

Chapter 29

Online Relationships and the Realm of Romantic Possibilities

Aaron Ben-Ze'ev
University of Haifa, Israel

ABSTRACT

Human life concerns not only—or even mainly—the present, but rather, and to a significant extent, the realm of imagined possibilities that include cyberspace. The fundamental human capacity to imagine the possible not only reveals reality, but often disregards it as well. Although the realm of potential romantic possibilities is promising, it is also risky. To guide our path through this unknown territory, humans have created boundaries that eliminate the options that seem immoral or dangerous. Internet-based social interaction technologies have considerably increased the boundaries of the realm of the romantically possible and its accessibility. Hence, the challenge of coping with this realm has become central to modern life and has far reaching implications for human relationships. This chapter theorizes the role of technology in creating potential possibilities for romantic relationships and focuses on the imagination, interactivity, reciprocity, and anonymity of cyberspace.

INTRODUCTION

A major function of imagination is to help us understand our environment and prepare ourselves for future situations. We can overcome present difficulties by imagining possible desirable circumstances; in this manner we may also become aware of the shortcomings of certain possible imagined scenarios and the greater or lesser likelihood of their material-

izing. It is difficult to act without considering the infinite possibilities—what may be and what might have been. The imaginative capacity forces us to be concerned not only with the present circumstances, but also with past and future circumstances. Indeed, people think about the future more than about the past or the present. Many potential events are more pleasurable to imagine than to experience (Gilbert, 2007: 17-18; Roese & Olson, 1995). Imagination facilitates our flight from one such set of circumstances to another. The constant play between the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-368-5.ch029

actual and the potential can generate profound emotional dissonance. The “road not taken” is as significant as the one we ultimately choose. Social interaction technologies enable us to miss fewer roads.

The realm of possibilities considerably increases the importance of including a comparison in our quest to make a choice. When making decisions in the present, we constantly compare the present to possible alternatives. The act of comparison that underlies the emotional significance attributed to an event encompasses a mental construction of an alternative situation. The more available the alternative, that is, the closer the imagined alternative is to being realized, the more intense the emotion (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Ben-Ze’ev, 2000: 21-23). The Internet has extended our notions of what we might consider possible. Cyberspace is the land of unlimited possibilities. Although we can be emotionally rich in no time, we can suffer many painful experiences and never reach the “Promised Land.”

The notion of the availability of alternatives may explain many seemingly puzzling situations, such as people who remain in unfulfilling marriages or jobs. Although their satisfaction from the present situation is low, people perceive other possible alternatives to be even worse (Baron et al., 1992:3). The other direction is found as well. People leave reasonable existing situations for unknown risky ones; By comparison, the evaluation of possible alternatives often supersedes those of existing positions. Since the realm of romantic possibilities so overwhelms us with tempting alternatives, we are not able to reasonably consider alternatives to the status quo. We tend to bow to the lure of immediate and ever-changing possibilities while neglecting the more stable aspects of the present and the long-term future.

BACKGROUND

The great advantage of modern technology is its ability to present many tempting possible romantic options. We have become slaves to such romantic options—the Internet, business trips, and cell phones all facilitate various romantic and sexual possibilities. The chains of potential possibilities prevent us from enjoying or even being comfortable with the present. We tend to get used to the chains of the present, as we really have no other choice. It is much harder to cope with the chains of the possible, since this realm, bounded only by our imagination, is extremely exciting and can prevent us from being happy with our present lot. The present may make us somewhat sad, but the realm of the possible makes us restless and continually disappointed.

Coping with the mixed blessing of the possible requires us to establish a normative order of priority in the form of ideals and boundaries. As we establish a set of normative priorities, we often find ourselves giving up an ideal or violating a certain boundary. Romantic love in modern society is rife with the difficulties associated with fulfilling ideals and maintaining boundaries. To decrease the violation of boundaries, we may want to make our normative boundaries more flexible; in turn, this may weaken the safeguards against further violation. Take, for example, cyberspace where the romantic and sexual boundaries are much more flexible than in offline circumstances. This flexibility did not reduce the number of offline violations of boundaries but rather increased it. Romantic and sexual cheating increased with the expanded use of the Internet (Orr, 2004).

Many married people testify that they set certain boundaries for their online activity, yet quickly violate them as they want to upgrade their online affair. The absence in cyberspace of external constraints and the ability to overcome personal limitations by using the imagination make cyberlove similar to infatuation, both of which approximate idealized love. It seems that

7 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/online-relationships-realm-romantic-possibilities/36041

Related Content

Facilitating Collaboration: Potential Synergies Between Collaboration Engineering and Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning

Aleksandra Lazareva and Bjørn Erik Munkvold (2017). *International Journal of e-Collaboration* (pp. 22-38).
www.irma-international.org/article/facilitating-collaboration/207356

Expertiza: Managing Feedback in Collaborative Learning

Edward F. Gehringer (2010). *Monitoring and Assessment in Online Collaborative Environments: Emergent Computational Technologies for E-Learning Support* (pp. 75-96).
www.irma-international.org/chapter/expertiza-managing-feedback-collaborative-learning/36844

A Policy-Based Team Collaboration

Jae W. Hwang and Shmuel Rotenstreich (2012). *International Journal of e-Collaboration* (pp. 1-16).
www.irma-international.org/article/policy-based-team-collaboration/61402

Progression of E-Publishing Capacity Building in Nigeria

Emmanuel Ifeduba (2022). *Virtual Technologies and E-Collaboration for the Future of Global Business* (pp. 117-133).
www.irma-international.org/chapter/progression-of-e-publishing-capacity-building-in-nigeria/308191

The Relationship between Online Reviews, Brand Trust, and Willingness to Buy

V. Cheng, J. Rhodes and P. Lok (2015). *Strategic E-Commerce Systems and Tools for Competing in the Digital Marketplace* (pp. 139-161).
www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-relationship-between-online-reviews-brand-trust-and-willingness-to-buy/125545