



Online infidelity in Internet chat rooms: an ethnographic exploration

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Available online 13 April 2004

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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Keywords: Cyber-relationships; Online relationships; Internet; Chat rooms; Sexual attraction; Interpersonal interactions

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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.

partner and omitting the truth. Partners channel sexual and/or emotional energy outwards and keep this part of themselves and their lives outside the spouse's cognizance by sneaking around and searching for opportunities to have a lively or "hot" chat. (In cases where chat room activities are not hidden from one's spouse, this definition does not apply.) The categorization as "infidelity" is also grounded in the fact that most spouses feel as – or nearly as – betrayed, angry, and hurt by online infidelity as they would if skin-to-skin adultery had taken place (Maheu & Subotnik, 2001; Schneider, 2002). In other words, the consequential nature of chat room liaisons and the breach of trust it can create substantiate their classification as infidelity.

It has been reported that one-third of divorce litigation is due to online affairs (Infidelity check, 2002), a trend that will conceivably grow as Internet usage becomes more and more widespread. However, the present study makes no causal links between online infidelity and marital breakdown. It was not designed to establish causation or any correlation between these factors; rather, the design focused exclusively on revealing participants' activities online and their perceptions about them, as indicated in the research questions below.

The research questions in the present study were: (a) What elements and dynamics does online infidelity involve and how does it happen? (b) What leads married individuals specifically to the computer to search for a relationship "on the side"? (c) Do married individuals consider their online contacts as infidelity? Why or why not? and (e) What dynamics do chat room users experience in their marriages? These questions were analyzed within a qualitative methodology framework because research on the specific topic of online infidelity in chat rooms is still scarce (such methodology is best suited for exploratory studies such as this one – Creswell, 1994). Studies have addressed the nature of chat room communication (e.g., Rollman, Krug, & Parente, 2000); the development of online relationships (e.g., McCown, Fischer, Page, & Homant, 2001; Whitty, 2002; Whitty & Gavin, 2001); and sexuality in cyberspace (e.g., Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Schnarch, 1997), among others. Yet, online infidelity in chat rooms remains an under-explored topic within the body of Internet-based research: there are few studies available (see review of literature below) and there is a glaring absence of academic, data-driven, in-depth explorations. Unfaithfulness that does not require physical contact, cybersex, and cyber-emotional contact are still relatively novel concepts: for example, despite a decade of exploration, there is no "official" definition of cybersex. Definitions vary widely from researcher to researcher and among the general public as well. The same is valid for online infidelity, which can be considered as any type of computer-mediated sexual activity (e.g., Internet pornography, chat rooms, and so forth) in which a married person engages. This overlooks basic distinctions such as the nature of chat room contacts, which are live and interactive – thus contrasting with the viewing of pornographic pictures, which does not necessarily have an interactive component. Add to that those chat rooms in which it is possible to see one's virtual partner live (via camera) or any website where sexual acts can be viewed and the blurring of definitions becomes more intense.

The results of this study revealed three theoretical constructs that represent the experiences of married chat room users: (a) Anonymous Sexual Interactionism, (b) Behavioral Rationalization, and (c) Effortless Avoidance. Each construct is explained below and is thoroughly illustrated with data collected from in-depth interviews with research participants.

1.1. Background literature

Young and others (2000) proposed a framework to clarify the underlying magnetism of the online world as it fosters infidelity and to outline treatment strategies for counselors working with couples affected by this issue (Young et al., 2000). This framework is the ACE model (Anonymity, Convenience, Escape), which was first developed in a related research endeavor to explain cybersexual addiction (see Young, 1999a, 1999b, 2001). The model is, in fact, a variation of Cooper's (1998) Triple-A Engine (Access, Affordability, Anonymity), which was proposed to help understand the power and attraction of the Internet for sexual pursuits. The model is presented quite briefly: it consists of a two-paragraph definition of each of its three elements. The ACE model apparently is not grounded in data; the authors propose and discuss it, but data collection and analysis are not evident. At the end, treatment strategies are outlined briefly, ranging from detection of affairs (e.g., early warning signs) to suggestions for improving communication and rebuilding trust.

Merkle and Richardson (2000) dedicate a portion of their digital dating article to infidelity, stating that what *actions* specifically constitute infidelity within computer-mediated relationships have not been identified by research. They contend that research is needed to determine how individuals in computer-mediated relationships define the boundaries of betrayal. However, these boundaries may vary greatly for each individual and each couple; what one partner may perceive as "harmless fun," the other may perceive as betrayal.

Some recent books have approached the topic of online infidelity with a self-help outlook, offering guidelines for coping with and recovering from betrayal (Adamse & Motta, 1996, 2000; Gwinnell, 1998; Maheu & Subotnik, 2001). Of these, the work of Maheu and Subotnik stands out as the most complete to date. It discusses the power of virtual attraction as an element that relieves individuals from social and emotional loneliness; argues that real betrayal stems from virtual-only contacts; and puts forth a typology of virtual lovers (e.g., *The Seeker*, *The Explorer*, *The Romantic*, *The Escapist*.) It also presents a self-help perspective when advancing a discussion of the signs of an online affair as well as suggestions on how to recover from betrayal. The work is based on: (a) case examples taken from an essay contest conducted on the first author's self-help website and (b) fictional stories based on the authors' clinical experience.

The works of Adamse and Motta (1996, 2000) and Gwinnell (1998) offer more of this self-help angle, presenting discussions of cyber-relationships, warning signs, and even guidelines to select a "good" partner on the Internet when one is single. Gwinnell's work is based only on e-mail vignettes composed by the author (who states that all the examples have been invented), which adds to the need for research based on actual data.

As seen in this review, virtually no solid, empirical studies have examined the culture of online chat and the ways in which it so powerfully promotes infidelity for persons involved in committed relationships.² Within this context, the aim of the present work is to offer an initial exploration of this particular domain based on direct chat room participants' input.

