

Book Review

Cyberspace Romance: The Psychology of Online Relationships

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Foreword by Brian H. Spitzberg

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The book examines romantic and sexual relationships in cyberspace discussing how these relationships are different and similar to the way individuals initiate, develop, and maintain offline relationships. The authors argue that cyberspace should not be perceived as a conglomeration of bodiless selves. Cyberspace is depicted as a potentially more playful space than the offline world. Nonetheless, despite its liberating qualities, cyberspace can be problematic for some people. The positive and negative aspects of online relating are presented.

The first chapter, “Cyber-Relationships, the Story so Far”, presents a brief history of the internet, online relationships, real relationships and more radical opportunities for relationships development in cyberspace. The authors summarise how cyber-relationships have been considered in the literature and suggest ways to theorise about online interactions.

The second chapter, “From Courtly Love to Cyber-Flirting”, makes the point that it is important for researchers to consider the choices individuals make in constructing their online self. They develop their theory drawing from object-relations theory, arguing that cyberspace shares the same qualities as Winnicott’s notion of ‘potential space’. They place cyber-dating within an historical context, giving a brief history of the courting process till romantic love in the postmodern era.

In “Playing at Love: Winnicott and Potential Space” (chapter 3), it is argued that, like ‘potential space’, cyberspace provides a safer space than the offline world to play and experiment at flirting and developing relationships. Cyberspace is discussed as a potential space for psychological growth and ‘liberation’. The chapter explains how cyberspace provides a unique and more playful space to play at love based on psychodynamic theory and attempts to offer a theoretical framework to help in the understanding of human relationships in cyberspace based, mainly, on the work of object-relations theorists.

Transitional objects are fundamental to negotiate our way between inner and outer worlds and are relevant for playing at love in cyberspace.

The fourth chapter, “Object Engagement and Dysfunctional Aspects of Relating Online”, extends the argument above by considering ‘transitional objects’. In particular, from Bollas’ work that considers the relationship we have with objects and the trace they leave within us. The cyberspace is seen as a liberating space.

In chapter 5, “Cyber-cheating: Can We Really be Liberated in Cyberspace?”, and chapter 6, “Deviance and Cyberspace”, the authors discuss that one’s playful activities in this space are not always liberating. In these chapters, they examine the dark side of online relationships, including internet infidelity, internet addiction, paedophilia, cyber-harassment, cyberstalking, and misrepresentation of self online. Although they believe that the online world and the offline world are not completely separate from one another, they draw from Klein’s object-relations theory to argue that individuals sometimes split the cyber-world from the offline world. The book emphasises that the cyber-world is not one generic space. Chapter 6 focus on internet addiction, cyber-harassment, rape in cyberspace, paedophilia, and misrepresentation of self online.

The chapter 7, “Online Dating: Shopping for Love on the Internet”, highlights how the way individuals develop relationships through an online dating site is considerably different to the way relationships are developed within other spaces. The authors draw from work on ‘possible selves’ to make the argument that individuals might feel more comfortable presenting different aspects of themselves in different spaces online. The chapter draws from Whitty’s recent research on an Australian internet dating site. The data suggest that the way people go about establishing these types of online relationships vary considerably to the way relationships initiate and develop in other online spaces. So, the internet should not be treated as one generic space. For successful relationships to be established one needs to ‘live up to one’s profile’.

In the following chapter, “Characters and Archetypes in Cyberspace”, personality theories are examined in more detail, including what character types tend to be attracted to cyberspace. The chapter focuses on what the research literature reveals about character type on relationships formation and whether or not the various places (spaces) that comprise cyberspace attract some character types more than others. In order to understand behavior in cyberspace, the potentially predictive nature of character can deepen our comprehension of human relationships. A psychodynamic appreciation of the term character is discussed. The book’s psychodynamic approach reveals new questions and serves to re-frame some of our previous understandings about relationship in cyberspace.

Finally, the last chapter, “Visions of the Future”, looks at the future of cyber-relationships and how individuals might conduct sexual relations online. It examines how

cyberspace might be used to conduct counselling. Some of the ethical issues related to studying online relationships are discussed. According to the authors, cyber-relationships and cybersex are here to stay. How people develop online relationships and engage in cyberspace will change as technology is developed and new ways to utilise this space are discovered. Our online and offline activities and relationships are not completely separate. The theory offered in this book purports that cyberspace is a unique space for playing at love and sexuality and the way we play varies depending on which space we are. The book is expected to foster research on the confluence of cyberspace and human relationships.

In sum, it is argued that the cyber-world is both similar and different to the offline world. As cyberspace can be a more playful space, this can be liberating for those anxious about forming relationships offline. However, the freedom of cyberspace can be problematic for some people. The book is an important resource for those studying or conducting research on internet relationships or interested in their own or others' online romances. It brings an important contribution for communication and relationship studies in a new and growing research area, dealing with new information and communication technology, and new ways of relating. This well-written book integrates research and theory with an emphasis on psychodynamic approaches.

Monica T. Whitty is a Lecturer in Psychology at Queen's University Belfast, UK. She lectures on cyberpsychology, social psychology, and qualitative methods. Her major research interests include online dating, cyber-relationships, internet infidelity, identity, misrepresentation of self online, cyber-stalking, cyber-ethics, and internet and email surveillance in the workplace.

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