deviant online sex offending.

Research has identified a number of predictors of sexual offence recidivism, and these predictors are generally organised into the following areas: intimacy deficits; social influences; attitudes tolerant of sexual abuse; sexual self-regulation; general self-regulation deficits.

Intimacy deficits.

The lack of emotionally intimate relationships with adults is believed to place offenders at greater risk of recidivism, and the excessive use of the Internet negatively affects an offender’s ability to initiate and maintain meaningful relationships in their lives. When excessive absorption into a virtual world precludes one from having experiences necessary for a healthy psychosexual development, then a deficient developmental processes is likely to occur leading to inappropriate mental or emotional attitudes about sexual attitudes.

Social influences.

In the ‘real world’ those presenting deviant sexual fantasies would be reluctant to admit to inap-

propriate sexual desires. However, in cyberspace the sense of anonymity allows individuals to become more open about sexual deviancies. The increased contact with others openly displaying sexual deviancy serves to validate the offender’s behaviour, increasing the likelihood of recidivism.

Attitudes tolerant of sexual abuse.

Research on sexual offending supports the idea that attitudes or values tolerant of sexual deviancy are related to sexual recidivism. Free access to a cyber subculture in which sexual deviancy is acceptable and encouraged by its members, fosters attitudes tolerant of sexual deviancy. Offenders are then likely to internalise sexual attitudes portrayed in a cyber culture that encourages and validates deviant sexual behaviour.

Sexual self-regulation.

Self-regulation is widely accepted as potent risk factor for the general sexual offender, and poor self-control has a have powerful influence on sexual recidivism among Internet offenders. Internet sexual offenders are constantly subjected to potent absorption of the Internet, and with high levels of impulsivity, offenders will commit sex offences given the opportunity. When confronted with the prospect of immediate reinforced deviant sexual acts in cyberspace, the impulsive online sexual offender may not have the skills to enable them to deliberate.

General self-regulation deficits.

When self-regulation mechanisms are deficient, sex is often used as a regulatory mechanism to provide an escape from negative emotions and everyday problems.

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¹ De Almeida Neto, A.C., Eyland, S., Ware, J., Galouzis, J., & Kevin, M. (2013). Internet sexual offending: overview of potential contributing factors and intervention strategies. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 20(2), 168—181.



Sexual assault expectancies.

Within the legal system, beliefs or expectancies about a crime can play a powerful role in guiding decision-makers evaluations and judgements of the alleged event. Research consistently demonstrates that laypersons will question the validity of a sexual assault and judge the victim with greater scepticism, if the assault all those involved in not complies with their expectancies. Whether these belief structures touch upon victim and all perpetrated behaviour *prior to*, *during*, or *following the alleged assault*, research has clearly demonstrated that expectancies regarding what typically occurs during a rape and what the 'appropriate' behaviour of a sexual assault victim should be, powerfully guide the judgements of those of the leading the claim.

Research conducted in Canada¹ focused on one subset of expectancies - the victim's post event behaviour - that can take on particular significance in the adjudication of sexual assault complaints. The purpose of the study was to examine how information regarding the

complainant's emotional display at trial impact perceptions of the alleged sexual assault, and in particular how her demeanour at trial in light of her earlier emotional displays make impact the decision process.

Research participants were provided a trial summary, that included opening and closing arguments; direct and cross-examination of witnesses; judicial instructions along with the emotional reaction of the complainant (*tearfullupset*, or *calm/controlled*). The emotional reaction was varied at two points, the *day following the incident* and *during her trial testimony*. Results suggested that when the complainant was *tearfullupset* the *day following the incident*, participants were more likely to believe her sexual assault allegation when she was also *tearfullupset* during a trial testimony as compared to when she was *calm/controlled* at trial.

Results of the research illustrate that displays of emotion at different points in time can interact to influence perceptions of the complainant, the of-

fender and the event. Indeed, it appears that emotional consistency on the part of the complainant had a powerful influence on participant's perceptions of sexual assault. Specifically, participants were more likely to be supportive of the complainant's claim and less supportive of the accused when the complainant's response was consistent over time, regardless of whether that response was *tearfullupset* or *calm/controlled*.

This suggests that an individual's perceptions of an alleged sexual assault victim are based to some extent on the manner in which she gave the testimony rather than completely on the factual content of what the victim said. It is not merely the type of emotional response displayed by sexual assault victims that influences perceptions of their allegation, but also the pattern of their multiple responses over time. This suggests that a victim who, through time or counselling, improves their ability to cope with the assault may be at a disadvantage given the expectancy of emotional consistency.

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¹ Klippenstein, M.A., & Schuller, R. (2012). Perceptions of sexual assault: expectancies regarding the emotional response of a rape victim over time. *Psychology, Crime & Law* 18(1), 29-94.

Internet sex offending cont..

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The sexual gratification internet users experience online, serves to provide an emotional or mental escape from negative emotional states, and reinforces compulsive online sexual behaviour. The immediate outcomes for dysfunctional Internet use, including family and peer problems, loss of employment, exacerbation of psychological problems, may contribute to negative emotions caused by daily life stressors. This is likely to lead the individual to seek more online sexual gratification to remove the negative feelings they experience.

The Internet provides an escape from negative emotions and everyday problems just like all impulse

controls disorders do. Given the pervasiveness of the Internet in modern society, total abstinence of computer use is not likely to be the best approach to Internet sexual offenders. As compulsive Internet use and sexual offending are correlated with negative emotional states, alternative ways of dealing with stress and other negative emotions must be an integral component of any treatment strategy designed to reduce recidivism of online sexual offenders. Given the willingness and necessary skills to maintain appropriate Internet use internet sexual offenders could plausibly go through their entire lives never having gone back to their previous maladaptive pattern of Internet use.