Sex is something you do. Sexuality is something you are.
—Anna Freud

In the words of the renowned psychoanalyst and the youngest child of Sigmund Freud, sexuality forms a vital aspect of one’s “self” and social identity. Healthy manifestations of sexuality, safe sexual practices, and enjoying reproductive/ sexual rights help in coping and psychological resilience. One of the best times to put it into perspective is the last year of the unprecedented Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic havoc, which is still plaguing the world. With the geopolitical, socioeconomic, and ecological landscapes undergoing rapid transformations due to the global pandemic, lives and living have been affected equally. It is understandable that on the background of a highly contagious infection that mandates face masks and social distancing, it is natural that the fear of infection, stress, reduced interactions, personal circumstances (like frontline work), travel restrictions, and financial setbacks have all contributed to deprivation of affective touch and physical intimacy. Global misinformation and uncertainty during the ongoing pandemic have further affected sexuality and sexual relationships, which form an important aspect of psychosocial well-being. Adopting the transition to “new normal” like other aspects of life, sexual practices too have increasingly borrowed the virtual platform. Cybersex, digital intimacy, use of pornography, and so on, have gained a renewed impetus during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have continued implications in the post-pandemic aftermath as well.

Dimensions of Cybersex

The widespread availability of the Internet and broadened arena of cyberspace has provided the scope for digital intimacy. Though there is considerable heterogeneity in the definitions of “cybersex” and individual variability, it has been consistently defined as an interactive activity. Digitally mediated sexual interactions through the use of technology can be in the form of cybersex, electronic sex, chat/cam sex, virtual sex, sexting, and so on, which have been in vogue since the 1990s. In the absence of clear operational definitions, Smith mentions, “an internet-based affair or digital sexual practice involves chat sessions and sexually stimulating conversations or cybersex, which may include (among other things), filming mutual masturbation with a web camera…. With the internet, we are moving away from just physical ideas about infidelity and acknowledging emotional infidelity.” Like any other relationship, this also has an emotional and a sexual (virtual) component. Though cybersex involves sexual practices exclusively involving the Internet/cyberspace, for the subsequent discussion certain aspects of digital sex (online sexting, nudes, etc) and pornography will also be included.

Traditionally, it has been difficult to systematically collect data related to cybersex, due to its personal and secretive nature. Research from Sweden and Australia report that 10% to 30% of younger participants engaged in intimate online relationships and online affairs. More than one-third of people preferred cybersex compared to abstinence or masturbation alone in long-distance relationships. Expression of virtual sexuality grants anonymity enabling one to explore and experiment various sexual identities and fantasies, without being impaired by environmental and situational constraints. These fantasies may be concealed in real life due to various beliefs and social stigma, which are brought to light within cyberspace that offers limitless possibilities to change identities (such as gender, race, or even different species). Jiang highlights that an “important element of
cybersex eroticism” is that people can try various vicarious sexual experiences, that they may not have tried in their real life. This element of “surprise” on the other end adds to the excitement and risk-taking in certain participants. In short, cybersex allows a “private, safe, and anonymous” environment to explore sexuality.

Digitalization of Intimacy During the Pandemic

Compared to the traditional sexual practices in some societies, making love and expressing desire digitally can be considered unconventional and revolutionary in certain cultures. Expression of sexuality has been historically linked with infectious disease outbreaks, from the time of the Spanish Flu to modern day acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).7 Manifestation of “free love” was restricted by AIDS, while “digitalization of love” is being propagated by COVID-19. What constitutes normal sexuality is a highly debatable construct! Considering that sexual practices are heavily influenced by traditions, myths, beliefs, social stereotypes, cultural connotations, and ethnic variations, its polymorphic nature and adaptation to “novel” circumstances are expected. Expressing love via the virtual platforms has even been termed as “sexual renaissance of the Gen Z” at times of the pandemic.8 The quarantine, lockdown, and travel restrictions have further bolstered sexual experimentation, be it sharing nudes, thirst traps of Instagram, mutual masturbation and recording the same (Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, etc), sexting, digitally sharing pornography, and so on. As opposed to the popular conception that a video-screen barrier is always isolating, research in psychosexual health needs to understand if contactless sex can be safely “actualized” through technology to eliminate the void of social distancing. There remains, however, a plethora of social, legal, ethical, and moral dilemmas that need further debate and discourse.