² There is a fair amount of literature on cybersex *addiction* (e.g., Cooper, 2001; Schneider & Weiss, 2001; Young, 1999a, 1999b), which does not pertain to the present exploration. The present study concerns only recreational use of the Internet. According to Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2001), the overwhelming majority of Internet users typically engages in recreational online pursuits only and does not develop what is known as an "addiction." One percent of their sample was classified as "cybersex compulsives," a group of individuals whose online sexual activities were clearly problematic and greatly affected their lives.

2. Methods

Eighty-six married participants, of which 76 were male and 10 were female, took part in open-ended, in-depth interviews conducted by the author. Females are under-represented in the sample because this author had enormous difficulty in recruiting women. Reasons for that remain unclear, yet they may be related to the researcher's sex within the highly sexualized chat room environment (being female and having identified herself as such, the researcher drew mostly male participants). Another possibility was suggested by a 36-year-old male participant who stated that "women do kind of rule the rooms due to the number of men seeking them. They get whispered [contacted] to death, so they don't need to be bothered. . . . Guys are seeking the interaction that they dismiss. . . hence I'm talking with you." Participants were recruited by the author in several chat rooms; after an informed consent procedure, the author proceeded to interview each of them. The data were collected in *Yahoo* and *MSN* chat rooms grouped by age, location (several states and major cities in the US were selected), and on *Yahoo's Married And Flirting* and *MSN's Married But Flirting* chat rooms.

The average age was 42 years old. The oldest participant was 66 years old and the youngest was 25. All were married, except for one female who was in a long-term committed relationship. Seventy percent of the sample was online searching for and engaging in online-only liaisons, while the remaining 30% had met one or more chat partners in person and had had actual affairs (with two exceptions, where a meeting occurred but did not proceed to sexual contact). No formal distinction was made between these two groups because all were online, and the focus of the study was their activities at the computer.

The qualitative methodology of ethnography was employed in the form of in-depth interviews with all participants. Each interview lasted a minimum of one hour and a maximum of three hours. Participants represented a variety of social strata: the sample is composed of stay-at-home mothers, construction workers, legal employees, engineers, nurses, and presidents of large corporations, to name a few. This suggests that Internet chat rooms lure individuals from all walks of life, which renders the cultural scene of cyberspace rich and complex. However, this information was not used in data analysis; no relation between social class and chat room activity was established (the study was not designed as such). Further research might investigate whether social class is related to differences in chat room usage (this was not apparent in the present study, but it is a possibility worth exploring).

3. Results

The results of this qualitative exploration were three cultural constructs derived from the data collected. They are: Anonymous Sexual Interactionism, Behavioral Rationalization, and Effortless Avoidance. Combined, these constructs represent married individuals' experiences in chat rooms and their perceptions of those experiences. Each construct will be explained and illustrated with data below.

3.1. Anonymous Sexual Interactionism

The construct Anonymous Sexual Interactionism (ASI) represents the essence of the activities in which married individuals engage when they visit chat rooms. In other words,

concepts that are crucial for understanding online infidelity are the anonymous and interactive expressions of sexuality that occur within these virtual spaces. A sense of interactional togetherness is felt as individuals enter a virtual room and co-create communicative interchanges with others. Active participation in the room requires wit and mental resourcefulness within a constant give-and-take exchange between individuals. One could argue that these dynamics are the same for both married and single individuals. However, they take on a new flavor within the context of marriage: interacting with strangers, individuals “join the dating scene” while holding on to their family lives.

In addition, anonymity is particularly helpful for a married individual, who can remain unknown and unexposed while exchanging steamy content in chat rooms. When asked why he joins these rooms (as opposed to engaging in other activities), one participant replied:

Well, I think it's the complete freedom to explore and yet be safe – that is what gets me. I am married and never never cheat. Yet this is an outlet to be younger and have fun, like reading a book or watching a porn movie. I truly enjoy making a woman feel good for at least an hour – just write and flirt – and if you enjoy, that is my bonus (48-year-old male).

Many other participants equated participation in chat rooms with watching a movie or reading a novel. This completely discounts the interactivity of virtual chat room contacts. Reading and watching a movie are activities that do not require live contact with another human being; chatting does, although it can be argued that the contact is not as “complete” as a face-to-face encounter. Other participants do recognize the interactivity of the initiative:

[I value] keeping my identity a secret. It's like an interactive steamy novel. Anonymity works. [I reveal only] my ht 5'10, my wt 160, my hair color, my eyes brown like my hair, and my true size down below. I want my partner to do same, be honest (37-year-old male).

Being fundamentally unknown while interacting with someone online is exhilarating partly because of its freeing aspect: one is free from bodily existence, free from having to interact in actuality, free from “losing face” in front of another, free from the often self-imposed duty to hide selected emotions. Anonymity carries with it an inherent element of “freedom” to express oneself while remaining unexposed and even to experiment with facets of the self that ordinarily remain hidden:

People will say things here that they would not face to face. They feel protected. We [my chat partner and I] feel close very soon, emotionally and otherwise (47-year-old male).

Anonymity is fun and liberating. You can let your usual guard down. You can just say whatever comes to mind, no need to filter it. We are all here to have fun, to share something about ourselves. We can show those emotions that we usually hide because it's so easy not to have to face the person (40-year-old male).

Guys will tell me things honestly that I've never heard a guy say before – because they aren't saying it to my face. They aren't saying it at all. If they don't have to speak the words, they probably don't seem as bad. Well, you know how most guys feel like they have to be macho and in control all the time. Lots of them don't seem

to feel that way online. They can say stuff they'd never say out loud because it would be unmanly or something. Do you need an example? . . . Ok, one guy told me that when he broke up with an ex of his, he said mean things to her that he didn't mean at all because she'd hurt him so much – and when she got mad and yelled at him, he felt horrible, but he had to act macho. . . . I definitely tell stories about myself that I wouldn't normally tell people I don't really know. They [virtual partners] don't know you; they'll probably never meet you, so why not tell them something entertaining about yourself? (25-year-old female).

