Internet Relationships and Their Impact on Primary Relationships

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The number of personal relationships occurring via the Internet is increasing as more people gain access to it. Many of these relationships are romantic in nature, and evidence is accumulating that they have the potential to have an adverse effect on existing face-to-face relationships. This study explored the formation of romantic relationships on their Internet, their nature, and their possible impact on existing marital or de facto relationships in a sample of 75 adults (mean age 42 years, *SD* = 11.1 years) who responded to an online survey of individuals involved in extra-dyadic relationships on the Internet. Respondents reported a variety of means of contacting their online partner. More females than males communicated with them daily. Most respondents knew what their partner looked like, most had contacted them by telephone, and a third had met them. Most reported more satisfaction with their online relationship than with their face-to-face one, though few said that it was more important to them than their primary relationship. Although only a quarter of the sample admitted that their online relationship had affected their primary one, those participants reported concealing the truth about the time or nature of their activities, that everyday tasks did not get done, and that levels of sexual intimacy with their primary partner had dropped. The nature of these and other problems suggests that therapists should be aware of the potential for Internet relationships to seriously affect face-to-face relationships.

Online relationships, particularly those which are romantic in nature, have emerged as a distinct group of contemporary relationships. They have been reported by participants to be as real, as close, and as important or more important than non-Internet romantic relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Merkle, 2000). Online romantic relationships are becoming the subject of research attention because their number is increasing, and also because of their capacity to adversely affect marriages and de facto relationships (Merkle, 2000; Young, 2000).

Merkle (2000) described the Internet as a social technology which is creating a new genre of interpersonal relationships. Many studies provide evidence for this assertion. Parks (1996) found that two-thirds of respondents reported that they had formed a personal relationship with an online partner via an Internet newsgroup. Parks and Roberts (1998) found that 98% of respondents in their study of online text-based games had formed close relationships with another player. McKenna (1998) found that of 600 randomly selected newsgroup respondents, 51% had formed close friendships and 35% had formed romantic relationships.

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The evidence to date suggests that those who become involved in romantic Internet relationships tend to be male, tertiary-educated and engaged in professional occupations. Wysocki (1998) asked participants how and why they chose to be involved in online sexual relationships, and reported that the mean age of the respondents was 35.2 years, that most were male, and that half were married with up to three children. Most (70%) were in full-time employment, 2% were retired, and the remainder consisted of students, homemakers and volunteers. The majority were college-educated with only 18% reporting less than a high-school education. Schneider's (2000) study into the effects of online addiction on the partners of participants confirmed the tendency for the pursuit of Internet relationships to be a male-dominated activity, as the majority of participants in that study were female. In their study of online cybersex abusers, Cooper, Delmonico and Burg (2000) found that the majority of the 9265 participants were male, single and dating, and professional, or engaged in occupations related to information technology. Likewise, Schwartz and Southern (2000) reported that the largest group of participants were white-collar professionals who were married (57%) or living in a committed relationship.

Various suggestions have been provided to explain why most of those who use the Internet to form online relationships tend to be males. It has been suggested that men feel pressured by the traditional role of making all the moves in romantic relationships. They might therefore be attracted to online relationships because this form of communication enables relationships to develop in an organic, less pressured way, with sexuality emerging from an emotional rather than a sexual connection (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997).

An alternative explanation (Cooper, 1998) is that the Internet has become a way for men who are isolated or in unfulfilling relationships to express their sexual selves or obtain sexual gratification easily and anonymously, and possibly compulsively. It has also been suggested that the pursuit of romantic and/or sexual relationships via the Internet is ideal for married men with commitments to career and family, because anonymous and easily accessible relationships are also devoid of attachment and responsibility (Schwartz & Southern, 2000). Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy and Maheu's (2002) survey included 41 items designed to gather information about sexual attitudes and behaviours of the respondents. The results suggested that men tend to sexualise their worldview and emotions, using sexual interactions to self-soothe and make affective connections with others. The male respondents in this study were more likely than women to use the Internet for light recreational use, such as distraction, taking a break or having fun. In contrast to women, who were more likely than men to have primarily sought socially interactive relationships with a sexual component, men reported that their primary reason for going online was to engage in sexual activities. It was suggested that these findings are consistent with traditional gender-role behaviour.