It has been seen that deprivation of sexual pleasure is associated with infection-related anxiety, grief, loneliness, substance abuse, domestic violence, loneliness, and poor coping in stressful situations, though a causal attribution could not be established.79 Lehmiller et al10 highlighted “redefining” of recreational sex during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors reported an online survey of 1,559 adults among which more than 50% revealed a decline in their relationship intimacy while 20% expanded their sexual interest by trying new fantasies, modes of foreplay, sexual positions, sexting, and digital sex. Those who attempted these novel additions were thrice more likely to have improvements in their sex lives. Further, in a large study involving 3,593 participants from 57 countries, perceived partner responsiveness even virtually helped improve poor relationship quality associated with the pandemic-related stressors over a period of 3 months.11 To glance at a cross-cultural perspective, a cross-sectional online study involving 3 South-Asian countries (India, Bangladesh, and Nepal) showed that 45% of the participants felt that their sexuality (types and frequency of sexual practices) was affected by COVID-19 while more than half of them reported having positive changes in emotional bonding during the lockdown as a consequence of “innovative sexuality,” even when the partners were away.12 Though preliminary evidence points toward the fact that contactless manifestations of sexuality, not a substitute of physical intimacy, can be one of the better options during a long-distance relationship compared to complete abstinence.

We need to consider here that cybersex is not just about partnered sexuality. Besides, more telephonic and online sexual interactions between couples, even solo sex has been benefited by digital platforms. Masturbation, an ever debated and stigmatized topic, has been “celebrated” by social media platforms in a new vigor. Prescriptive as well as descriptive narratives of masturbatory practices have been reported during the pandemic.13 Die Bild14 mentions the compensatory ability of masturbation using digital erotica in the absence of partnered sex and recommends it to help stress and anxiety, though evidence for the positive outcomes of masturbation is superficial.15 The New York City Health Department16 even mentions it as a guideline, “You are your safest sex partner. Masturbation will not spread COVID-19, especially if you wash your hands (and sex toys) with soap and water for at least 20s before and after sex.” Banerjee and Rao17 provide a more detailed advocacy review on the safe sexual recommendations during the pandemic. Parallel to self-stimulatory practices, the use of pornography has literally exploded during the outbreak and especially the global lockdown. In order to cater to and capitalize on this soaring demand, one of the leading providers of online pornography Pornhub.com granted free premium access globally till April 23, 2020.17 In a verbal pact of free registration and premium pornography access on Pornhub in return of adequate social distancing, this platform changed its name to “StayHomeHub” on a lighter note. In fact, an entirely new genre of pornography termed as “Coronavirus porn” emerged during the pandemic, which centered around the outbreak-stricken areas with protagonists in the video wearing masks, medical protective devices, gloves, and so on.17 Themes of pornographic videos often reflect the ongoing global events, and in that sense this “Coronavirus porn” does not really appear as a bizarre form of fetishism. Lehmiller et al10 has linked these apparently strange fantasies with eroticization of the threat as a coping mechanism, fear defense, curiosity about the “bizarre” to combat uncertainty, desire to cross-geopolitical borders to fight social distancing, and instill hopes of recovery. Both media statistics and that from Pornhub.com reflected enhanced interest in this form of pornographic content since March 2020.17 Further research is warranted to understand the usage patterns and likely social effects of Coronavirus porn consumption. The pandemic has led to significant bottle-necking of prostitution and “body-related services” due to the risks of physical proximity.
and infection, that has led to marked rise in poverty, social inequality, and homelessness. Furthermore, the “anti-prostitution” movements have gained boost during this pandemic, so much so that the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been termed the “Abolitionist virus” as it prevents people from spending time for sex. Public health groups and various nongovernmental organizations have actively vouched for the human rights of commercial sex workers (CSW) and their rehabilitation during the ongoing crisis, which has led to emergency funds, promoting psychosexual healthcare, and shifting of some CSW to the digital platform, further boosting pornography and facilitating cybersex. Over time, as the pandemic has spread its clutches, most porn studios have closed down too leading to widespread unemployment in the porn industry and erotic material being changed to phone sex, online sex, and solo sex recordings. Paraphilias have also been on the rise.