Another element inherent in anonymity that heavily contributes to its allure is fantasy: one can project onto the screen one's wildest imaginings. The conversation is limited only by the very limits of one's imagination. The lack of identifying information, of visual input (in some cases), of a real body next to one's own leads individuals to co-create an imaginative fantasy ambiance whose magnetism can be very strong. There are unlimited possibilities to fill in the blanks that computer-mediated communication creates by its very disembodied, virtual, machine-powered nature. The persona of the virtual partner usually evokes a very powerful response; however, this response may have more to do with the individual's own projecting mind than with the virtual partner's real personality or physical characteristics. In this respect, potent idealizations add up to produce an irresistible aura that captivates, engulfs, and soothes the chat room participant.

The discourse leading to fantasy imaginings varies, depending on the disposition of the virtual partners. It can vary from partners describing erotic scenarios to each other, to the interactive telling of romantic “novels,” to graphic sexual descriptions. Illustrations of this discourse can be seen in statements made by participants who offered a taste of what they do online:

I love to write romantic stories while I chat. . . and am [writing] now. . . she [the woman I'm chatting with] is reading, and I am writing about romance – and a night in a ski lodge – with the mountain, fireplace, and of course a love scene. Hold on a sec and I will paste [it for you to read].

The car pulled up to the bed and breakfast at the top of the valley just about a mile from the ridge. Michael walked out and looked up and could see her standing there with a cup of coffee and a fireplace in the background. He pulled his coat tight and could feel the snow flakes against his face. She smiled and knew that the time for them alone finally has come. She smiled and let him in, watching [his] every move, searching his face for any signal. His eyes locked on to hers as he hung his coat and walked to her. The room [was] dark, only lit from the fireplace and the reflecting snow banks. The night was young and the wine was waiting for him.

[I asked] You just wrote this to someone you chatted with, u mean?

Yes, this was early in the story, I am way down now.

[I asked] And what was her reaction?

She loves it, so far. . . then taking her hand and walking her back [to the] fireplace. . . They laid on the rug and watched the fire dance. Then soon the kisses turned to passion, and they loved the feel and sensuality of each others lips. Her lips tasted like wine to him – as sweet as sugar. His hand softly touched her hair as his kisses drew her breath deep into his mouth she pulled on his tongue with her breath and feeling the warmth of his mouth, the wetness, going crazy! She wrote that last line. . . She answers at times. . . this is her line.

[I asked] I see... do you always chat like this, I mean, creating stories?
Yes (48-year-old male).

This process is significantly more impersonal than chatting about real life, the state of one's marriage, and so forth. Thus, it may suit some married individuals quite well, since it precludes self-disclosure and emotional intimacy. Other participants consider the creation of such romantic stories as too "detached" because the protagonists are two ideally created individuals who have no ties to the virtual partners themselves. Thus, many males prefer to involve the virtual partner by leading her to imagine herself getting involved with them. One example of such contact:

Ok... we are in a dimmed light room – you and me alone – slow music–wine on the table–fire in the background – I unbutton your shirt... (39-year-old male).

Alternatively, some chat room users appear to want a purely graphic, sexual interaction that may lead to mutual masturbation. They do not seem to want to meet anyone in person, carry on a personal conversation, reveal intimate details, or spend time creating romantic scenarios in order to seduce a virtual partner. All they search for is an impersonal encounter (many times leading to a physical release) with a stranger within the exciting and unexposed realm of anonymity. In this respect, several participants propositioned this author to have cybersex *before* they would participate in this research. This was deemed an illogical proposition (based on the essence of the research effort), but it did add to the panoramic view of the ways in which online infidelity manifests itself in chat rooms. In their words:

Cyber first! [*before* participating in the research]

Do u enjoy having your [graphic] licked?

Your nipples kissed and nibbled on?

Do u enjoy being kissed softly?

Made love to softly?

After [cybersex] I will finish any and all [research] questions! (34-year-old male)

[I'm] 6'2", 220lbs, br and br [brown hair and brown eyes], med built, ok? What do you look like? Will you maybe have some fun then later maybeee? I will help [with the research] but I am stressed and need to let go of steam. So I need your help too then, you sound nice.

[I said] I can't exactly help you here. I'm here just researching.

Why not? You can kiss me and tell me about your best sex ever? (32-year-old male)

Still other individuals chat about life in general, their professions, marriages, and so forth, thereby creating psychological intimacy and a feeling of attachment with the virtual partner (this promotes long-term contacts in many cases):

I have a lot of chats, start off real great then they disappear. I got one that I am talking with for a year and a half and I never met her. We chat on the phone, talk just about everything, she is married too. We talk about life, things that happen to her and her husband and vice versa, things we like in the opposite sex and so on. Vacations, how fun it was, [our] jobs, and hypocrites (33-year-old male).

I actually have probably 3 or 4 people who are my chat buddies, and if they are not online, I'll cruise thru rooms... With two of my chat buddies, we talk intimate... we don't just chat about sex, lots of times talk about our lives, what's going on in them,

problems we're having, etc. . . . It's not just [the] sexual part of person that has to interest me. I also have to feel some sort of connection-like I would actually hang with that person if I met them in real life. . . . have to mentally stimulate me too (34-year-old female).

I have about 5 long-term friends I've talked to for the past year. We have a special kind of love for each other. . . . It gets hard though if you have too many. . . . I was going crazy and had 100 friends on e-mail in 1 month. I had to back off a little (40-year-old male).

Based on the above categories, it is a myth that every married person is online searching for a meaningful connection or emotional attachment with another person. Many times this occurs, but many individuals restrict their chat room contacts to impersonal romantic stories, purely sexual contacts, or any other "no-strings-attached" form of interchange. There is much variation among categories and the type of connection that each affords married individuals. This renders the term "cyber-affairs" rich and fluid, and suggests that it does not signify the same for all of its users (as one may typically assume). In this respect, further research might consider exploring more nuances instead of adopting a reductionist definition of the term.

