

Emotions and morality in computer-mediated romantic relationships

Aaron Ben-Ze'ev
Department of Philosophy
University of Haifa

Ben-Ze'ev, A. (2004), *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (Cambridge University Press).



Major Issues

The morality of imagination

Is chatting about sex sexual activity?

Is chatting cheating?

The morality of online affairs

The possible harm of online affairs

The future of online romantic relationships

The nature of imagination

Imagination has an important role in our life.

Imagination releases us from the chains of the present, but chains us to the prospects of the possible.

Referring to the possible enables us not merely to postulate moral ideals and rules, but also to undermine them by imagining and planning ways to violate them.

The nature of imagination

Imagination has a crucial role in cyberspace.

Cyberspace is a seductive place.

Major reasons for this: imagination, interactivity, availability, anonymity

The nature of imagination

Cyberspace provides many possible seducing alternatives.

So many men, so little time. Mae West

The morality of imagination

If the imaginative environment were in no sense real to us, it would be of less relevance to moral discussions. But imagination has a powerful impact precisely because it is considered to be in some sense real, and hence may have a harmful impact upon our actions.

The morality of imagination

Imagination is not typically subject to moral criticism and guilt because it is often not translated into actual behavior.

However, imagination is not completely immune to moral criticism, since some practical implications are evident as well.

The morality of imagination

The active role of people in an online relationship raises the issue of whether electronic correspondence has already left the imaginary realm; if so, they could be subject to moral criticism.

This issue depends upon the degree of reality we attach to online relationships. People treat such affairs to be real.

The morality of imagination

The illusory nature of cyberspace does not diminish the need to resort to illusory methods.

People complain that they now have the added pressure of faking cyberorgasms.

One married woman described her online sexual partner:

"He was self-centered and not very exciting. I found myself faking an orgasm over the computer and thought I had totally lost my mind."

The value of chatting

Online affairs are based upon conversations.

Subject: The art of the spoken word

Looking for ladies who enjoy being pampered with good conversation and the sensuality of the spoken word. Well-thought conversation is an art, and its appreciation is an extraordinary gift! I love to talk about anything and everything, so if you're interested in having a great talk, please e-mail me.

The value of chatting

One woman writes:

"A relationship based solely on communication is rare and too valuable to be dismissed."

This is in sharp contrast to the following claim by Linda Evangelista:

"I can do anything you want me to do, as long as I don't have to speak."

The value of chatting

This is in sharp contrast to the following claim by Linda Evangelista:

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Is chatting about sex a sexual activity?

Not all chatting about sex is equivalent to sex.

Cybersex has the basic characteristics of actual sex—except for the physical contact. It has the excitement, anticipation, satisfaction, and orgasm. Unlike masturbation, cybersex is conducted with a real person, and this real interaction makes these contacts sexually real and morally problematic.

Is chatting about sex a sexual activity?

Physical penetration is important for sex, but other characteristics are significant as well. Cybersex is a sexual activity—albeit not the typical one.

An activity should be regarded as sexual not according to the mere presence of physical contact, but according to other aspects as well: for example, its emotional nature (the presence of intimacy), or its results (if orgasm is achieved).

Is chatting about sex a sexual activity?

There are cases of physical penetration that do not involve intimacy or do not lead to orgasm; on the other hand, there are cases of cybersex that involve intimacy and result in orgasm.

The prospects of achieving real intimacy and orgasm during cybersex are no less, and often even higher, than in physical sex.

Is chatting about sex a sexual activity?

If an activity involves physical penetration, intimacy and orgasm, it is a more typical sexual activity than an activity that lacks one of these elements. However, it is arguable which of the elements is more significant. All these elements are significant for sexual activities, but none is sufficient to constitute the prototypical sexual activity.

Is chatting cheating?

If physical contact is not the sole essential factor in sex, then physical contact cannot also be the sole factor determining whether cybersex involves cheating.

When extramarital affairs are conducted with the knowledge and acceptance of the other partner, no cheating is involved, even if physical penetration occurs.

Is chatting cheating?

Chatting is cheating if deception is involved.

There is nothing intrinsic to chatting that makes it cheating, but the same holds for sex.

Cyber-infidelity

Major reasons for the popularity of cyber-infidelity concern their greater accessibility, greater privacy, lesser vulnerability, and apparent lesser moral weight. .

Cyber-infidelity enables you to nibble on forbidden fruit, served with anonymity in the comfort of your home, while paying a smaller moral and emotional price .

The morality of online affairs

In discussing the morality of online affairs, two central aspects are most relevant:

- (a) whether such affairs involve cheating,
- (b) whether they are harmful.

The two issues are independent. An online affair may not involve cheating if the offline partner knows it, but it may still be harmful to that partner. And cheating does not necessarily have harmful consequences.

The morality of online affairs

Moral norms are less rigid in cyberspace; this is due to the fact that the damage done in cyberspace is typically less severe and that certain types of deception are more likely to occur.

There are however some moral norms also in cyberspace.