**Cons in the Path**

Understandably, cybersex and digital intimacy have various dimensions. It encourages casual sexual encounters and exploration without risking unplanned pregnancies and abortions. In fact, research during the pandemic showed that virtual sexuality has helped to counteract the coronavirus baby-boom (due to relationship sex) to some extent. There is evidence from the U.S. and China to show that a significant number of people had reduced sexual partners and sexual frequency in order to reduce the risks of infections during COVID-19. In such circumstances, sexual relationships over virtual media help to reduce frustration, loneliness, and stress, while at the same time nourishing emotional bonding in distanced relationships. Online sex, once considered to be tabooed and deviant form of sexuality, has now been recommended as a preventive measure in public health. To quote the International Society for the Study of Women’s Sexual Health (ISSWSH), “The new ‘really safe’ sex in many cases may require ‘e-sex’.” As mentioned before, cybersex also contains an appreciable amount of uncertainty and surprise, which adds to the eroticism. It allows anonymity and free experimentation of sexual fantasies. Queer sex parties, online fetish concerts, and LGBTQ+ related PRIDE festivals have been organized over social media. However, it has aptly been considered as a “double-edged sword.” Besides the cultural barriers in acceptance, technological mindedness and technical feasibility, as well as network access issues in rural areas, sex within cyberspace can never really replace social or affiliative touch. A virtual void cannot, perhaps, completely compensate for a tight hug, a warm embrace, an assuring cuddle, or a passionate kiss. The intention, rather, is not to compensate but to complement partnered sexual interactions at times of such crisis or when the couples are distant due to various reasons. The most important concern, however, is that cybersex needs a certain degree of skills and knowledge to be able to express sexual fantasies and desires through the audio-visual, text, and pictorial media. Also, the mutual visibility can be compromised by the logistic issues. Accessibility, anonymity, and affordability are often the factors regulating cybersex. The digital screen time has had an unprecedented rise during the pandemic. Unchecked, this can affect the students and younger population who are bound to spend most of their times in cyberspace. This can have the unintended effects of technology use, exposure to illegal aspects of digital sex (based on legal systems in various nations), pornography addiction, risks of online extortion, cyber-fraud, cyber-bullying, and cyber-security threats. Furthermore, it runs the risks of online stalking, revenge pornography, online sexual harassment, online grooming, online dating scams, and so on. Also, people who have a pre-existing history of unhealthy technology use can potentially have exacerbation of their problems during a continued practice of cybersex. What constitutes excessive or problematic cybersex is again a debatable area that has no clear consensus. Sharing features with addiction medicine, symptoms like excessive time consumption, loss of control, and significant adverse consequences of use have been related to cybersexual disorders. Though various users have reported sexual arousal, emotional satisfaction, stress reduction, and expression of hidden sexual fantasies as reasons for indulging in digital sex, studies have reported associations of cybersex with loss of interest in partnered sex, sexual dysfunctions, depression, anxiety, and high-risk sexual behaviors. A detailed review of conceptualization, assessment, and treatment of problematic cybersex is provided by Wéry and Billieux. Lived perceptions of cybervictims, technical coping strategies, cyberspace regulatory policies, and targeting at-risk groups like adolescents and students help in prevention of cybersexual crimes.

There is no easy solution! Like any other form of sexuality, sex education forms the anchor stone in healthy exploration of sexual fantasies, validation of mutual emotions and respect, as well as open communication and bonding. Informed consent of partners is of utmost importance, especially when it comes to recording online sexual interactions. Similarly, the use of pornography and online sexual practices needs to be regulated and researched to understand the differential effects and public reactions during the pandemic crisis. Besides cross-cultural and cross-country, research should focus on cultural effects on virtual sexuality and effects of cybersex on psychosexual health. Longitudinal mixed-method studies and exploring lived experiences related to partnered and solo sex are essential to formulate policies and guidelines that can be rooted within the participant perceptions. The pandemic may also provide us the chance of using online platforms for destigmatizing sexuality, busting the social myths related to sex, enable healthy discussion concerning psychosexual health, and facilitating sexual rights of the gender minorities. Long-distance relationships have the potential for a renewed importance, better bonding, and sustenance using virtual
media. Cybersex is a growing practice and has various tenets to its implementation. Whether this will lead to enduring change remains unknown. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic offers us a full advantage of the connectivity established by technology to extend the boundaries of love and sex, now and for the future.

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