



THE 14<sup>TH</sup> EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION  
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

## Online Infidelity Theoretical Background Contributing to Cyber-Related Intimacy Issues

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**Abstract:** The introduction of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace has provided a relatively new platform for interpersonal communication, a vital part of daily living and a popular way of initiating, establishing, maintaining, and enhancing existing as well as new relationships. However, certain problems and difficulties have arisen from this issue. The present research has been done to outline the four “As” related to cyber intimacy (anonymity, affordability, accessibility; approximation) as identified by King (1999), Cooper (2000; 2002), Ross (2002), and Tikkanen and Ross (2003) by outlining how these “As” are noted within the published literature. There have also been taken into consideration two more “As” (ambiguity and accommodation) as introduced by Hertlein and Stevenson (2010).

**Keywords:** cyber-related intimacy issues; couples; sex; online infidelity

### Cooper’s Online Infidelity Theory Contributing to Cyber-Related Intimacy Issues

Today’s systems of communication allow people to interact with each other in settings that are not face-to-face. The Internet provides many opportunities for people to connect and relate to one another. To date, 1.7 billion people worldwide use the Internet (Internet Usage Stats, 2009). People access the Internet for a myriad of different reasons ranging from obtaining information to maintaining relationships. Some avenues include: Twitter (8 million users), Facebook (200 million users and 100 million log on daily), and MySpace (76 million users) which encourages people to connect to one another. This type of communication has made it easy to create new interpersonal relationships, get in touch with old friends, and maintain distant relationships.

The Internet can be a very powerful, positive tool for a couple’s relationship. Couples can exchange instant messages or texts throughout a day, e-cards, and share links and music with a few short clicks of the computer mouse or taps on a touch screen. Long distance relationships also become easier to maintain in an age of instant communication because users (1) can find partners independent of geographic location, and (2) can share videos, photos, and messages instantly, enhancing the development of intimacy and progression of the relationship (Hertlein, 2008). Further, these relationships can be sustained rather affordably through an Internet service provider package and a monthly fee (Cooper, 2002). In seeking to understand the pros and cons of technology and couples, Henline and Harris (2006) discovered that people enjoy using technology to communicate with their partners or potential partners, and enjoy that technology provides a context in which relationships develop based on common interests rather than looks. Henline and Harris concluded that technology can

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help couples build connections, provide a base for developing a relationship, and assist with conflict resolution.

### **Defining Cyber-Related Intimacy Issues**

In some cases, however, the Internet can facilitate problems for its users. Henline and Harris (2006) found that there were also negatives related to technology and couples in three main ways. First, they discovered that communication through technology can create problems accurately interpreting the true intention of the message. Clearly, such misunderstandings can disrupt the couples communication patterns both on- and offline. Second, participants who are continually connected to the Internet via phone or computer reported greater degrees of feeling “smothered” by their partners. Third, participants reported those who become over-involved in online activities may neglect household responsibilities or the maintenance of their relationship.

Other scholars also believe that the Internet can contribute to problems in other ways. Barak and Fisher (2002) believe that cybersex relations “will become a major factor in deteriorating marital relations and, therefore, a cause of relationship distress and divorce.” (p. 270). This quote echoes results the work of Schneider (2003) who investigated how people (primarily women) had been affected by their partner’s cybersex usage. She found that cybersex was a major factor in separation or divorce in addition to the problems it caused for the relationship, including: a decrease in desire for relational sex, comparing oneself negatively to the online partner, and feelings of betrayal. Likewise Ross, Månsson, Daneback, and Tikkanen (2005) conducted a study comparing men engaging in same-sex behavior online with a sample of men engaging in heterosexual behavior online and found that, as compared to the group of men who had sex with women, men who had sex with men reported more problems regarding: (1) their sexual thoughts and behaviors, (2) daily life related to their desire to have sex, and (3) maintaining commitments and responsibilities due to their sexual behavior.