Cooper, Delmonico and Burg (2000) provided detailed statistics about the multiple channels of communication used by participants to find online partners. These communication channels included chatrooms, email, newsgroups, the World Wide Web and 'other'. Some significant gender preferences for method of online communication were reported, in that females tended to prefer chatrooms and used adult websites as the second choice of medium whereas males preferred adult web sites, with chatrooms as their second preference. The question then arises as to whether, and how much, these relationships give rise to what could be called infidelity.

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Online Infidelity

According to the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, online infidelity is accounting for a growing number of divorce cases in America (Quittner, 1997). It has been proposed that there are two main characteristics of infidelity: sexual and emotional (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000). Much has been speculated about the nature of romantic Internet relationships. It has been suggested that the emotional characteristics of Internet relationships outweigh those of physical or sexual attraction. It has also been speculated that current Internet technology necessitates that acts of infidelity involve emotional betrayal over sexual betrayal, and that this should be seen as a compelling desire to be loved and cared for in a way that has not been met in the primary relationship. These speculations would suggest that emotional intimacy is more strongly associated with romantic Internet relationships than is lustful attraction (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). It is difficult to define sexual infidelity in the context of computer-mediated relationships because the bond of trust cannot be violated by physical sexual acts, due to the geographic separation of the partners, at least in the initial stages of the relationship.

Although geographic separation is clearly an important characteristic of online relationships, the sexual nature of online relating should not be underestimated. According to Wysocki (1998), more than 50% of all online communication is related to sex. The results of a survey by the InterCommerce Corporation (1996) suggested that online communication may have the capacity to heighten erotic connections. The most common reasons respondents gave for participating in a sexual relationship on the net was 'because it was a benign outlet for sexual frustration' (p. 1). When asked about the level of sexual behaviour they had experienced online, over half the respondents had read online sex stories, and over a third had masturbated while online. Just under a quarter had exchanged erotic email. Although some respondents believed their online sexual relationships encouraged adultery, others believed it had helped their marriages because it had discouraged face-to-face adultery.

Although it appears that online sexual activity is common, it is less clear whether sexual activity that does not involve physical contact with the online partner constitutes infidelity. Whitty (2002) investigated community attitudes towards Internet relationships, and whether they are considered to be acts of betrayal. This study involved 1117 participants with equal numbers of males and females aged between 17 and 70. Participants were asked to what extent they considered participating in cybersex, engaging in online sexual chat, sharing online versus offline emotional information, and engaging in face-to-face sexual intercourse to be acts of infidelity. The results suggested that online romantic relationships were considered to be 'real' acts of betrayal. Additionally, some online activities, including online sexual activity, were considered to be more significant acts of betrayal than some offline acts of infidelity, such as sharing intimate information. Whitty's study therefore suggests that online actions can have significant impact regardless of the physical availability of the partners. In contrast, most of the 7035 respondents in Cooper et al.'s (2002) online study investigating the user demographics in online sexual activity indicated that they did not believe that an online romantic/sexual relationship violated an individual's marital vows. This leads to a consideration of the impact of such online relationships.

Effects of Online Relationships

Research investigating the effects of online relationships on primary relationships is accumulating. Young (1996) sought to investigate the clinical profile and social implications associated with high use of the Internet for interactive social communication. Young developed an 8-item questionnaire, based on a screening instrument used to diagnose pathological gambling. Six hundred and five surveys were completed via the Internet or telephone. Young found that the excessive use of the Internet was perceived as resulting in personal problems including negative effects on marriages and other close relationships. Those who used the Internet excessively also spent less time with the 'real' people in their lives, and avoided or were more reluctant to perform everyday household tasks or caring for children. In particular, it was reported that marriages were most affected when excessive amounts of time were spent on the Internet attempting to maintain that online relationship.

Cooper and Sportolari (1997) reported that Internet relationships tended to feel separate from face-to-face relationships. They suggested that this distancing effect had the capacity to lead to erotic relationships that could then be recklessly acted upon, breaking apart steady real-life relationships that lack the novelty and ready accessibility of online relationships. In one of the first studies investigating the development of romantic online relationships, Wysocki (1998) found that respondents typically logged on at work or when their partner went to bed. Some respondents spent many hours on the computer and had withdrawn from domestic and other activities. Other respondents knew of otherwise-committed relationships that had broken up because of online infidelity.

