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WASHINGTON (RNS)—After putting her daughter to bed, Maggie, 42, routinely sat at her computer for hours, mesmerized by an online world of erotic stories and real-time sexual discussions.

Beth, 33, usually clicked on the most visually graphic sites, disproving the theory that only men are enticed by pornography.

“A lot of people don't realize this happens with women too,” said Beth, who, along with Maggie, asked that their last names not be revealed.

The myth began long ago, perhaps because women rarely were seen walking into seedy adult bookstores or asking for plastic-wrapped magazines kept behind convenience store counters.

But in recent years, the accessibility, affordability and anonymity of the Internet has made pornography undeniably attractive to millions of women. While some women simply find it exciting, others have battled addictions.

Nearly one in three visitors to adult websites is a woman, according to

Nielsen/NetRatings, the industry standard for measuring online audiences. From a study of the Internet use of 40,000 panelists at home and work, Nielsen estimated 9.4 million women in the United States accessed such sites in September.

Julie Neff, 29, of Mukwonago, Wis., sees nothing but benefits. Internet pornography “is pretty much an adjunct to my regular sex life,” she said. She estimates she views it less than an hour a week, and is open about it with her boyfriend.

Others think it can lead to problems. There is some evidence Internet pornography is luring even women whose values oppose it. Some speculate a forbidden-fruit factor can make it tantalizing for religious women in particular.

The editors of Today's Christian Woman, an evangelical magazine, had heard anecdotes of churchgoing women getting hooked on pornography, so they conducted a survey asking readers of their online newsletter if they had intentionally visited porn sites. Thirty-four percent said they had.

“Apparently online sex addiction isn't just a male problem anymore,” the magazine's editors wrote in the October issue, which suggested Internet filters and other pornography-avoiding tips.

While the frequency of female pornography “addiction” is difficult to measure, psychologists agree that some women, as well as men, do engage in destructively compulsive behavior fueled by the Internet.

Maggie said she began exploring pornography to try to understand what it was that captivated her ex-husband. Soon, she was spending up to 30 hours a week surfing the Internet for arousal.

She realized she had a serious problem when she couldn't wait for her daughter to go to sleep so she could get on the computer. “The light went

on that I preferred porn to spending time with my child.”

Marnie Ferree, a Nashville, Tenn., marriage and family therapist, calls Internet pornography “the crack cocaine” of sexual addiction.

“On the Internet, I can be whoever I want to be. I can look however I want to look. It's a totally false environment that's about objectification and deception, and that's not going to be satisfying in the long term,” said Ferree, author of “No Stones: Women Redeemed From Sexual Shame.”

The interactivity of the Internet makes it especially appealing to some women, said Al Cooper, a staff psychologist at Stanford University and the author of “Sex and the Internet: A Guidebook for Clinicians.”

“We see women all the time who may not feel that attractive, but they get 20 guys going after them at a time in a chat room, e-mailing them instantly. That's affirming to a woman, and it's hard to match when your husband is in the next room drinking a beer, maybe asking you if you're going to exercise next week” because he thinks you're overweight, Cooper said.

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