

# Ethical Implications of Investigating Internet Relationships

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## INTRODUCTION

The focus on Internet relationships has escalated in recent times, with researchers investigating such areas as the development of online relationships (e.g., McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Whitty & Gavin, 2001), the formation of friends online (Parks & Floyd, 1996), representation (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, 2002), and misrepresentation (Whitty, 2002) of self online. Researchers have also attempted to identify those addicted to accessing online sexual material (Cooper, Putnam, Planchon & Boies, 1999). Moreover, others have been interested in Internet infidelity (Whitty, 2003a) and cybersex addiction (Griffiths, 2001; Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara & Buchanan, 2000). Notwithstanding this continued growth of research in this field, researchers have neglected to consider the more ethical ways in conducting this type of research.

While it is acknowledged here that some of the discussions in this article might be equally applied to the study of other Internet texts, such as religious or racial opinions, the focus in this article is on the concomitant ethical concerns of ongoing research into Internet relationships. Given that the development and maintenance of online relationships can be perceived as private and very personal (possibly more personal than other sensitive areas), there are potential ethical concerns that are unique to the study of such a topic area (Whitty, 2004). For a broader discussion of virtual research ethics, refer to Ess and Jones (2004).

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON INTERNET RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY

Early research into this area has mostly focused on the similarities and differences between online and offline relationships. Researchers have been divided over the importance of available social cues in the creation and maintenance of online relationships. Some have argued that online relationships are shallow and impersonal (e.g., Slouka, 1995). In contrast, others contend that Internet

relationships are just as emotionally fulfilling as face-to-face relationships, and that any lack of social cues can be overcome (Lea & Spears, 1995; Walther, 1996). In addition, researchers have purported that the ideals that are important in traditional relationships, such as trust, honesty, and commitment, are equally important online, but the cues that signify these ideals are different (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Current research is also beginning to recognize that for some, online relating is just another form of communicating with friends and lovers, and that we need to move away from considering these forms of communication as totally separate and distinct entities (e.g., Vayreda, Galvez, Nunez & Callen, 2002). Moreover, McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) have found that when people convey their 'true' self online, they develop strong Internet relationships and bring these relationships into their 'real' lives.

Internet friendships developed in chat rooms, newsgroups, and MUDs or MOOs have been examined by a number of researchers. For example, Parks and Floyd (1996) used e-mail surveys to investigate how common personal relationships are in newsgroups. After finding that these relationships were regularly formed in newsgroups, Parks and Roberts (1998) examined relationships developed in MOOs. These researchers found that most (93.6%) of their participants had reported having formed some type of personal relationship online, the most common type being a close friendship.

Researchers have also been interested in how the playful arena of the Internet impacts on the types of relationships formed in these places (e.g., Whitty, 2003b; Whitty & Carr, 2003). Turkle's (1995) well-known research on her observations while interacting in MUDs found that the role-playing aspect of MUDs actually creates opportunities for individuals to reveal a deeper truth about themselves. Whitty and Gavin (2001) have also contended that although people do lie about themselves online, this paradoxically can open up a space for a deeper level of engagement with others.

Cybersex addiction and the available treatment for these cybersex addicts and their partners has been an area of research and concern for psychologists (e.g., Schneider, 2000; Young, Pistner, O'Mara & Buchanan, 1999). Research has also focused on what online acts might be

considered as an act of infidelity. For example, Whitty (2003a) found that acts such as cybersex and hot-chatting were perceived as almost as threatening to the offline relationship as sexual intercourse. In addition to the above concerns, Cooper et al. (1999) identified three categories of individuals who access Internet erotic material, including recreational users, sexual compulsive users (these individuals are addicted to sex *per se*, and the Internet is but one mode where they can access sexual material), and at-risk users (these individuals would never have developed a sexual addiction if it were not for the Internet).

## **ETHICAL ISSUES PERTINENT TO THE STUDY OF INTERNET RELATIONSHIPS**

Much of the research, to date, on Internet relationships and sexuality has been conducted online—either through interviews and surveys, or by carrying out analysis on text that is readily available online. There are many advantages to conducting research online, as well as collecting text or data available online for analysis in one's research (see Table 1).

In spite of the numerous advantages to conducting research online, investigators also need to be aware of the disadvantages (see Table 2).

What all studies that research Internet relationships have in common is that they are researching a sensitive topic, which requires individuals to reveal personal and often very private aspects of themselves and their lives. Given the sensitive nature of this topic area, it is crucial that researchers give some serious thought to whether they are truly conducting research in an ethical manner.

A common form of using the Internet for researching online relationships is to analyze the text produced by people online. The text can be produced in a number of different forums, including chat rooms, MUDs, newsgroups, and online dating sites. One way researchers collect data is by lurking in these different spaces in cyberspace. The development of online relationships

(both friendships and romantic) and engaging in online sexual activities, such as cybersex, could easily be perceived by those engaging in such activities as a private discourse. Given the nature of these interactions, social researchers need to seriously consider if they have the right to lurk in online settings in order to learn more about these activities—despite the benefits of obtaining this knowledge.

There are fuzzy boundaries between what constitutes public and private spaces online, and researchers need to acknowledge that there are different places online. For example, a chat room might be deemed a more public space than e-mail. It is contended here that lurking in some spaces online might be ethically questionable. We must, as researchers, debate how intrusive a method lurking potentially is. As Ferri (1999, cited in Mann & Stewart, 2000) contends: "Who is the intended audience of an electronic communication—and does it include you as a researcher?" (p. 46).

Researchers also need to consider how the participant perceives the spaces online. As Ferri suggests, private interactions can and do indeed occur in public places. It has been theorized that the Internet can give an individual a sense of privacy and anonymity (e.g., Rice & Love, 1987). The social presence theory contends that "social presence" is the feeling that one has that other persons are involved in a communication exchange (Rice & Love, 1987). Since computer-mediated relating (CMR) involves less non-verbal cues (such as facial expression, posture, and dress) and auditory cues in comparison to face-to-face communication, it is said to be extremely low in social presence. Hence, while many others might occupy the space online, it is not necessarily perceived in that way. As researchers, we need to ask: Can researchers ethically take advantage of these people's false sense of privacy and security? Is it ethically justifiable to lurk in these sites and download material without the knowledge or consent of the individuals who inhabit these sites? This is especially relevant to questions of relationship development and sexuality, which are generally understood to be private matters. Therefore, good ethical practice needs to consider the psychology of cyberspace and the false sense of security the Internet affords.

*Table 1. Practical benefits of conducting research online*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Easy access to a population of individuals who form relationships online and who access sexual material</li><li>- Internet provides researchers with a population that is sometimes difficult to research (e.g., people with disabilities, agoraphobia)</li><li>- Contact people in locations that have closed or limited access (e.g., prisons, hospitals)</li><li>- Requires relatively limited resources</li><li>- Ease of implementation</li></ul> |
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