Cooper, McLoughlin and Campbell (2000) suggested that online infidelity is becoming an increasingly attractive form of social and/or sexual behaviour. They believe that those engaged in online romantic relationships may tend to avoid working through marital problems and instead look for intimacy, comfort and understanding with their online partner. Energy that could be directed into problem-resolution within the primary relationship may therefore be directed into the online relationship, which may prevent open communication or discussion of distress, and cause a loss of potential for improvement and growth. Cooper et al. (2002) asked respondents who were engaged in online sexual activity their reasons for doing so, and the consequences of this activity. Females were found to be significantly more likely than males to report that their online activities had negatively affected their existing relationships.

The aim of the present study was to examine the formation and nature of online romantic relationships, and determine how respondents perceived the comparison with, and the effect on, their current marital or de facto relationship.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 75 usable responses to an online survey, 53 males (M 43 years, $SD = 11.2$ years) and 22 females ($M = 41$, $SD = 11.1$). The response rate was 31% usable data sets from 243 'hits', comparable to McKenna's (1998) e-mail survey and Cooper et al.'s (2002) survey of online sexual activity. Respondents had been either married or in a de facto relationship for a mean of 13 years ($SD = 10.4$). Forty-five per cent had children; most (66.6%) had some tertiary education; most (76%)

were in fulltime employment; 41.4% reported that they were professionals. Most respondents lived in the USA (70.7%), with 6.7% in the UK and 2.7% in Australia.

Materials

The online survey was introduced as an exploration of the nature of Internet relationships, and suggested that such relationships could complicate existing relationships. Criteria for participation were being currently married or in a de facto relationship and also having an Internet relationship that is romantically meaningful. Demographic questions included age, employment, education and length of relationship. Respondents were asked how they communicated, how often, and the average length of communication with their online partner, with options provided. Next was an open-ended question asking them to describe how their Internet relationship began.

Relationship formation. Respondents were asked if they knew what their online partner looked like, and how they had found out, that is, by webcam or similar, or through exchange of photos and videos. If so, they were also asked whether they found their online partner physically attractive, using a Likert scale where 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. They were then asked whether their online partner was within manageable travelling distance, whether there had been telephone contact, and whether letters had been exchanged. They were also asked a series of questions about intention to meet.

Self-disclosure. The survey then asked whether respondents participated in a range of forms of self-disclosure with their Internet partner and, if so, how quickly this had happened. Examples included whether they shared secrets, discussed personal problems, or had discussed sexual preferences with their online partner. Later in the survey they were asked identical self-disclosure questions regarding their marriage or de facto partner. Other questions included whether they had participated in any other romantic Internet relationships, and if so, how many, and whether they had participated in any other face-to-face romantic relationships outside of their marriage or de facto relationship.

The Internet relationship and the primary relationship. Participants were asked to rate the intensity of satisfaction with their Internet relationship on a 5-point Likert Scale. Later in the survey, the same information regarding their marriage or de facto relationship was requested. Respondents were given the opportunity to describe which aspects of their Internet relationship they found satisfying or less than satisfying. Later in the survey, those who indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that their marriage or de facto relationship was satisfying were asked to respond yes or no to a series of statements describing possible problems that they could encounter in their marriages or de facto relationships.

Several questions were asked regarding the way respondents perceived that their Internet relationship had affected their marriage or de facto relationships. The first item was to rate on a 5-point Likert scale how much their Internet relationship had damaged their marriage or de facto relationship. Respondents who strongly agreed or agreed that their Internet relationship had damaged their marriage or de facto relationship were asked to answer yes or no to a series of items taken from Young (2000), which described how their marriage or de facto relationship could have been affected by their online relationship.

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The sexual nature of the online relationship. Respondents indicated whether their Internet relationship involved sex, the nature of the sexual relationship, and whether the respondent had met their online partner. Later in the survey, the sexual nature, if any, of the respondent's marriage or de facto relationship since involvement with their Internet partner was assessed.

Procedure

Links to the electronic survey form were posted at a variety of newsgroup sites including Google groups and Yahoo clubs. Particular clubs or groups were selected because it was thought to be likely that respondents fitting the criteria for inclusion in this study would be likely to access these groups or clubs. The survey URL was simultaneously posted to different newsgroups such as Romance, Romance Online, Romance Chat, Culture Internet, Online Relationships and Long-distance Relationships. The online survey was posted with newsgroups during June 2002 for a period of 5 months, after which the data was downloaded for analysis. Of the 243 hits, 70 responses contained no information and 98 contained minimal data (usually only initial demographics), resulting in the 31% return rate previously mentioned.