Literature in the realm of couple therapy also seems to contend that couples can experience struggles related to the Internet. For example, couple therapists reported an increase in the number of cases with an Internet component (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002) and are struggle with appropriate treatment strategies (Nelson, 2005). Goldberg, Peterson, Rosen, and Sara (2008) found a majority (73%) of marriage and family therapists reported they were not trained in their program to deal with this problem in treatment. The majority of the sample of couple therapists reported they learned that cybersex could be a clinical issue from their clients, partners and families (58%), followed by the general media and educational sources both at 28%, friends, colleagues and supervision at 15% and lastly the Internet itself at 12%. Additionally, they report the average participant saw four clients per year who presented with cybersex related issues, with a range from 0 to 50. These findings accentuate the need for clinicians to be well informed when working and treating clients with these issues.

Clearly, there are many instances where technology (and the Internet) can complicate a couple’s life together. We have found, however, that many scholars have difficulty separating the treatment of Internet-related intimacy problems from other common issues a couple faces. In the case of Internet infidelity for example, therapists address the trust, communication, and loss of security brought on by the affair, but do not address the technology specifically other than to advise the couple to move the computer to another room of the house (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). This finding suggests that couples therapists are aware the presence of the computer has an important place in contributing to and treating an Internet-related problem, but cannot articulate how it manifests within a couple’s relationship or what to do about it. The purpose of this paper was to conduct a literature review to (1) identify support for the

previously identified five “As” to explain the seduction of the Internet into a couple’s life, and (2) demonstrate instances of two other “As” contributing to Internet-related intimacy problems.

### **Literature Review Process**

In order to identify possible contributing factors towards Internet-related intimacy problems, we conducted a literature review. While there is already an Internet-Related Problem Scale (Armstrong, Phillips, & Saling, 2000), as therapists, we were specifically interested the problems experienced by couples. We defined Internet-related intimacy problems as any Internet phenomenon which might cause a problem for a couple’s intimacy. In general, we determined that most of the articles in the literature address exploring Internet-related problems focused on porn use (see, for example, Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004), infidelity, (see, for example, Mileham, 2007; Miliner, 2008), and the development of relationships online (see, for example, McCown, Fischer, Page, & Homant, 2001).

We used several search engines including: PsycINFO, EbscoHost, and Academic Search Premier. Search terms we used included (but were not limited to): “Internet sex”, “cybersex”, “online intimacy”, “internet intimacy”, “online affair”, “Internet affair”, “Internet infidelity”, “online infidelity”, and “computer-mediated relationships”. While our search initially included many articles describing characteristics of Internet users, our limited search focusing on investigations whose focus was on Internet-related intimacy problems published between 2000 and 2009, yielding a total of 62 unique citations. Of these 62 citations, 35 were scholarly articles. Of those 35, we did not include articles focused on addiction (eliminating two articles), were clinical/theoretical rather than empirical (eliminating eight articles), reviewed previous literature (eliminating two articles), or focused on the formation of a primary relationship online in the absence of an existing couplehood (eliminating six articles), resulting in a total of 19 articles.

This literature review was a semi-structured, discovery-oriented process. According to Tikkanen and Ross (2003), “The Triple A Engine (Cooper, 1998), with its fourth factor suggested by King (1999), seems to be accurate in understanding gay men’s use of Internet chat rooms.” (p. 131). Therefore, we began our search with the concept of the “Triple A Engine” (Cooper, 2002). We read the published research in an attempt to locate information supporting the existence of the three “As” (anonymity, accessibility, affordability) as well as for King’s (1999) fourth A (acceptability) and the concept of approximation as discussed by Ross and Kauth (2002) and Tikkanen and Ross (2003). We also found that there seem to be two other “As” operating in cases where Internet usage can be problematic: ambiguity and accommodation. Each of these concepts in relation to their contribution to Internet-related intimacy problems are discussed below.