One common thread is that of co-created fantasy sexuality: of desiring and feeling desired, fleeing (albeit temporarily) to an environment that is often experienced as better than real life, fulfilling a need that can be sexual or emotional. Typical views of these dynamics are:

[The chat room] gives us married people a fun way to flirt and feel desirable. . . . The fantasy is always better than the reality (40-year-old male).

A fantasy is perfection. . . . One creates an image [of the person]. . . . If a woman is intelligent and can converse in things I like, after hours of flirting it's hard not to like someone because it fills a void that don't get filled elsewhere. . . . either a sex thing or a friend need. . . . it's addictive (40-year-old male).

Finally, Anonymous Sexual Interactionism with a stranger online can open up new avenues that would not have been opened if it was not for the existence of chat rooms and the Internet. In many cases, the person was not even curious about something until he or she started exploring it via chat rooms and other Internet portals. It is crucial to point out that technology does not *create* curiosity, yet it does provide more opportunities for explorations; with more opportunities available, there are more chances to stray from one's primary relationship if a person is so inclined. As the following participant revealed, sexual avenues that were unthinkable and unexplored before he went online became a reality when they blossomed into a real-life liaison:

I have learned a great deal here. I use that knowledge at home, but then I realize how much more I would like, soooo good and bad. One example: anal [sex]. Never thought I would like it until I got to looking at it, talking to women about it, the fact that they liked it, etc. So I go home and approach the subject. NO WAY IN HELL is that going to happen there. Soooooo I meet someone online, get to talking about it, meet for real and do it. The reality aspect is incredible. . . . I think that cyber[sex] is just as much sex as physical sex is; again, [it's] of the mind (53-year-old male who has had 13 affairs).

The security of anonymity and the soothing allure of interpersonal connection, combined with the primordial enjoyment of sexuality with a potentially desirable opposite-sex member (or at least a desirable disembodied creation) all add up to the captivating culture characteristic of chat rooms, where having or looking for an affair is not only permissible but normalized as well.

3.2. Behavioral Rationalization

The construct named Behavioral Rationalization refers to the following trend. Eighty-three percent of all participants rationalized their chat room behaviors in a particularly uniform way: since there is *no physical contact*, online-only liaisons are *not* a form of infidelity. The common thought process behind this conception was: “How can this be cheating if I’m not touching anyone?” The remaining 17% admitted that, based on morality, these contacts are a form of infidelity; however, they are a weaker, milder form (see below).

The contacts take place via a computer: evidently, there is no face-to-face interaction with the opposite sex, no touching, no kissing, no secretive escapades, no worry about being seen by neighbors, friends, or co-workers. In sum, if it is all virtual, then it “does not count” as unfaithfulness (note that many times these exchanges lead to real-life encounters, but participants are referring to chat room contacts only). Sexual interchanges are perceived as simply another form of fantasy entertainment within a virtual playground. Paradoxically, the activities remain hidden from one’s spouse – if these contacts are simply “harmless fun,” then it is difficult to explain the need to hide them.

There is a difference between providing a reason for one’s behavior and a rationalization for it. Reasons occur in contexts that are morally neutral; rationalizations, justifications, or motives occur in contexts where moral considerations are crucial elements (Szasz, 1974). The choice of the word “rationalization” in the present work rests on this premise; as suggested in the above definition of online infidelity, moral codes play a critical role in the context of marriage.

3.2.1. Online contacts: to cheat or not to cheat?

The disembodied self in cyberspace gives participants a “license” to engage in infidelity without perceiving it as such. Most participants typically presented their logic and justifications as follows (note that the word “cheating” was used instead of “infidelity,” as it is more informal and thus consonant with the nature of chat room communication):

Well, what I think is cheating is actually doing sex. That is cheating. Cybering [i.e., having cybersex] is having a fantasy and someone fulfilling it over the net. Cybering is not cheating because you don’t know the person on the other end. So how can you cheat with someone by just chatting with them (40-year-old male)?

It is all fantasy (at least for me). In my head, cheating means touching another human. It is all in your HEAD. You can create “friendships” here and those lead to a more intimate conversation. . . . It’s not a big deal, it’s not cheating (42-year-old male).

Online? Cheating? No, not at all. We’re physical beings; mere communication is not cheating. Cheating in my mind requires physical contact (49-year-old male).

I don’t consider this as cheating at all. There is no physical contact!! It’s like reading *Playboy* or *Penthouse* or watching an adult film (48-year-old male).

What I do here is not cheating. I am at home, not with them (37-year-old male). Having cybersex isn't cheating because "the other party" is not touching me at all (36-year-old male).

I don't think it's a form of cheating, I think it's harmless fun; some people like to talk to other people (26-year-old male).

My response is as long as [there is] no physical contact being made, then it's ok in my mind (43-year-old male).

Cheating? No. It's more fantasy; it's not a relationship; it's not straight sex; it's more kinky... what people think they want, but don't get. You express it and suddenly it's more mainstream... not kinky anymore; the guilt of fantasies is gone (50-year-old male).

Several elements spring from this discourse: according to participants, chat room contacts are only fantasy/illusion (i.e., not real), mere communication (i.e., "just talk"), and only virtual (i.e., not body-involving). Such meanings arise within the social interactions that occur in the virtual room. In this interactive environment, the creation of these meanings provides the latitude that allows married individuals to enjoy guilt-free thrills. However, the online world (and all of its implications) leads to another creation: a double life, where online and offline co-creations are kept as separate as possible, with the latter constantly finding ways to hide the former. It is the discovering of a hidden life and lies that causes spouses' greatest pain, emotional struggle, and indignation. Some spouses report that "the experience of being deceived online is as devastating as traditional infidelity" (Maheu & Subotnik, 2001, p. 105; see also Schneider, 2002). For some spouses, the lies involved may be conceivably more disturbing than the disembodied sexual and/or emotional connections that occur in cyberspace.

In addition, a grey area arises when one considers the fundamental assumptions of the rationale "no touching, therefore no infidelity." The logic behind such rationale rests on at least two assumptions: (a) Sexual energy can be channeled away from one's primary partner with no consequences to either partner or the relationship; and (b) Infidelity is in the body, not in the mind – which presupposes that the body is separate from the mind ("mind" being loosely defined as the conglomerate of one's thoughts, beliefs, and emotions).

