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Cyberaffairs

A new area for psychological research

Now that Nora Ephron's film You've got Mail has seeped into public consciousness, online relationships appear to becoming a more socially acceptable activity. Why are cyberaffairs growing in popularity, and what are their advantages and drawbacks?

Probably one of the most unexpected uses surrounding the growth of the Internet concerns the development of online relationships. It is hard to estimate how many online relationships there are, but in the UK one newspaper reported that there had been over 1000 weddings as a result of Internet meetings. Cyberspace is becoming another 'singles bar' as there are now numerous sites aimed at those who want romance or a sexual liaison. Some of these are aimed at single people (e.g. *Widows, Thirtysomething UK,*) while others appear to encourage and facilitate virtual adultery (e.g., *MarriedM4Affair, Cheating Wife* or *Lonely Husband*).

Young et al. (2000) define an online relationship (a 'cyberaffair') as a romantic or sexual relationship that is initiated via online contact and maintained predominantly through electronic conversations by e-mail and in virtual communities such as chat rooms, interactive games or news-

Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan in the film You've got Mail.

Signposts

This article is directly relevant to attraction and the development of relationships, especially in the AQA (A) 'Relationships' section (A2). It will bring you right up to date in this field, but is not a substitute for all the areas outlined in this part of the specification.

groups. Young and her colleagues claim that what starts off as a simple e-mail exchange or an innocent chat-room encounter can escalate into an intense and passionate cyberaffair and eventually into face-to-face sexual encounters. Further to this, those in online relationships often turn to mutual erotic dialogue (often referred to as 'cybersex'). In this instance, cybersex involves online users swapping text-based sexual fantasies with each other. These text-based interactions may be accompanied by masturbation. Online chat rooms provide opportunities for online social gatherings to occur almost at the push of a button without even having to move from your desk. Online group participants can, if they so desire, develop one-to-one conversations at a later point either by continuous e-mails or by instant messages from chat rooms. It could perhaps be argued that electronic communication is the easiest, most disinhibiting and most accessible way to meet potential new partners.

How and why

There are a number of factors that make online contacts potentially seductive or addictive. Such factors include the disinhibiting and anonymous nature of the Internet. Furthermore, given the global nature of the Internet, online relationships can have the added excitement of being culturally diverse. Disinhibition is clearly one of the Internet's key appeals. Users appear to open up more quickly online and reveal themselves emotionally much faster than in the offline world. What might take months or years in an offline relationship may only take days or weeks online. As some have pointed out (Cooper and Sportolari 1997) the perception of trust, intimacy and acceptance has the potential to encourage online users to see these relationships as a primary source of companionship and comfort.

Some researchers have attempted to explain how and why infidelity occurs online. Cooper (1998) proposed the **Triple A Engine** (**access**, **affordability** and **anonymity**) which he claimed helps to understand the power and attraction of the Internet for sexual pursuits. Young (1999) also claimed to have developed a variant of the Triple A Engine which she called the **ACE Model** (**anonymity**, **convenience**, **escape**). Neither of these are strictly models as they do not explain the process of how online relationships develop. They do, however, provide in acronym form the main variables that account for acquisition and maintenance of online relationships.

In order to understand the increased incidence of sex and infidelity online, Young claims her ACE Model explains how cyberspace creates a cultural climate of permissiveness that actually serves to encourage

and validate sexually adulterous and promiscuous online behaviour (Young 1999). The variables that can lead to virtual adultery outlined by Young and Cooper (i.e. anonymity, access, convenience, affordability and escape) do appear to provide the explanatory building blocks for the development of emotional or sexual relationships on the Internet. These are briefly looked at in turn as are other factors such as social acceptability and long working hours. It would also appear that virtual environments have the potential to provide short-term comfort, excitement or distraction.

Access

The Internet can be accessed easily from the home or the workplace. Given that prevalence of behaviours is strongly correlated with increased access to the activity, it is not surprising that the development of regular online use is increasing across the population. Increased accessibility may also lead to increased problems. Research into other socially acceptable but potentially addictive behaviours (e.g. drinking alcohol, gambling) has demonstrated that increased accessibility leads to increased uptake (i.e. regular use) and that this eventually leads to an increase in problems although the increase may not be proportional.

Affordability

It is now becoming cheaper and cheaper to use the online services on offer on the Internet. Although excessive use will still lead to large monthly bills, for most people the cost compared to either a telephone call or postage will be cheap to moderate.

Anonymity

The anonymity of the Internet allows users to privately engage in erotic text-based exchanges without the fear of being caught by a partner. This anonymity may also provide the user with a greater sense of perceived control over the content, tone and nature of the online experience. The anonymity of the Internet often facilitates more honest and open communication with other users (Cooper and Sportolari 1997). Anonymity may also increase feelings of comfort as it is not possible to detect signs of insincerity, disapproval or judgment in facial expression, as would be typical in face-to-face interactions (Young et al. 2000).

Convenience

Interactive online applications such as e-mail, chat rooms, newsgroups, or role-playing games provide convenient media in which to meet others. Online sexual behaviours will usually occur in the familiar and comfortable environment of home or workplace thus reducing the feeling of risk and allowing even more adventurous behaviours which may be potentially addictive.

Escape

For some, the primary reinforcement to engage in an online affair or cybersex is the sexual gratification they experience online. However, the experience of an online relationship itself, may be reinforced through a subjectively or objectively experienced 'high'. The pursuit of mood-modifying experiences is characteristic of addictions. The mood-modifying experience has the potential to provide an emotional or mental escape and further serves to reinforce the behaviour. Excessive involvement in this escapist activity may lead to addiction (Griffiths 1998). While sexual fulfilment may provide either the initial or subsequent reinforcement, the more potent reinforcement is the ability to cultivate a subjective fantasy world. Online romantic or sexual behaviour can provide a potent escape from the stresses and strains of real life. These activities fall on what Cooper et al. (1999) describe as a continuum from life-enhancing to pathological and addictive.

