

Chapter 73

Online Intimacy Problems

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ABSTRACT

Online intimacy problems are broadly defined as interpersonal issues occurring when: (1) computer-mediated communication interferes with online relationships, or (2) Internet usage patterns/practices interfere with offline relationships. In general, online intimacy problems include cybersex (Cooper, 2002), online infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008; Whitty, 2005), social networking and one's social life (Bargh & McKenna, 2004), and online gaming (Scott, Mottarella, & Lavooy, 2006). Further, Internet use may create intimacy problems related to sharing of intimate information with someone other than one's partner; misinterpretation of messages, feelings of being smothered, isolation, etc. The entry reviews the current literature on online intimacy problems as well as vulnerabilities that contribute to those problems. The authors also present ideas for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The progression of online technologies has shifted how we conceptualize intimacy. While a good body of literature suggests that participation in online activity might enhance a couple's levels of intimacy (e.g., Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Henline & Harris, 2006; Hertlein, 2008; Hertlein & Hawkins, in press), other information suggests that participation in online activities may compromise intimacy. The purpose of this entry is to highlight the current knowledge base related to online intimacy problems.

DEFINING ONLINE INTIMACY PROBLEMS

Online intimacy problems are broadly defined as interpersonal issues occurring when computer-mediated communication interferes with online relationships or offline relationships. Embedded within this definition are three key concepts: online, intimacy, and problems. The online component generally refers to one of two circumstances: either someone participating in online activities to the exclusion of their primary offline relationship, or someone's engagement with another

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0315-8.ch073

person online. For example, Hertlein and Piercy (2008) found that couples therapists who were interviewed regarding their treatment of Internet infidelity cited the presence of an identifiable third person online as problematic to offline relationships.

The meaning of intimacy is also critical to understanding how online intimacy problems are defined. Intimacy is described as an ongoing process in interpersonal relationships (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). In general, highly intimate relationships refer to those where a high degree of closeness is present as well as a stance of openness and vulnerability with one another (Moss & Schwebel, 1993). As a result of their summary of the literature on the definitions of intimacy, Moss and Schwebel (1993) define intimacy as being:

Determined by the level of commitment and positive affective, cognitive, and physical closeness one experienced with a partner in a reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) relationship. (p. 33).

Timmerman (1991) added that intimacy includes a relationship in which reciprocal feelings and trust are present in the relationship. Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, and Pietromonaco (1998) found that intimacy is made up of self-disclosure and partner disclosure, which are mediated by perceived partner responsiveness. Specifically, emotional self-disclosure contributes more to intimacy development than factual self-disclosure (Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998).

Intimacy developed with another person online is developed much in the same way as in an offline relationship: in both cases, the roles of self-disclosure is key to the development and maintenance of the relationship (Bargh et al, 2002; Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008). The way in which self-disclosure proceeds in computer-mediated relationships, however, differs in some ways from face-to-face relationship development. Tidwell and Walther (2000) found that people who develop relationships online do

not have opportunities to view potential partners within social or other observational contexts; in other words, they can evaluate their partner (or potential partner) rather unobtrusively. Those involved in computer-mediated relationships, however, do not have this opportunity and must rely instead on self-disclosure. This explains the findings discussed by Rabby and Walther (2002), which stated that people involved primarily in online relationships trade more self-disclosures than people in face-to-face relationships.

Therefore, in our view, intimacy refers to the level of emotional self-disclosure and the perception of the other partner's receptiveness to the information within a relationship. This broad definition accounts for both describing intimacy in relationships that are primarily maintained online (e.g., long distance relationships) as well as describing intimacy in offline relationships.

The final element of the definition is the aspect of a problem. Problematic Internet usage can mean a variety of things, from interpersonal issues (such as Internet infidelity) (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000; Schneider, 2002) to unethical or criminal behavior (such as cyberstalking). These problems involve both costs to the primary (and often offline) relationship (such as termination of the relationship) as cited by Barak and Fisher (2000) and Schneider (2002) or costs to the individual psyche, such as pronounced feelings of shame, guilt, and other complicated emotions (Cooper et al, 2000). When some of these powerful individual feelings are experienced, the partner participating in the online behavior might actually not be able to communicate the true nature of their online activities, further impairing intimacy. Our conceptualization of the problem is to consider whether the online behavior disrupts the intimacy in the primary couple's relationship, regardless of whether the primary relationship is facilitated offline or facilitated online.

In sum, our definition of online intimacy problems is any disruption to a couple's intimacy (defined as levels of emotional self-disclosure and

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