The morality of online affairs

Despite the great *psychological* reality felt by participants in cybersex, most of them do not consider it to be *morally* real—at least not as real as offline affairs. Over 60% of people in cyberspace do not consider cybersex to be infidelity.

Such affairs may be considered as a sincere and profound expression of the participant's true self, which is remarkably different from cheating. Preventing your heart from speaking honestly may be not less of a sin than preventing your (offline) partner from knowing about all your actions.

The morality of online affairs

Other people consider cybersex as a means not to cheat. It is something that may add spice to their offline relationship. They believe that if they do not know the real name of their cybermates and never actually see them, their affair cannot be regarded as real from a moral point of view; it is like reading a novel or other kind of mere entertainment—a way to play out fantasies in a safe environment.

The morality of online affairs

Another group of people argues that cybersex done without the knowledge of the other partner is cheating as it involves deception; nevertheless this is a type of positive cheating. In some circumstances cybersex may help a person through rough periods in an offline relationship. In such circumstances, cybersex may be recommendable, but can still be regarded as cheating.

The morality of online affairs

When people feel trapped by their current relationship, but they still do not want to abolish them, cyberspace may offer a parallel world in which things are better.

Living within the two worlds is not easy and may become risky when the borderlines are blurred.

The morality of online affairs

People having online affairs tend to reduce their problematic nature and consider them to be psychologically real but morally unreal. They believe that although these affairs provide them with real psychological satisfaction, their offline partners should not be hurt since from a moral point of view such affairs are merely imaginary.

The offline partners often do not see any difference between online and offline affairs: the lack of physical contact and face-to-face meetings does not diminish the sense of violation of their vow of exclusivity.

The possible harm of online affairs

At the heart of immoral behavior is the harm we impose upon other people. Online affairs are not inherently harmful; they may be so, when participants are also involved in another primary offline relationship.

The following aspects are particularly significant here:

- (a) the resources invested in such affairs,
- (b) the wish to actualize them,
- (c) their degree of intimacy,
- (d) the addictive risk.

Diversion of resources

A major objection to extramarital affairs is that they harm the primary relationship by taking from them significant resources.

Two empirical assumptions here: (a) we have a given amount of sexual energy, and (b) having an affair decreases the sexual energy directed toward the spouse.

It is not evident that the two assumptions are always correct.

Diversion of resources

Romantic love consumes much time and energy.

The major resources invested in an online affair are not physical but mental; but still these resources are limited as well.

There are, however, cases in which getting involved in cybersex may improve people's comfort with their own sexuality and their offline sexual relationships.

Online relationships are also a potential rehearsal tool.

Loss of exclusivity

Emotions are partial in the sense of being personal and having a narrow perspective.

Online affairs violate emotional exclusivity.

From a moral viewpoint, it matters less that you do not actually touch your online partner; what matters is that you may not touch your offline partner in the same manner as before.

The wish to actualize the relationship

The wish to actualize an online affair is profound, although that by doing it people may kill the thing they love.

The wish to actualize an online affair, which may prevent people from truly enjoying the online affair, can also ruin their offline relationships.

The possible actualization of the affair takes it further away from the imaginary realm.

Keeping the affair within certain boundaries

Postulating boundaries is inevitable for maintaining both the online and offline relationships. Keeping them is very hard, if possible at all.

One woman wrote:

"I found myself truly surprised that mere characters on a keyboard could carry with them such an erotic and emotional charge. But the guy was married and although we did establish ground rules, I ended up 'coloring outside the lines' in a way I never thought I would."

High degree of intimacy

Another aspect expressing the moral difficulty of online affairs is their high *degree of intimacy*.

If in the course of an online affair, two people reveal to each other sexual fantasies or secrets that they do not reveal to their offline partners, it is not clear in which relationship there is greater intimacy, and this may threaten the primary offline relationship.

The addictive space

One can find a woman who has never had one love affair, but it is rare indeed to find anyone who has only one.

La Rochefoucauld

The addictive space

People are easily carried away and can confuse the nature of the relation they are in or underestimate the risks of surfing the net.

Cyberspace does not merely satisfy needs, but creates novel needs that often cannot be met.

Online affairs are like a new toy which the human race has not yet learned how to play. Cybering is similar to taking drugs. Both provide easy access to pleasure, which is often based upon virtual realities.

The future of online romantic relationships

A greater variety of people will enjoy online romantic experiences.

Integration of offline and online relationships in a way that will increase both satisfaction from serious personal relationships and excitement from more transient relationships will likely prevail..

The future of online romantic relationships

We can expect further relaxation of social and moral norms in the romantic realm and in particular in the issue of romantic exclusivity.

The romantic realm will become more dynamic and flexible. It will be more difficult to achieve the emotional advantages of a stable romantic framework.

As online relationships cannot replace offline relationships, their test will be whether they can complement them.

The future of online romantic relationships

Only a better understanding of computer communication and the limitations of human nature may enable us to cope with the brave new world we are facing. So far, human history has been characterized by our ability to learn how to cope with painful and usually harmful circumstances; it is now time to learn how to cope with the enjoyable and often beneficial environment provided by cyberspace.

Thank you