Social acceptability

To some extent, online relationships (like the personal advertisements that are found in both local and national newspapers) can lead to many meetings and introductions. What is really interesting is how the perception of these types of activity has changed over the years. It was not long ago that personal advertisements and dating agencies were accused of preying on social inadequacy and emotional vulnerability. It is now accepted that there are many reasons why people are not in relationships. There are high-powered individuals who are career-minded and have little leisure time, others who have exhausted their social networks, and those who feel uneasy making contact with a stranger. As children are exposed to technology at an early age and become used to socialising using computers as tools, social acceptance is likely to increase in the future.

Long working hours

In the UK, people are working long hours and can have social relationships from the desktop. For these people the Internet is ideal. Dating via your desktop may be a sensible option for the workaholic professionals of today. It is effectively a whole new electronic 'singles bar' which, because of its text-based nature, breaks down physical prejudices. For others, Internet interaction takes away the social isolation that we can all sometimes feel. There are no boundaries of geography, class or nationality. It opens up a
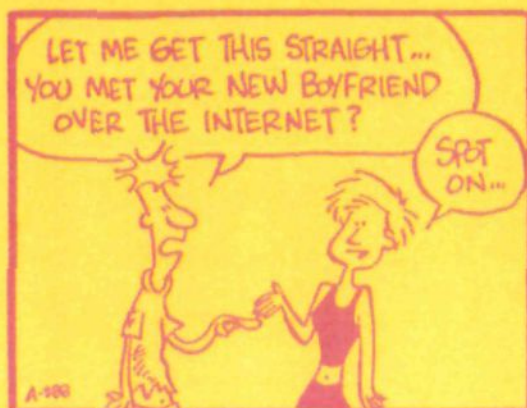
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whole new sphere of relationship-forming. As mentioned previously, the whole process is also disinhibiting. For those in online relationships, they are not usually an abnormal or online addiction — just a different way of living and interacting.

Types

A number of researchers have forwarded typologies of the different kinds of Internet users in relation to sexual or relationship activity. Cooper et al. (1999) suggest there are three types of cybersexual user (recreational, at risk and compulsive) but this tells us about little except frequency of use. However, Griffiths (1999) has outlined three basic types of online relationship in relation to actual online behaviour. The first is purely virtual and involves two people who never actually meet. They engage in an online relationship which goes further than being pen-pals as the exchanges are usually very sexually explicit. Neither person wants to meet the other and they are engaged in the interaction purely for sexual kicks. It is not uncommon for these individuals to swap gender roles. The 'relationships' may be very short-lived and the people involved will usually have real-life partners. These people prefer the distance, relative anonymity and control offered by the Internet and will prefer to confine the relationship to cyberspace. As far as these people are concerned, they are not being unfaithful.

The second type of relationship is where people meet online but eventually want the relationship to move from the virtual to the actual after becoming emotionally intimate with each other online. The shared emotional intimacy often leads to cybersex or a strong desire to communicate constantly with each other on the Internet. For many, the online relationship will progress, after sending photographs of each other, into secret phone calls, letters and offline meetings. Once they have met up, and if they are geographically near each other, their Internet use will usually decrease considerably as they will spend far more time actually (rather than virtually) with each other.

The third type of relationship is where two people first meet offline but then maintain their relationship almost entirely online. This is usually because they are geographically distant and may even be living in separate countries. These people only meet up a few times a year but may spend vast amounts of time 'talking' to their partners on the Internet most nights. As they are

geographically distant, the relationship only continues for those who have the time, the budget and the travel opportunity to maintain the nominal physical contact. There are however possible downsides. For instance, there is anecdotal evidence that love over the Internet may lead to financial problems. One couple reported spending £7000 on their Internet relationship — their longest single conversation online was 17 hours and cost them £330 (Barry 1996). They would spend an average of 7 hours a day typing to each other over the Internet and the man in the partnership went bankrupt.

More downsides

Online infidelity has accounted for a growing number of divorce cases according to the President of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. This is backed up by Young (1998) who claims that cyberaffairs exacerbate relational problems. They almost always adversely impact ongoing, long-term face-to-face relationships, cause marital discord, separation, and can even contribute to divorce.

Although many people who have not engaged in an online relationship fail to understand the pull and attraction of such an activity, it quite clearly can have detrimental consequences for some people who do. Online relationships can lead to normally loving and compassionate individuals becoming uncaring towards their partners or families. They may become evasive and start demanding privacy online. In an effort to help both couples and therapists, Young et al. (2000) produced a list of early warning signs in the detection of a suspected online relationship. These include:

(1) change in sleep patterns
(2) demands for privacy
(3) ignoring other responsibilities
(4) evidence of lying
(5) personality changes
(6) loss of interest in sex
(7) declining investment in the relationship.

There are many reported case studies of excessive Internet users engaged in online relationships. However, these are not deemed to be addicted to the Internet. Excessive usage in these cases is purely symptomatic with the Internet being used to counteract other deficiencies in their lives (e.g. lack of human contact, physical appearance, disability, coping etc.). However, it is interesting that most case studies cited in the academic literature used the computer excessively for social contact. As these cases show, text-based relation-

ships can obviously be rewarding for some people. In some circumstances, online relationships could be deemed to be psychologically healthy because they break down prejudices. They are intimate relationships which are not based on people's physical appearance. ∎

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Key concepts

- Cyberaffair
- Chatroom
- Cybersex
- Triple A Engine
- ACE Model
- Disinhibition
- Virtual relationship