### **The Four “As” Cited Within the Published Literature**

#### **Anonymity**

There are several known types of Internet-related vulnerabilities which contribute to Internet-related intimacy problems. Cooper (2000; 2002) identified three including: anonymity, accessibility, and affordability. Anonymity refers to the concept that the user is in control of their self-presentation. As Hertlein and Sendak (2007) stated:

*...those engaging in online relationships can choose to present a detached attachment or absent presence characterized by features of oppositionality: distance/immediacy; anonymity/disclosure;*

*deception/sincerity...in one line of text, an individual can transmit confessional self-disclosure while remaining anonymous.” (p. 2)*

In face to face relationships, identities or other attributes about a person can be exposed through physical appearance, non-verbal communication signals, or other aspects. Such aspects might lend someone to being judged by the other person and have real consequences for the duration or development of the relationship. Internet users have the ability to manage what demographics are observed (i.e., ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) until they feel more assured that these aspects will not hinder the development of the relationship. In essence, the Internet “enhances one’s ability to promote any chosen identity.” (Hertlein & Sendak, 2007, p. 4).

The notion of the Internet being a place for anonymity is supported through published literature. Reitmeijer, Bull, and McFarlane (2001) found that those seeking Internet sex had more partners than those who did not look for sex online. Further, 65% of those who were looking for sex online had sex with their Internet partner. Within these cases, however, only 44% reported using condoms during their last sexual encounter. Because those on the Internet have more partners than those who do not meet partners online, the risk of spreading sexually transmitted diseases is greater (Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001; McFarlane, Bull, & Reitmeijer, 2000; Klausner, Wolf, Fischer-Ponce, Zolt, & Katz, 2000). Therefore, the anonymity provided by the Internet can contribute to problems when the user decides to hide pertinent aspects of him/her in order to pursue a relationship.

### **Accessibility**

Accessibility refers to the many locations for Internet access – from homes, workplaces, internet cafés, to PDAs and cellphones. The accessibility of these modes of Internet access provides affair partners the ability to sustain their relationship by corresponding throughout the day, sending erotic emails, and initiating a sexual encounter (Cooper et. al, 2000). All of these modes can be accessed without drawing too much attention from a partner, co-workers, and friends. This concept relates most similarly to the concept of opportunity, a core concept in related to one’s likelihood to engaging in infidelity (Treas & Giesen, 2000). The access one has to the Internet is increasing daily, and potentially resulting in problems because of it. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, and personal webpages accelerate the accessibility one has to other connection and, consequently, the opportunities for engaging in an Internet affair. Underwood and Findlay (2004) found similar results when exploring the manner in which relationships develop online. While their respondents reported that their primary relationship was more important than their online relationships, the researchers found evidence to suggest that the online relationships do have the potential to interfere with an offline relationship intimacy is threatened.

### **Affordability**

To facilitate a relationship online is also affordable (Cooper, 2000; 2002). For example, one merely pays a monthly service charge from an Internet service provider. This is certainly less expensive than paying for dinners, movies, or other outings with a third party. Further, the likelihood of the involved partner being “discovered” may be reduced, as there will likely be no receipts for outings, dinners, or other activities. The duration of time spent online engaging in sexual pursuits, whether a short amount of time or a long amount of time, does not make a difference in the bottom line of how much it costs a household per month, so tracking time spent online is not immediately obvious.

To date, we did not find any articles that spoke directly about the affordability component described by Cooper. While articles such as Schneider (2003) and Ross, Månsson, Daneback, and Tikkanen (2005) speak specifically to the problems in one's life related to the Internet, they did not specifically have to do with finances. We, then, suggest that this category be broadened to talk about the emotional cost to a relationship in the cases where the Internet use is problematic, or the emotional cost to the relationship when not using the Internet as a resource.

### **Approximation**

After the development of the three "As", scholars began to consider how other factors about the Internet affect how people use it. Approximation, a fourth A, has been added by Ross and Kauth (2002) and Tikkanen and Ross (2003) in regarding online sex. It refers to the quality about the Internet which approximates real world situation. In other words, what can be viewed on the Internet is becoming more close to the physical world. One can engage in particular sexual acts without participating in them in the real world, thus blurring the line between fantasy and action (Ross, 2005). Applied to online infidelity, programs on the Internet approximate the real world better every day. Not only is the approximation of the behavior attractive, however, such an approximation also helps to enhance relationships.

