Netiquette within married couples: Agreement about acceptable online behavior and surveillance between partners

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ABSTRACT

The internet has become an integral part of many people's everyday lives. It is unclear what its role is in maintaining intimate offline relationships and whether the use of the internet might cause conflicts between partners about what constitutes acceptable online behavior. An online survey of 920 married couples in the UK who used the internet investigated whether partners have similar netiquettes. There were high levels of agreement between married partners about the unacceptability of online infidelities; similarly they agreed more than two random individuals about the acceptability of entertainment activities which, in excess, might be addictive. Partners further showed high correspondence in surveillance behavior. Women were more concerned about their own and their partner's behavior and were more likely to monitor their partner's online activities. These findings suggest that a netiquette is developed and consciously or subconsciously negotiated within intimate relationships. Nevertheless, traditional gender differences as regards risk perception still hold; women are more likely to problematies their own and their partners behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the beginnings of the internet researchers have questioned its utility in developing and maintaining psychological healthy friendships, romantic relationships and sexual relations. Early researchers were fairly sceptical about the benefits of online relationships (Kraut et al., 1998; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Those who subscribed to the 'cues-filtered out perspective', for instance argued that due to fewer non-verbal and paralinguistic cues, there is diminished feeling of social presence. That is, an individual's self-perception is reduced and deindividuation is encouraged. In the absence of typical social context cues, such theorists contended that communication can become increasingly uninhibited and aggressive (e.g., as evident in flaming). However, despite all the early negativity researchers across the globe have found ample evidence that people do make friends and initiate romantic relationships in cyberspace and often these relationships progress offline (Dutton & Helsper, 2007; Whitty, 2008). While we are left in little doubt that people can and do form relationships online, we know little about which role the internet plays in intimate offline relationships (Tong & Walther, in press). Obviously, this is important

given that the internet has become another mode of communication in many people's everyday lives. The widespread integration of ICTs into interactions with others could mean that partners have started to establish (unspoken) rules of conduct or etiquettes about online behavior. We label these rules about what is acceptable and not acceptable *online netiquette*.

This study was interested to learn more about how married couples perceive the use of the internet within their relationships. We wanted to learn more about couple's expectations of each others' online activities and if some online activities were seen as taboo. There is very little known about how partners evaluate online activities and whether this has become something that is part of marital conduct and evaluation. Furthermore, we were interested in how couples use the internet to monitor each others' online activities. These aspects are important in light of an increase in online counseling and matchmaking services as well as an increased awareness of excessive internet use and the impact this has on people's lives and interactions with others. This study will further our understanding about whether internet use has become an important area of negotiation and defining intimate relationships.

1.1. Married couples' use of the internet

There is a dearth of research on married couples' use of the internet, especially with regards to their use of it to develop and

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maintain their relationships. We know even less about couple's expectations of each other's internet usage.

Sipior, Ward, and Marzec (2002) reported that in the US married couples with children aged 17 or younger use the internet the most. Likewise, in the UK adults with children in the household have greater interest, awareness and skills in relation to technologies including the internet (Dutton & Helsper, 2007; Ofcom, 2006). This is likely due to a filter down process whereby ICT savvy children who use the internet motivate their parents to do the same or because parents acquire ICTs because their children need them for school and end up using them themselves (VanRompaey, Roe, & Struys, 2002). Most of the studies which interview married individuals therefore discuss how the internet is used to manage relationships between parents and children (Gross, 2004; Livingstone & Bober, 2004) but do not address how parents use the internet within their adult relationships.

There is evidence that people develop and maintain intimate relationships with others through the use of the internet. For example, Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2003) found that 14% of 1501 10–17 year olds reported close online friendships and 2% claimed to have established online romances. Whitty and Gavin (2001) found that individuals form friendships in chat rooms and perhaps more interestingly that some of these participants preferred that they remain online (see also Whitty & Carr, 2006a). Helsper, Dutton, and Whitty (2008) report that in the UK 6% of married internet users have met their partner online. The most likely meeting places for these couples were online dating sites (32%), instant messaging (20%) and chat rooms (17%).