First, short of conducting a longitudinal study with couples where at least one partner is a regular chat room user, one cannot definitively determine the extent to which channeling energy online has adverse consequences for a marital relationship (and if so, how). However, it is safe to state that channeling energy online involves allocation of mental resources, time, and conscious choices. It involves actively seeking out people in chat rooms; sharing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of a sexual and/or emotional nature; devoting attention to, learning about, and appraising personal characteristics of another person; and co-creating, developing, and nurturing an attractive magnetism with another virtual party. It requires allocating time for and channeling one's energies towards such pursuits and subtracting that very time and energy from nurturing a connection with one's primary partner. It consumes the person's thoughts while it is happening (and often afterwards as well), as the person is composing a fantasy existence via virtual interactions and thus partially neglecting offline relational dynamics. This neglect is also temporary, although some individuals choose to spend more time online than others.

Second, the issue of whether or not “no touching” equals “no infidelity” is blurry at best. In the last decades, hundreds of research findings have established that the mind has a profound, visible influence on bodily processes (an idea that is centuries old; see [Damasio, 1994](#); [Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1993](#); [Moyers, 1993](#); [Pelletier, 1993](#); [Sternberg, 2000](#)). Medical science (i.e., physiological, epidemiological, and clinical research) as well as quantum physics have repeatedly demonstrated that the body is intricately connected with the mind to the point that they are inseparably one. For example, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions create the chemical reactions that support life in every cell ([Chopra, 1993](#); [Goleman & Gurin, 1993](#); [Sternberg, 2000](#)). In addition, watching something unreal (such as a scary, romantic, or thrilling movie) leads to the production of the same chemicals that would be generated if the situation were real. Likewise, the memory of a stressful occurrence (which is only a thought) also releases the same hormones that would be encountered in the real event ([Chopra, 1993](#)).

The body appears to be constituted of solid matter that can be broken down into molecules and atoms; however, quantum physics has shown that every atom is more than 99.9999% empty space and the subatomic particles moving at lightening speed through this space are clusters of vibrating energy ([Chopra, 1989, 1993](#)). Being composed of energy and information, the human body is constantly being renewed within a timeless flowing field of constant transformation. We “are” energy, and we literally create our bodies as we create our experience of the world via our thoughts and emotions. Thus, the physical body can easily be conceptualized as a mind-body system.

Translating this to the online realm, it becomes clear that, when individuals invest their mental, emotional, and sexual energy in online liaisons, they are investing their own mind-body systems. They are literally creating hormones and other chemicals that originate and maintain not only physical but emotional arousal as well. They are also interweaving brain circuitry that keeps them coalesced with and craving the emotional “high” that online contacts offer them. Eroticism and sexuality permeate their mind-body systems: they speak to each other in erotic ways, describe their heightened sexual sensations, tease each other with sexual innuendos, reveal their fantasies, and many times share personal problems, wishes, and dreams. Thus, in a very real sense, individuals do share their mind-body systems with each other as they create and experience the other in an involving, engulfing flow of sexual and/or emotional energy. Of course there are no bodies in cyberspace; however, the communicative co-constructions in chat rooms must start from the mind-body system of each person sitting at a computer and communicating. These co-constructions cannot exist without one or more mind-body systems. This goes beyond the idea of touching the most superficial layer of skin. Also, many individuals may perceive that they are skilled at compartmentalizing their online and offline experiences but, when seen in this light, both are part of the same system. (It is important to stress that these reflections do not invalidate, judge, or condemn participants’ perceptions in any way; the ethnographic enterprise aims at preserving the meanings that participants construe for themselves – namely, that most do not perceive their behaviors as infidelity. These reflections are presented for purposes of discussion only.)

Along the same lines, there is the issue of infidelity where only emotional bonding has occurred (no physical touching). Recent research on infidelity has repeatedly claimed that one does not have to touch the physical body for infidelity to occur ([Glass, 2003](#); [Maheu & Subotnik, 2001](#)). When there is sharing of emotions in chat rooms, that is usually experienced as unfaithfulness, especially by (but not limited to) females. Some research suggests

that females are more threatened/jealous when extra-marital *emotional* contacts occur, while males are more threatened by *sexual, physical* encounters. (These differences exist in many cultures: the United States, China, Japan, Korea, Sweden, and the Netherlands – see Wilson, 2002). Thus, sharing emotional and/or sexual energy in chat rooms is typically experienced as betrayal by unsuspecting spouses who remain ignorant of their partners' chat room activities until the moment of discovery (Maheu & Subotnik, 2001; Schneider, 2002). The consequential nature of this phenomenon extends well beyond the limits of the physical body.

3.2.2. Online contacts as infidelity

Seventeen percent of participants *do* consider their chat room behaviors as infidelity. At first sight, it appears that these individuals do not resort to the rationalizations discussed above. However, they make statements of the following type: “Yes, this is cheating, *but* . . .” – the “*but*” introducing a qualifying remark that is meant to account for and justify the actions. Typically, such remarks involve calling online contacts a “weaker” form of infidelity. Also, some individuals appear to regard their online behaviors as justifiable because these behaviors boost the sexual side of the relationship they have with their spouses. Typical views are:

In a way this is cheating, but in a way it helps our marriage, I think. When I talk on here, I get very excited, so when I make love to my wife it is very good. I don't share it [what I chatted about] with her, she would kill me (39-year-old male).

Yes, in the world of morality, I think it is cheating, but I also believe that it can give you an outlet to relieve certain sexual tensions that you would never be able to relieve in any other way. I have a very loving and stable relationship with my spouse, but I need something else, an outlet, sometimes. I mean that, if you were going to have an affair, the Internet is the best way to go (50-year-old male).

