

Online infidelity in Internet chat rooms: an ethnographic exploration

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Abstract

Internet chat rooms have introduced unprecedented dynamics into marital relationships: never in history has it been so easy to enjoy both the stability of marriage and the thrills of the dating scene at the same time. This study examined the phenomenon of online infidelity in chat rooms, a process whereby individuals involved in a long-term committed relationship seek computer synchronous, interactive contact with opposite-sex members. The following factors were investigated: (a) what elements and dynamics online infidelity involves and how it happens; (b) what leads individuals specifically to the computer to search for a relationship “on the side”; (c) whether individuals consider online contacts as infidelity and why or why not; and (e) what dynamics chat room users experience in their marriages.

The results revealed three theoretical constructs that represent married individuals’ chat room experiences. The first construct, Anonymous Sexual Interactionism, refers to these individuals’ predilection for anonymous interactions of a sexual nature in chat rooms. The allure of anonymity gains extra importance for married individuals, who can enjoy relative safety to express fantasies and desires without being known or exposed. The second, Behavioral Rationalization, denotes the reasoning that chat room users present for conceiving their online behaviors’ as innocent and harmless (despite the secrecy and highly sexual nature). The third, Effortless Avoidance, involves chat room users’ avoidance of psychological discomfort by exchanging sexual messages with strangers. Happily married individuals also join such rooms, a trend that is also discussed. Together, these constructs symbolize chat room dynamics and serve as a foundation upon which further studies can build.

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1. Introduction

Internet population around the world has grown exceptionally fast in less than a decade, rising from 16 million users in 1995 to approximately 680 million in late 2003 (Global Internet Statistics, 2003). Millions of such users are married individuals who use the Internet to meet strangers, flirt, and many times engage in highly sexualized conversations. In fact, Internet chat rooms have introduced unprecedented dynamics into marital relationships: never before has it been so easy to enjoy both the stability of marriage and the thrills of the dating scene at the same time. This phenomenon has become commonplace (Adamse & Motta, 2000; Gwinnell, 1998; Maheu & Subotnik, 2001; Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000); at any time of the day or night, married individuals can be found in all types of chat rooms, ranging from apparently “innocent” ones (e.g., those grouped by age or location) to those geared specifically for married people (e.g., Yahoo's *Married And Flirting*; MSN's *Married But Flirting* chat rooms).¹ If individuals possess a camera, they can see and/or be seen by their virtual partners; in many chat rooms, the viewing is live, in real time, while the conversation is taking place.

Other actions such as viewing Internet pornography conceivably may be categorized as “online infidelity” by some researchers (e.g., Maheu & Subotnik, 2001), but the present study focuses exclusively on chat rooms. The emphasis is on the process whereby individuals already involved in a committed relationship seek to be involved in computer *synchronous, interactive* contacts with opposite-sex members. Such contacts may be restricted to the computer only (i.e., a cyber-affair); alternatively, they may blossom into a real-life affair (a cyber-affair is defined as any chat room contact that the individual feels must be kept hidden from the spouse due to its sexual and/or emotional nature). This study is limited to heterosexual relationships only.

There is much popular debate about whether or not chat room contacts should be classified as “infidelity.” The present work defines it as such based on three factors. First, in Western culture (the background of this study), marriage is grounded within a powerful moral/cultural code where sexual – as well as emotional – exclusivity is steadily expected, if not required. This expectation or requirement is powerfully endorsed by public opinion; the cultural institution of marriage presupposes monogamy, faithfulness in actions and in spirit, and unequivocal honesty with one's spouse. Thus, flirting and/or becoming sexual with potentially compatible strangers while married is usually considered unacceptable within the boundaries of the moral, ethical, cultural, political, and religious codes governing the institution of marriage (there are exceptions: for example, some religious leaders consider online flirting as acceptable for married individuals – see Russell, 2003). Second, online infidelity typically occurs in secrecy, outside the primary spouse's awareness. Even if the extramarital contact remains exclusively restricted to the computer (i.e., virtual partners never meet in person), it remains hidden in the overwhelming majority of cases. Thus, not only do online behaviors carry a “forbidden” quality; they also require lying to the

¹ This does not happen in *all* chat rooms; for example, some chat rooms are dedicated exclusively to the discussion of religion, and the participants in these rooms can discuss topics without sexual tension (although even in these rooms there is the potential to experience psychological intimacy if a virtual conversation partner is perceived as compatible). Many, if not most, chat rooms, however, no matter what the topic, present a marked sexually charged environment.

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