Results

Relationship Formation

Significant differences $\chi^2(2, n = 75) = 319, p < .05$ were found between genders for frequency (daily, weekly, monthly) of communication. As shown in Table 1, more females than males reported that they communicated once a day. No significant difference between the genders was found for normal length of communication. Fifty-six percent reported that they normally communicated for one hour a day, 29.3% reported typically communicating for 30 minutes a day.

Most respondents (54.7%) reported that their romantic Internet partner was not within travelling distance; however, 38.7% said that they were. Over two-thirds of this sample reported that their online relationship had 'migrated' to other channels of communication. Sixty-eight per cent responded that they communicated with their online partner by telephone, and 37% by letter. Thirty-four per cent reported that they had already met their online partner. However, lack of proximity was mentioned frequently in the qualitative data.

Most respondents (76%) indicated that they knew what their online partner looked like. Of these, 79% strongly agreed or agreed that their online partner was attractive. Of those who answered the question about method of discovery of their partner's looks, most (82%) had found out by exchanging photos or videos. Those

TABLE 1

Frequency of Online Communication

Frequency	Males (n = 53)	Females (n = 22)
	n (%)	n (%)
Daily	25 (47.0)	18 (81.0)
Weekly	21 (36.9)	3 (13.6)
Monthly	7 (13.2)	1 (4.5)

TABLE 2

Frequency and Timing of Self-disclosure with Online Partner

		Within		
	Yes/No	Days	Weeks	Months
Sharing secrets	66/5	25	27	15
	(88.0/6.7)	(33.3)	(36.0)	(20.0)
Discussing problems	64/9	26	25	15
	(85.3/12.0	(34.7)	(33.3)	(20.0)
Discussing sexual preferences	66/7	36	19	13
	(88.0/9.3)	(48.0)	(25.3)	(17.3)
$N = 75$				

Note: Figures in brackets are percentages. They do not sum to 100, since not all respondents
  answered these questions.

who knew what their online partner looked like were more likely to intend to meet, $\chi^2(2, n = 66) = 10.58, p < .01$.

No specific questions were asked in this study about similarities between online partners. However, qualitative data in response to the questions 'What is satisfying or meaningful about your Internet relationship?' and 'How did your Internet relationship begin?' strongly suggested that perceived similarity between the partners in this study was an important factor in the development of the online relationship. Many respondents referred to similarities: 'We had similar interests and similar problems', 'We met in a chat room about a specific topic', 'I searched for years for a man who shares my dreams and interests', 'We have many of the same interests and the same sense of humour'.

As shown in Table 2, a large majority of respondents reported sharing secrets, and discussing personal problems and sexual preferences with their online partner. About a third discussed these aspects within days. Interestingly, almost half the sample claimed they had discussed sexual preferences with their online partner within days. There were no gender differences in these proportions, though there was a slight trend for women to be slower in such self-disclosures.

Infidelity

When asked 'Have you ever entered into any other romantic Internet relationships apart from your present Internet relationship?', 40 respondents (53%) said yes, and of them, the mean number of other relationships reported was 6.0 (median = 3.0). When asked 'Have you ever entered into any other romantic face-to-face relationships outside your present marriage or de facto relationship?', 36 respondents said yes (mean 7.0, median 3.0). These numbers should be treated with caution, since a small number of respondents reported numbers as large as 50. Also, the wording did not make clear whether the other relationships were during the existing ones.

Only 29 people (39%) responded to the item 'Please tick the box which describes the sexual nature, if any, of your Internet relationship'. Of these, only 5 (17%) reported that their romantic online relationship was not sexual in nature. Eleven (38%) reported that they had met and had sex with their Internet partner.

The remainder reported that their online relationship was sexual in nature, involving sexual images of the partner, masturbation and/or explicit sexual content of written communication.

Of the 95% of respondents who answered the question 'To what extent are you satisfied with your online relationship?', nearly two-thirds (63%) reported that they found their online relationship to be satisfying and meaningful. A quarter (25%) neither agreed nor disagreed. A small number (11%) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. In contrast, of the 84% of respondents who answered the question 'To what extent are you satisfied with your primary relationship?', most respondents (75%) remained neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. Only a very small number (6%) of respondents strongly agreed that they found their primary relationship satisfying.