1.2. Married couples in the offline world

There is extensive psychological research on the characteristics of married couples in the offline world. Contrary to the popular belief that opposites attract, most research finds that in general it is those who are similar that form long-lasting romantic relationships (Condon & Crano, 1988; Sprecher, 1998). The similarity between partners is not due to assimilation between the partners over the duration of the marriage but to 'selective mating' or 'assortative selection' at the meeting stage (Feng & Baker, 1994; Galbaud du Fort, Kovess, & Boivin, 1994; Price & Vandenberg, 1980). That is, these similarities already exist at the very beginning of the relationship instead of developing over the course of the relationship. In establishing a romantic relationship, similarity of interests, attitudes and values are seen as more important attributes than similarity in socio-demographic characteristics (Sprecher, 1998). This similarity does not restrict itself solely to attitudes and values, as behavioral patterns also often coincide. The literature on addiction has shown that people who abuse substances or report addictive behaviors are more likely than others to have a long term relationship with someone who has the same type of problematic behavior (Grant et al., 2007; Homish, Leonard, & Cornelius, 2007; Ladd & Petry, 2002; McLeod, 1993a; Olmsted, Crowell, & Waters, 2003; Schuckit, Smith, Eng, & Kunovac, 2002; Shaw, Forbush, Schlinder, Rosenman, & Black, 2007). Homish and Leonard (2005) showed, for example, that similarity between partners in the level of alcohol consumption was related to greater marital happiness, particularly in young couples.

When evaluating a partner's behavior or values an individual often sees their partner as more similar to themselves than they actually are. This projection heuristic leads to '. . .a strong tendency for spouses to use their own feelings as a reference for predicting their partner's feelings' (p.1, Sillars, Pike, Jones & Murphy, 1984; see also Ruvolo & Fabin, 1999). Since projection leads to a greater perceived similarity between the partners and greater similarity is related to marital happiness, projection can strengthen a relationship. Studies have found a positive relationship between marital

adjustment and accurately understanding the attitudes, views and expectations of one's partner (Ickes, Dugosh, Simpson, & Wilson, 2003). However, seeking out information about one's partner is not always good for a relationship. Ickes et al. (2003) found that dating partners who are highly motivated to acquire relationship-threatening information are more likely to break up. Afifi, Dillow, and Morse (2004) found similar results but suggest that these results are "affected by the communication directness with which that motivation is enacted" (p. 445).

Previous research thus suggests that partners within a marriage are likely to have the same values and behavioral patterns (McLeod, 1993a, 1993b). We thus could expect partners within married couples will have similar ideas about what types of online behavior are acceptable, what type of internet user their partner is and what the norms are for monitoring behavior.

1.3. Gender differences and online activity

Based on existing research about offline relationships it is clear that partners within married couples show high levels of similarity in their values and attitudes and it would be logical to extend this argument to online behaviors and attitudes about the internet. Notwithstanding these high levels of similarity, married couples are made up of two individuals and the individual characteristics of the partners will likely lead to different approaches to the internet. Thus while partners in married couples are likely to be more similar to each other than they are to people outside their relationship, differences within this unit will exist. One characteristic that distinguishes partners within a marriage is gender and the literature does suggest that men and women use the internet differently (Jackson, Ervin, Gardner, & Schmitt, 2001; Selwyn, 2007; Tsai & Lin, 2004; Warner & Procaccino, 2007). The biggest differences can be found in breadth of use, with women showing a narrower use of the internet than men (Ono & Zavodny, 2003; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005). Moreover, research has found that women are more likely to have lower computer self-efficacy and less positive internet attitudes (Durndell & Haag, 2002; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; Imhof, Vollmeyer, & Beierlein, 2007). This corresponds to lower confidence levels of women in other technical and hard science related areas (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Lucey, Melody, & Walkerdine, 2003). The lower confidence levels that women report has been shown to be largely independent from their actual skill level and to be instead related to perceptions of what men and women are supposed to be good at or what they are supposed to like doing (Busch, 1995; Durndell & Haag, 2002; Selwyn, 2007).

Most activities that have been associated with internet addiction (i.e., gambling, gaming and pornography), are undertaken more frequently by men than women. Livingstone and Helsper (2007) surveyed 1511 children and their parents and found that young men tended to take more contact and content risks online and used the internet more often for purposes, such as pornography, gaming and gambling. Other studies regarding online transactions show that men are less concerned about online risks. Garbarino and Strahilevitz (2004) found that women estimated privacy and economic risks in online transactions to be more likely than men. This corresponds to offline behavior in which men have been found to be greater risk takers and less worried about the social consequences of this behavior (Traeen, Nilsen, & Stigum, 2006). Women have repeatedly been shown to have higher levels of worry and concern than men in a wide range of circumstances (Lewinsohn, Gotlib, Lewinsohn, Seeley, & Allen, 1998; McCann, Stewin, & Short, 1991; Robichaud, Dugas, & Conway, 2003; Stavosky & Borkovec, 1988). Notwithstanding these differences in risk taking and worry offline, research by Dutton and Sheppard (2006) showed that women did not differ from men in their perception of the online risks related to privacy. The Dutton and Sheppard (2006) study