In one of the studies that shaped the development of this concept, Tikkanen and Ross (2003) conducted a sociosexual survey among men who have sex with men in Sweden. The questionnaire did include items about communication with potential partners via chat rooms or other communities. The study was partially launched on a reputable website within the gay community hosted by the largest organization for gay people in Sweden. There was also a written portion which was distributed within the gay community. The participants were nearly equally divided, with 678 completing the Internet survey and 716 completing the written version, for a total of 1,394 responses. The data suggest that the interactions established via the Internet "may be a secure way to experiment with homosexual behavior or emotions without having to identify as homosexual or gay." (p. 131).

Support of this "A" is offered by Cooper, Galbreath, and Becker (2004). In a sample of 384 men investigating the Internet as a medium of men's sexual behavior, the researchers found men use the Internet for several reasons, among which are to simulate certain behaviors in which they may not be able to realistically participate. Further, Cooper et al (2004) found that men may be using the Internet to cope with stress and when this strategy is reinforced, usage around this reason continues. In this context, the quality of approximation of the Internet is used as a stress and conflict management tool in that it simulates a way to manage stress through sexual activity in which people may not feel comfortable realistically participating (Cooper et al, 2004). Whitty (2005) also explored how the perception of online betrayal affected offline relationships and concluded that Internet infidelity can be perceived as a real betrayal and can affect a primary relationship as much as an offline betrayal would, in part because of the ability of the Internet to approximate an infidelity scenario.

Mileham (2007) also was specifically interested in focusing research on the "synchronous, interactive" (p. 12) components of communication online and their contribution to online infidelity. Mileham conducted in depth interviews with 86 participants contacted via an Internet chat room. She concluded that there were three main concepts that were contributing to affairs: anonymous sexual interactionism, behavioral rationalization, and effortless avoidance. Relevant to the seven "As" is the concept of anonymous sexual interactionism. While the researcher identified the chat room experience as one that was interactive, the participants did not notice the interactional quality of the Internet, but rather viewed the chat room experience as watching a movie, thus removing themselves as active participants in the

process. It is this inability to take ownership of their own behavior which may diminish awareness and put one on the “slippery slope” toward an affair or other intimacy problems.

### **Acceptability**

Acceptability means that much of the behavior on the Internet that has been deemed inappropriate in society has found a way to be an accepted way of life on the Internet. King (1999) discussed this in regard to Internet pornography, but it also applied to other Internet-related intimacy problems. The majority of the literature that addressed the acceptability component conducted studies examining the perceptions of Internet-related problems. For example, Daneback, Cooper, and Månsson (2005) found in a sample of 1,835 participants, 1,458 (or nearly three quarters) admitted to using the Internet for the pursuit of online sexual activities. In another study, Boies, Cooper, and Osborne (2004) found that 283 of their 760 participants did not use the Internet for sexual entertainment or information, thus suggesting that for a majority of their participants, using the Internet to access sexual topics was viewed as acceptable. Goodson, McCormick, and Evans (2000) looked at college student attitudes toward Internet use specifically focused on the creation of personal connections as well as using the Internet for the pursuit of sexual activities. In developing a survey, the authors asked undergraduate students to suggest potential survey questions. Once the items were developed they were refined by experts and submitted to a focus group of students. Finally, the researchers conducted intensive individual interviews with undergraduate students to understand the questions. In this process, they relied on the perceived acceptability of online behavior for young adults.

## **Ambiguity and Accommodation in Cyber-Related Intimacy Issues**

### **Ambiguity**

Two more “As” appear to Internet-related intimacy problems. The sixth A is ambiguity, and essentially means online behavior can be tricky to define as problematic. For some individuals, viewing porn online constitutes is problematic behavior; for others, the behavior becomes defined as problematic when it is characterized by the emailing or messaging of sexually explicit or sexually charged material. This is particularly true in cases of Internet infidelity. Quite often, each partner has an independent definition of what it means to be unfaithful in a relationship (Parker & Wampler, 2003). This may be the result of couples not discussing their relationship contract as it regards to betrayal and the Internet. With no clear behavioral definition of what is or is not Internet infidelity, one may be more likely to “cross the line” online than in other situations. This “A” was also noted in research on Internet infidelity treatment. The therapists surveyed reported that the definitional issues for couples around Internet infidelity were problematic enough to warrant a portion of treatment be devoted to reducing the ambiguity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).