Of the 31 respondents who reported dissatisfaction with their primary relationship, 8 (26%) reported that there were constant unresolved problems; 10 (32%) reported sexual dissatisfaction; 5 (16%) reported different child-rearing beliefs; 4 (13%) had been recently relocated away from family and friends; 6 (19%) reported financial problems; 10 (32%) reported that they do not communicate about important issues; and 11 (35%) reported that their primary relationship was in a rut.

In response to being asked to describe what they found to be satisfying about their online relationships participants revealed that there were some gender-related themes relating to self-disclosure. A common theme in the qualitative responses from males was that the most important feature of the online relationship was its sexual nature. Comments included: 'An intelligent and sexually satisfying relationship'; 'Purely a sexual meeting for mutual satisfaction and release'; 'Companionship and sexual conversation'; 'Sex with no strings'. No females commented about the sexual nature of the relationship. Female comments included: 'We share so much and have the joy of talking for hours about everything, we care about each other'; 'My heart is uplifted every time we talk'; 'We connect better than our partners, and we are understanding of one another'; 'It is an honest and true friendship'; 'That someone cares and shows love'.

Respondents were asked the degree to which they agreed that their Internet relationship had affected their marriage or de facto relationship. Of the 73 participants who responded, most (76%) said neither agree nor disagree, disagree or disagree strongly. Of the 17 respondents who admitted that their Internet relationship had affected their primary relationship, 10 (59%) said they concealed the truth of the nature of their activities on the computer; 9 (53%) said that everyday tasks did not get done because of the time spent on the computer; 8 (47%) admitted that they concealed from their partner how much time they spent on the computer; 8 (47%) agreed that their marriage or de facto partner said that they had changed; 8 (47%) agreed that levels of sexual intimacy with their marriage or de facto partner had declined; 7 (41%) said that time on the computer took time away from their marriage or de facto partner; and 2 (12%) said they argued with their marriage or de facto partner about high Internet costs. In spite of these admissions, only 4 (24%) agreed that their Internet partner was more important to them than their marriage or de facto partner.

Of the 66 people who responded to the item about the sexual nature of their relationship with their marriage or de facto partner since their involvement with their Internet partner, most (49%) reported that there had been no change; 22 (33%) reported that the sexual relations within their primary relationship had

improved; 6 (9%) reported that there had been a decline in sexual relations in their primary; and 6 (9%) reported that sex was absent in their primary relationship.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to confirm and add to the existing knowledge about the ways in which Internet relationships are formed and, in particular, to investigate the development of online relationships with a partner other than the marital or de facto partner, and how these online relationships compared with the participant's face-to-face relationship. No previous studies were found that have compared the nature of an online romantic relationship with that of a primary relationship.

This sample was comparatively older than the samples in previous studies which have found that the largest group of respondents was single and dating (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg 2000; Nice & Katzev, 1998; Parks, 1996), or that up to half were married (Schwartz & Southern, 2000; Wysocki, 1998). It was a requirement of the present study that all the participants were married or in ongoing committed relationships. This requirement may have lead to the self-selection of a sample at a different life-stage than in previous studies and hence the higher representation of older respondents.

Although more females indicated that they had participated in extramarital sexual behaviour than has been reported in the past, and both genders are now more equally represented in the literature (Spanier & Margolis, 1983), the present sample did not show a similar trend. Relatively few females reported that they were participating in online extra-marital relationships in the present study. It may be speculated that females were reluctant to participate in this survey due to social constraints, or because they did not feel safe disclosing information for research purposes. This would be consistent with past research investigating face-to-face infidelity (e.g., Feldman & Cauffman, 1999). Whitty (2002) also found that although chatroom relationships can be completely anonymous, many women do not use this forum. An alternative explanation for the apparent differential between genders in reporting extramarital sexual activities may that the males have overreported as a means of exhibiting their sexual prowess.

The present investigation found that most of the respondents were tertiary-educated and in full-time employment. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Cooper, Delmonico & Burg, 2000; Schwartz & Southern, 2000; Wysocki, 1998). Professions represented in the present thesis included teachers, accountants, information-technology professionals, and members of the armed forces. Unlike other studies, however, the present one found that the 'other' employment category was well represented, with over a third of respondents being involved in non-professional employment. It is probable, as suggested by Nie (2001), that as computers become more affordable, the Internet is being more widely used by nonprofessionals than has been previously the case.

Females were found to communicate more often than males, that is, daily rather than weekly. They also communicated more times per day, sometimes up to five times. This is consistent with the findings of the PEW Internet and American Life Project, (2003), where females were found to communicate in intense bursts, whereas males were found to tolerate longer delays between communications with their online partner.