He [my husband] is the one who reaps the benefits of me having a hot conversation. . . . Sometimes I get hot when I really get into detailed conversation about sex. Some people have very good talent for writing about sex – and of course, then I'm horny! (34-year-old female)

A little, yes, it is a little bit of cheating. Well, it's mental, but u do get to know the other person. But if it was real, it would be much more, I think. This is a mild form of temptation (40-year-old male).

Under the guise of “helping the marriage,” “relieving sexual tensions,” and “becoming sexually excited when chatting with others” (which spouses will appreciate later on), individuals regularly channel sexual and/or emotional energy outside of their primary relationships. Even though many perceptions are positive, some individuals sense infidelity and a breach of trust (yet they still resort to some type of rationalization that makes the behavior “ok” and still doable). One could question what exactly makes it acceptable or desirable to have to boost the marriage from the outside and why tensions cannot be relieved within the union. Answers to these concerns were not achievable within the context of this study. (These answers are far too complex and would require a different design; also, when questioned along these deeper lines, participants did not demonstrate interest in responding).

Other examples where the infidelity is recognized yet rationalized occur when individuals attempt to qualify behaviors by reducing them from a general to a particular form.

For example, “just chatting” in general is said not to be infidelity (even if the chat revolves around sexual content), but engaging in cybersex is (cybersex in this context involves mutual masturbation). The discourse below is typical of this line of reasoning:

My opinion would be yes, it is a form of cheating because there is supposed to be a trust and bond between man and wife and just because one of them is unaware of something doesn't mean it is right. I mean, having a conversation is not cheating, but if you cybersex, that would be.

[I asked] What if the people are flirting or talking about sex during the conversation? No, that's not cheating because they are not touching themselves or each other (46-year-old male).

Once more it becomes clear that touching the physical body is of primary importance for a conceptualization of infidelity in participants' minds. If one is not touching oneself while chatting, then the contact is not classified as infidelity – even though sexual content is an integral part of the conversation (and this may lead to psychological intimacy as well). This depicts how important involvement of the physical body is for matters of infidelity.

In addition, what can be discerned from the above examples is that some individuals display enough awareness to observe that *hidden* online contacts involve a breach of trust within the marriage – yet choose to continually engage in those contacts. From this divided state, some participants display a sense of ambivalence: they waver between a recognition of unfaithfulness and a longing for connection, choosing to resolve the latter by dismissing the former and heading outside the marriage. In addition, statements such as “I can't be blamed for coming to chat rooms” (after all my spouse is sexually/emotionally unavailable) were fairly common and suggest that the participant “has no choice” but to pursue online contacts since his or her home life is not satisfactory. This is as much of a rationalization as is “no touching, therefore no infidelity”.

3.3. Effortless Avoidance

Avoidance represents a widespread, powerful trend found in many couple systems: temporarily avoiding the dynamics of one's primary relationship is an exceedingly common motivator for the development of infidelity. The most commonly heard justification for affairs are “pain and emptiness in the marriage and anger at the spouse's lack of sexual or emotional responsiveness” (Brown, 2001, p. 23). A partner perceives a deficiency or insufficiency within the marriage and, instead of engaging in the arduous (and many times seemingly impossible) task of determining what has gone awry, chooses to partially avoid and escape the entire system. However, not all infidelity occurs because of problems in one's marriage: people in marriages that are perceived as satisfactory/happy also stray (see section below on the happily married online).

It is important to remember that this study was *not* designed to establish either a *causal* link or a correlation between the state of one's marriage and the joining of chat rooms. This work reports participants' perceptions of their chat room usage only. While most participants state that they join these rooms *because* of a lack of sex at home, it is not possible or sensible to attribute causation based on the results hereby obtained. Marital relationships are complex as well as fluid, and it would be overly simplistic and naive to make such

reductionist claims of cause and effect. (For example, being “seen” by a stranger as attractive and experiencing a new role in a new relationship may play a considerable role in the development of online liaisons.)

Internet chat rooms have introduced a new version of avoidance, one that is exceedingly effortless. In fact, the evasion pattern may be conceivably more common in online infidelity than in traditional infidelity: many individuals who would never tackle the vicissitudes and logistics of real-life affairs continually engage in online liaisons, taking advantage of the ease and readiness that the Internet affords them. In this respect, it is conceivable to predict that online infidelity will soon become the most common form of infidelity – if it is not already. At the click of a button, thousands of potentially desirable individuals instantly become available. The medium offers an unparalleled opportunity to browse through names and profiles, start conversations, enter and exit interactions with no effort or second thought at all, and choose those that seem worthy of one’s attention. For example, when asked “why the computer” as opposed to any other means to elude marital dynamics, some participants stated:

The computer is right here. Easy access to lots of people, and fast – and I can shut it down when I’m ready (46-year-old male).

It’s a safe way to flirt with no strings attached (38-year-old male).

I am a pretty regular person: educated, good job, normal. . . lol [laughing out loud]. . . so I can keep it at a distance. . . No strings, no romance, no phone, that [phone] is real (48-year-old male).

I just try to find my sex fix for the day and move on. . . lol. [I had] one affair in 21 years and I hate myself for it. The computer makes it so easy. . . no strings attached, love them and leave them. . . lol. . . It did [get physical] the one time, and I was devastated that I had done it. . . Yea, it did [start online]. She lived about 40 miles away. We first talked online maybe a week or two. . . Then we met for coffee and then I was in her pants. . . Midlife crisis. . . the need for sex I guess. . . But I might be single soon. . . because my wife is about to leave me because of my drinking (46-year-old male).

I make myself available in ALL settings. . . malls, stores, theaters, etc. . . This is just a more convenient media. . . less threatening. . . can bare one’s soul to a stranger with no worries and, on occasion, find a soul that calls for a physical meeting, a drink, a lunch, and see where the road leads. . . I look for a lady who has the same interests but is bored to tears with her marriage situation (66-year-old male).