Despite the contract that can be discussed by couples, the online behaviors which constitute one being “unfaithful” are relatively unclear. To some, it may mean exchanging sexual conversation or words with someone other than one’s partner on the computer; to some, it may mean the viewing of porn; and still to others it may mean the development of an exclusive emotional relationship to the exclusion of one’s primary partner. Parker and Wampler (2003) investigated whether the online sexual activities are considered affairs. The researchers asked a sample of 242 students at a Southwestern University to rate different scenarios to determine the extent to which each represented infidelity. In general, how problematic an activity was depended defined depended on that nature of the activity. While Internet sex was rated less of an affair than physical sex, but was still perceived as problematic. The researchers discovered that women viewed online sexual activities as more problematic than men. In their discussion

of the results, they acknowledge that the partners experiencing difficulty in defining the behavior as infidelity is also complicated by society's confusion regarding the definition of infidelity: "It then becomes necessary for clinicians to normalize the ambiguous feelings and assist the couple or partner in defining the seriousness of the behavior and to what extent it should be deemed as an affair." (p. 426). Parker and Wampler (2003) defined the partners' feelings as ambiguous, but stopped short of classifying the definition of Internet infidelity as ambiguous to the couple, thus creating problems. When the definition is diffuse, the involved partner's likelihood of being accountable for their behavior drops, thus maintaining the problem the couple is having (Ross, 2005). As Hertlein and Sendak (2007) stated, "The issue, however, is not so much the sharing of something considered private, rather it is the keeping private of something that should be shared (and shared only with the relationship partner)." (p. 10).

The ambiguity surrounding the definition of Internet infidelity is not limited to couples. Scholars, too, struggle with coming to agreement about the behaviors constituting infidelity (Whitty & Quigley, 2008). Whitty (2005) described the efforts of several researchers who have tried to address the threat that Internet interactions have on couples. Some researchers have said that Internet infidelity is behaviorally different from face to face infidelity where as others have not been able to define a specific category of what constitutes online betrayal. Whitty's (2003) study suggested that people perceive online acts of infidelity as genuine as those offline. In fact the author proposes that there may be little difference between the two because the feelings of betrayal do not come from the physical contact between the two parties, but rather from their partner desiring another person instead of them (Whitty, 2003). In another study, Whitty (2005) provided a projective story completion task to a sample of 234 psychology students at an Australian University. She found that some of the participants did not consider Internet infidelity a "betrayal", whereas others did. Such ambiguity might interfere with a couples' definition of problematic behavior and, consequently, their interactions with third parties.

Docan-Morgan and Docan (2007) discussed some assumptions people may have about people's perceptions of what is considered appropriate versus inappropriate online behavior. For instance, those who define infidelity in only physical terms may not believe infidelity can exist on the Internet because of the lack of physical contact, voice, or face to face interactions. In fact, Docan-Morgan and Docan's (2007) study reinforced Glass and Wright's conceptualization of infidelity such that Internet infidelity also operates on a continuum: ranging from superficial/informal behavior to involving/goal-directed behavior. These research findings emphasize the importance of addressing each couple's opinions about what comprises Internet infidelity thus eliminating any ambiguity.

### **Accommodation**

Another observation in our clinical work and in the literature led us to the development of the seventh "A." As aforementioned, for many who seek companionship online, there may be a conflict between one's ideal and real self. One partner, for example, may have certain beliefs about how they should act and feel restricted in their day-to-day life, but when the opportunity arises, can exhibit the opposite behavior (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). Many people feel the need for a secret life because they perceive their lives as rule-driven, confined, or constrained. Further, there are many who have the ability to risk or desire to seek out sensations which are now living routine (and by their report, "boring" lives). The Internet provides greater opportunity for one to act a certain way in "real time" but have a different persona when it comes to online behavior and activities, especially when there are no outward or obvious signs of this other, seemingly contradictory persona. We term this "A" accommodation, meaning that those individuals who have more difficulty settling the tension between the "real" versus "ought" self

(Higgins, 1987) will be more likely to be taking risks on the Internet, thus making their relationship vulnerable to affairs than those who do not.