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Relationship Formation

Prior to the advent of computer-mediated relationships, geographic proximity was well reported as a prerequisite for who would meet (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). The present study found that although most respondents lived in the USA, a wide variety of geographical locations were reported. The results support the suggestion that computer-mediated relationships challenge proximity as a pre-requisite to relationship formation (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Merkle, 2000), demonstrating that the range and variety of people available to form relationships with is greatly enhanced with the use of the Internet as a method of communica-tion. As expected, most of the respondents in the present study indicated that their online partner did not live within travelling distance. Although most of the respondents could not easily travel to meet their online partner, consistent with other studies, the relationship was reported to have 'migrated' to other communica-tion channels (McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Parks, 1996). The lack of proximity, therefore, did not appear to be a problem to relationship-formation for many respondents, and other channels of communication such as letters and the tele-phone supplemented the relationship. In the qualitative data, however, some par-ticipants indicated that the lack of proximity did become a frustration, and a barrier to the further development of many online relationships.

The exchange of photographs, videos and webcams by most of the respondents in the present study seems to indicate that the role of attractiveness in online rela-tionships may be more important than has been previously suggested (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). These results chal-lenge previous proposals that online relationships are less superficial than face-to-face romantic relationships because they are built on high levels of communication and the development of intimacy, rather than on physical appearance (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; McKenna & Bargh, 1999). A significant number of respondents in the present study reported that they knew what their online partner looked like, and they also reported that this knowledge had influenced their decision about whether they intended to meet their online partner. These findings would therefore not appear to support Walster, Aronson and Darcy (1966), who speculated that as people age, physical attractiveness would become a less important determinant of attraction. Alternatively, it might have been that participants were more attracted to images of their online partner than they would otherwise have been, because they had already formed a strong (preimage) relationship with this partner (McKenna & Bargh, 1999).

Although it was not a major area of investigation, qualitative responses in the present study suggested that perceived similarities between the participants and their partners were important determinants of the development of the relationship. Many respondents referred to similarities such as interests, intellectual and emo-tional levels, problems and opinions. These findings would appear to confirm the well-documented tendency for individuals to be attracted to others with similar interests or social backgrounds (Brehm, 1985; Buss, 1993). The references to the similarities between partners also appears to confirm the value of the Internet as an efficient 'sorting house', thereby increasing the chances that people would find partners with similar interests (McKenna, 1998; Rheingold, 1993).

Respondents reported that there was a significantly higher level of self-disclo-sure in the online relationship in comparison with their primary relationship. Also,

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self-disclosures about sexual preferences were reported more than self-disclosure of secrets, or the discussion of personal problems with their online partner. Just under half of the sample in the present thesis reported that they had disclosed information about their sexual preferences within a week of communicating with their online partner. This tendency was further illustrated in the qualitative data. The finding that the respondents disclosed high levels of information about their sexual preferences early in the relationship confirms previous findings (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Wysocki, 1998) that, online, people can get to know each other free of inhibitions, including sexual inhibitions. The findings also support Parks (1996) and McKenna and Bargh (1999) who found that early high-level self-disclosure of risky and emotional information is typical of online relationships. It is likely that particular characteristics, such as low levels of self-consciousness, low levels of social evaluation and high levels of perceived anonymity promoted subjective feelings of emotional safety, enabling the frank and intimate discussion reported by the respondents (McKenna, 1998; Young, 2000).

Within the primary relationship, respondents reported that although they used to self-disclose in the past, the current level of self-disclosure was much lower. This tendency might well be expected in any long-term relationship. It could be that the partners believe that they know each other so well that there is little left to disclose or, alternatively, that problems and issues that could have been productively discussed within the primary relationship are now being discussed with the online partner. It is interesting that no significant differences in discussion of problems were found between the online and the primary relationship. These high levels of discussion of problems, or perhaps arguments, within the primary relationship might indicate the presence of longstanding unresolved problems, which were set against a backdrop of low levels of secret-sharing and low levels of discussion about sexual preferences. It is speculated that the high levels of discussion about problems in the online relationship might reflect the sharing of complaints and concerns relating to the primary relationship.