In addition, reaching to the Internet proves easier and more gratifying than turning to a primary relationship that may have become stale. Any discomfort experienced by the individual is “medicated” by stimulating trips to a chat room. Internal pain, troubling emotions at home, or despondency due to emotional and/or sexual disconnection with the spouse are easily anaesthetized by the soothing yet exhilarating social interchanges that are co-created with strangers. It was clear that most participants felt some type of disconnection in their primary relationships and were unwilling to address it directly with their spouses (in many cases, they perceived this addressing of issues as “impossible” and dismissed it completely, even when probed). Disconnection may be at different stages, ranging from more serious conditions such as alcoholism (see above quote), to boredom, to a more general need to avoid the realities of daily life:

It [chatting] actually does relieve some stress. It just feels good and knowing u r making someone else feel good is all the better (35-year-old male).

My wife is married – I am still single. I come here to escape reality (42-year-old male).

My wife is my best friend, my lover, my partner, and probably the most amazing woman I have ever known. I know your next question is then why are you in a chat room. I will answer that also. I am bored, we live during the week about three hours apart and she only comes in on the weekends. I just plain get bored with painting, reading, and all other distractions, and so I jumped online. As a male, you like to hear someone that does not know you from Adam tell you that you make them hot just by talking to them online. You are a non-entity online yet you are also King Kong (50-year-old male).

By far the most common evasion was from a lack of sex within the marriage, which is intimately tied to other deeper emotional issues (details were not discussed by participants, however). The typical discourse is composed of a thought process based on the premise that one goes to the chat room to get what he or she does not get at home, namely sex and affection. Although this thought process may have become “cliche” in popular discussions about infidelity, that is precisely what most participants in the present study revealed:

I enjoy women and sex... One element missing in my marriage is infatuation so I seek momentary infatuation here. Another element missing is sex-lol... I find child rearing takes a lot out of a woman's sex drive; I've got five [kids]. So I come here to get a sex “fix.” Sex = babies = hard times = always tired = no sex. Some live for it [having kids] like my wife at the expense of sex, which is not an issue to her (44-year-old male).

She [my wife] has zero sex drive. We have sex once a week if I'm lucky. But then she does it grudgingly. So, I find ways to cope by coming here... It doesn't help that she is sort of “small” and I am a little “big” so it hurts her some. Well, I wonder though if she is just saying that to keep me off her. I guess she just hates sex. Or hates me. Or both. Or hates sex with me. Or something (26-year-old male looking online for real-life “discreet sex”).

I have a wife that is drop-dead beautiful – but dead sexually over the past several years... so I chat, cull and, on occasion, find a Rara Avis that I can connect with-online and liaisons when possible (66-year-old male).

My wife is a bit stingy with affection and sex for my taste. I have met two women I found online. One was just a fling, the other I would have left for if I could. Just too much between us to do it and see to my family. I met them in person after meeting them online (41-year-old male).

This is a form of escapism – just a fantasy. I am in a happy marriage – but the physical side is poor, hence the flirting on the net (50-year-old male).

Participants typically described their marital sex lives as lacking excitement, eroticism, and sexual fulfillment. This is a common issue: it is estimated that one out of every three couples have problems with low sexual desire (it is a myth that only women have low sex drive; men are just as affected, yet that is usually kept secret due to cultural perceptions of masculinity – see [Weiner-Davis, 2003](#)). In addition, complaints about low desire are the

number-one issue taken to sex therapists's offices (Weiner-Davis, 2003). Typically, these complaints have non-sexual roots; many emotional factors may be involved. However, individuals may not even be fully aware of these factors, and even if they are, addressing them directly with one's spouse is an arduous, intricate, and complex task. These dynamics may contribute to the avoidance of marital issues and the seeking of online stimulation instead (yet, as indicated above, no causal link can be established). It is not surprising that people in sex-deprived marriages are turning to chat rooms for a "fix": these rooms provide optimal environments for men and women to re-imagine themselves as attractive and sexual, to feel desired, wanted, validated. The chat room environment offers acceptance, sexual connection, sexual arousal, authentication that one is desirable, fun to be around, tempting in sum, someone who can entice and capture another person's sexual desire and/or emotional attention. It is intensely delightful and pleasurable to be perceived in these ways, which fuels the continuous seeking of online encounters. (This is not to say that having an accepting, attentive, caring spouse *prevents* online or offline infidelity; this is also a common myth based on oversimplified foundations).

3.3.1. *The happily married online*

There is a commonly held, yet mistaken belief that only troubled, unhappy, and/or sex-deprived marriages are vulnerable to traditional affairs. The same myth holds true for online liaisons as well. In the present study, there is a clear trend where individuals who describe themselves as "happily married" also enjoy being online interacting with members of the opposite sex. Motivations vary from person to person, but one typical theme is a desire to recapture the profound exhilaration felt when one first meets a potential mate. The following discourses are representative of the dynamics encountered in this domain:

[I rate my marriage at] 8–10. I love my wife dearly. Our marriage is very good. My sexual problem has nothing to do with my marriage. . . . By sexual problem I mean, I'd like to meet someone else – and my desire to have sex with my spouse has diminished. I suppose when u first went out and the excitement of the first few sexual encounters were just too great compared with what u experience now. Sometimes we like to bring that experience back if we can (55-year-old male looking for a real-life affair).

I'm happy in my marriage but I'm tempted to be with someone else too. Can I spill my guts here? lol. . . . Well, my wife did cheat on me twice and I forgave her but that's not why I want to [meet someone]. The bedroom has become stale but it's not my doing – and I really want to taste some forbidden fruit. I've kind of been a sex guru in these rooms the last year. I've really enjoyed helping ladies get off on the phone and stuff – and mutual masturbation has been good too. . . . Just haven't found the right situation or woman yet to really meet – and I'm not flying to Kentucky or Florida for a one-night thing either! I'm really thankful you are letting me vent here. Timing is everything and I don't want to lose what I have here. Well, I might fly if it felt right, but I'm thinking maybe we might like it too much and want it again. . . . plus I'm a busy boy here without a lot of time to be out and about (40-year-old male).

I'm happy in my marriage. It is my nature I think, I enjoy flirting but love my wife – weird, huh (45-year-old male).