While it appears that there is some overlap between accommodation and approximation, they are two distinct and separate vulnerabilities. Approximation refers to the specific qualities of the Internet which replicate/simulate the physical world; accommodation, however, refers to the qualities of the individual (specifically, the extent to which there is a discrepancy between one's "real" and "ought" self) which contributes to their Internet usage.

The scholarly literature also seems to support accommodation category. In Cooper, Galbreath, and Becker's (2004) study described earlier, men who went online in pursuit of sexual activities reported participating in activities they would not do in real time more than men who did not go online to participate in sexual activities. This can be a particular vulnerability for couples if both partners are struggling with the tensions between their "real" and "ought" selves and in couples with increased familiarity to alternatives and options available on the Internet for pursuing one's vision of self.

More evidence of the concept of accommodation is found in the research conducted by Aviram and Amichai-Hamburger (2005). In a study of 178 participants, they sought to understand to what degree personality variables and relationship satisfaction contributed to expectations within an online affair. Results indicated that personality factors are at play in terms of developing an online affair, concluding: "The therapeutic intervention should include, in addition to improving the dyadic communication, an individual inquiry into the person's hidden fantasies that may not be fulfilled in 'real life'.

A study by McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) supports the contention that people who do not have an adequate social network offline are more likely to use the Internet to express particular aspects of themselves (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Specifically examining romantic relationships, Albright and Conran (2003) studied the process by which people meet and fall in love online through administering a 55-item survey to those looking for love online. This instrument was completed by 513 participants, with 366 of those choosing to also complete a narrative portion. Among the phases of relationship development, Albright and Conran classified one element as the "virtual mirror." The mirror was described as "where one throws out a best self and sees in the reflection another shaped to one's desires" (p. 48). In other words, one may be accommodating what you see in another in order to shape them into what you want to see.

There is also evidence of this concept within McKenna, Green, and Smith's (2001) study investigating whether one's expression of sexual activities via the Internet would result in a change in their sexual identity of their offline selves. Using a mixed methods approach, McKenna et al (2001) developed and tested a model of sexual identity demarginalization, which included: offline safety concerns, frequent and convenient sex, score on the Sexual Self Online instrument, score on the Importance of Online Sexuality to identify scale, benefits to self, and benefits to the relationship. The findings indicate that the more one looks for a sexual identity on the Internet, the more likely one is to incorporate those elements of identity in his/her general sense of self. These results are consistent with McKenna and Bargh (1998) in relation to Internet activities in general impacting the self, and McKenna, Green and Gleason's (2002) research, which discovered that people who develop meaningful relationships online integrate those relationships into their self-concepts. This is especially relevant when one considers that these findings were mediated by the extent to which people feel they were their "true selves" within the relationship.



The concept of accommodation is also displayed by Young's (2006) research, who discovered that due to the lower feelings of inhibition with online communication people are able to express their emotions more openly and honestly at a much quicker pace than in the physical world leaving people with a sense of deeper intimacy, sense of trust and acceptance (Young, 2006). Additionally, as a global tool, the Internet enables users to interact with more diverse people than they may have in their typical day to day life which may feel more glamorous to them (Young, 2006).

## Conclusions

Cyber-related intimacy issues are determined by a confluence of factors, many of which may never be fully understood by couples or therapists. We, however, believe that an understanding of how the seven "As" operate in the development and maintenance of Cyber-related intimacy issues can provide a framework for couples therapists treating these couples and shape scholarly research in a direction which can benefit couples. Ideas for future research include the empirical testing of the seven "As" to determine to what extent they interact with each other as well as to better understand their contribution to the maintenance of Cyber-related issues. It might also include empirical testing of how and in what way the incorporation of these elements is effective for couples struggling with Internet-related problems.

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