Although no significant quantitative differences were found between males and females for the discussion of sexual preferences, it is interesting to note that males and females gave markedly different qualitative responses about the sexual nature of the relationship and its importance to them. Although there were many comments about the caring aspects of the online relationship, comments about finding the relationship to be sexually satisfying were made exclusively by males. This suggests that for males, the online romantic partner satisfied unmet sexual needs, or perhaps that the sexual component flowed from more in-depth communication than they would characteristically engage in within face-to-face relationships. No females commented on the sexual nature of the relationship in the qualitative data. Perhaps, for females, the intimate online discussions satisfy their need to communicate about interests and explore aspects of themselves that are neglected or unable to be explored in their face-to-face relationships. These findings are supportive of Cooper and Sportolari (1997), who suggested that the emotional intimacy found in online relationships would be attractive to women because many experience their sexuality within a relationship that is well-developed emotionally/intimately. The data also provides support for Spanier and Margolis (1983) and Glass and Wright (1995), who found that females were more likely than males to report that their extramarital relationship was emotional in

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nature, and more males than females were likely to report that their extramarital relationship was sexual in nature.

The results of the present study provided further evidence of the growing popularity of online romantic relating. More respondents had been involved in prior Internet relationships than they had in prior face-to-face relationships with someone other than their primary partner. Although there has been much speculation about whether or not online relationships represent 'true' betrayal because there is no physical sexual act, the participants in the present thesis reported that they found their online relationships to be satisfying sexually. Most of the participants who described the nature of their online sexual activities reported that they were involved in explicit sexual communication. In particular, they sent and received sexual images of their partner, and that physical relief was obtained by masturbation. It is also noteworthy that over one-third of the respondents in this survey had met and had a sexual relationship with their online partner. The findings in the present study suggest a form of betrayal of the primary relationship, and provide support for Whitty (2002) that engaging in online sexual chat and sharing online emotional information are 'real' forms of betrayal.

Most of the respondents were significantly more satisfied with their relationship with their online partner than they were with their relationship with their primary partner. Two main reasons were given by respondents for their lack of satisfaction with their marriages or de facto relationships. First, they felt as if they were 'in a rut' and that they were sexually dissatisfied. Second, both males and females felt more understood and more able to talk about anything and share personal feelings with their online partner than with their primary partner. These reasons are consistent with the findings of Whitty (2002) that older respondents received emotional support from their online partner, and the Internet provided the opportunity for the development of intimacy that perhaps was perceived to be lacking in their primary relationships. Interestingly, even though the respondents in this survey reported greater feeling of *satisfaction* with their online partner, most respondents also said that their primary partnership was more *important* to them than their online relationship. This is consistent with what is known about face-to-face extramarital relationships, that is, that while extramarital relationships may be important, many people are cautious about letting their affair jeopardise their marriages (Masters, Johnson & Kolodny, 1994).

Most respondents in the present study reported that they did not think their online relationship had affected their marriages or de facto relationships. Of those who indicated that it had, most reported that they lied to their partner about the amount of time they spent with their online partner, and that they neglected to undertake day-to-day tasks around the house because they were online with their partner. Yet few of the participants admitted that their sexual relationship with their primary partner had been negatively affected by their online relationship.

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However, it appears that the participants' online affairs did have the potential to be harmful to their primary relationships. This supports Cooper, McLoughlin and Campbell (2000), who proposed that online relationships have the capacity to interfere with the resolution of ongoing problems in primary relationships. It appears that the participants have searched for intimacy outside of their primary relationships and in so doing have expended energy that could perhaps have been more usefully directed towards potential for improvement of the primary relationship.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. One is the variety of cultures represented. Although primarily North American, respondents included British and Australian respondents and some from non-Anglo cultures. The small sample size precluded serious comparisons across cultures — which is deserving of further research. Since the research was exploratory and descriptive, it often raises as many questions as it answers, particularly regarding perceptions of the effect of the online relationship on the primary one. Respondents may be not only defensive, but also possibly deluding themselves about such effects. More research, such as that of Schneider (2000), on the partners of people engaged in online relationships would be of use in investigating these effects.

Conclusion

It is obvious that online relationships are occurring in greater numbers and, given the ubiquity of the Internet, this can only be expected to increase. The present research confirmed the rapidity of relationship-formation and its intimacy and importance to those engaged in it. On the assumption that perceptions of the effect of online relations on primary ones are likely to be underrecognised or reported, the proportion of negative effects admitted in the present study implies that there are increasing problems that therapists will have to deal with. Hopefully this research has contributed to knowledge about the magnitude of such problems.

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