I rate my marriage at 10. . . I just enjoy having fun. You love someone and have fun too (50-year-old male).

Most participants who described their marriage as “happy” used expressions that minimized the importance of their online behaviors to a significant extent. They reported being very content with their primary relationships, yet those relationships were not enough. They craved excitement, fun, and the taste of some “forbidden fruit” although the love for their spouses stood strong. Despite the professed love, these individuals did not appear to consider the possibility of engaging the spouse in an attempt to enhance sexuality and exhilaration within the marriage. Rather, the answer to a stale marital bedroom or to the craving for “fun” was an electronic bedroom – and in many cases another *real* bedroom: 30% of participants went on to meet their virtual partners in person and all but two of them had a sexual relationship with the people they had met online. While the vast majority (70%) of participants did not take their contacts beyond the screen, a full third of the sample did – which is a considerable percentage. Also, this was a one-time study; it is not known whether some people in the 70%-group never met anyone in person *after* the study was completed. Further research must approach this dimension longitudinally for a more complete understanding of it.

Being happy in one’s marriage contrasts with the major trend of avoidance, as discussed above, where one avoids difficulties in the primary relationship by reaching to the online world. One could wonder why a person who professes to love his or her spouse has to join conversations with strangers online. The answer to this riddle (if there is one) is complex and may vary greatly from individual to individual; however, there are extended possibilities that can be considered. One such possibility is that the happily married person exemplifies the research finding that monogamy goes against “some of the deepest-seated evolutionary inclinations with which biology has endowed most creatures, *Homo sapiens* included” (Barash & Lipton, 2001, p. 1). There is a shared susceptibility to certain basic behavioral tendencies in most living things – and *not* being monogamous is one of them. This does not entail that humans cannot be monogamous: we certainly are in many cases (e.g., devoted couples do not even consider alternatives and remain as protective of their relationships as couples who have just fallen in love – Glass, 2003). Overall, research has shown that, biologically speaking, monogamy is quite difficult to maintain, so it is often left untried (e.g., most individuals find intense uplifting emotions, exhilaration, and satisfaction in seeking sexual stimuli other than their spouses, thereby being seduced by other people or images – see Barash & Lipton, 2001). The next question to be posed is why monogamy occurs at all when there are countless strikes against it. Barash and Lipton (2001) discuss the various possibilities that account for its existence, yet admit at the outset that “no one knows” (Barash & Lipton, 2001, p. 152). Regardless of why it exists, monogamy is solidly expected when individuals marry.

The initial promise to the spouse is always that of monogamy, both sexual and emotional (except in the relatively few cases of open marriages) – hence the acute pain felt when that promise is broken, even if “only” virtually.

4. Final remarks on the online pursuit of pleasure

Never before in history has a married person been able to bask in the familiarity of marriage and the thrilling dating world at the same time. Internet chat rooms have made this

possible and all elements involved suggest that this is highly desirable by many individuals: married people can be found online at any time of the day or night in overwhelming numbers.

Disembodiment and the impossibility of touching allow most individuals to perceive their chat room contacts as innocuous and marital vows as intact, honored. Other individuals acknowledge the existence of unfaithfulness, but attribute lesser importance to it because the contacts are “only” virtual. Still other individuals consider any sexual and/or emotional contact as infidelity, especially (but not limited to) when they discover the existence of a hidden life and lies (Schneider, 2002). This can be conceptualized as a continuum, but such conceptualization is tentative and must be investigated by further data-driven research on online infidelity.

Further research must also investigate the differences in the perception of online infidelity between males and females, establish more uniform definitions of cybersex (definitions vary from author to author and usually contrast with those of participants), investigate further the aftermath of online infidelity, assess the current moral, cultural, and religious codes regarding what constitutes infidelity (e.g., some religious leaders do not consider online contacts as infidelity – Russell, 2003), and so forth. There are limitless areas of exploration, all worthy of pursuing – since in all likelihood, online infidelity will soon become the most common form of infidelity (if it is not already).

The effortless, instant gratification, protective anonymity, and a firm belief that the no-touching dimension guarantees faithfulness all combine to keep luring individuals back to chat rooms again and again. Anonymous Sexual Interactionism is perceived as desirable and innocuous; remaining fundamentally unknown while interacting sexually is especially helpful for a married person, who cannot risk exposure. Behavioral Rationalizations provide a license to exchange sexual content with strangers in a guilt-free manner. Effortless Avoidance guarantees easy, instant fulfillment of needs outside of marriage without a perceived break of marital vows. Combined, these constructs interact in a fluid manner to engender and maintain co-created worlds in the virtual arena known as chat rooms.

Technological advances have launched new privileges such as meeting strangers without leaving one’s desk, but primordial human feelings, flaws, and responsibilities still co-exist with these privileges. The Internet provides more choices than ever, yet its limitless possibilities are still bound by moral and cultural promises of exclusivity, respect, self-respect, and personal integrity. Millions of individuals’ values and moral systems are being challenged by formerly inconceivable possibilities such as exposure to people they would never meet in ordinary life, instant communication and gratification, effortless entrance into whole new worlds of experience, and exceedingly easy evasion of actual relating with a flesh-and-blood long-time partner. The magnetism is so blinding that value systems and basic emotional/relational considerations are being bent to embrace the new frontier. The call of the “dating scene” is powerful and alluring, even though married individuals are fully cognizant of the fact that, at least in Western culture, marriage theoretically requires the abandonment of that scene and eliminates the need for it.

Within this context, it is important to keep in mind that technology is only technology – never inherently harmful or harmless in and of itself. The challenges lie with the human element’s choices when operating technology-based means of communication. The Internet has the potential to boost committed relationships in cases where partners negotiate and agree on what role technology should play within the context of their relationships – which may vary enormously from couple to couple. When there is an agreement and

no lying/hiding, the potential for relational growth may be maximally amplified. Further research must assess the consequences of hiding online contacts and establish what tangible effects these dynamics have for committed relationships in which at least one partner enjoys online disembodied sexual gods and goddesses.

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