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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMPUTER-MEDIATED AND FACE-TO-FACE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO THE ALLURES AND DRAWBACKS OF THE TWO TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS

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By

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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMPUTER-MEDIATED AND FACE-TO-FACE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO THE ALLURES AND DRAWBACKS OF THE TWO TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT……...……..……vii

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION……..1

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW…….…….5

Computer-Mediated Relationships …..……..5

Characteristics of Internet Patrons …….7

Advantages of Computer-Mediated Communication …….……..11

Disadvantages of Computer-Mediated Communication.....18

CHAPTER III: METHODS……..22

Participants…….22

Additional Demographic Information for the Participants……24

Research Setting……27

Protection of Human Subjects……...27

Instruments …..…….28

Data Collection……..28

Procedure……...28

Analyses/Coding……29

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS……31

Physical Attraction……...……...31

Convenience, Anonymity, Ease, and Depth of Online Communication……...33

Commitment, Intimacy, and Duration of Romantic Online Relationships…….....39

Trust and Misrepresentation Online…….....44

Effects on Academic Performance and Existing Relationships…….49

Conflicts…….....52

Selection of the Fittest……...54

Intellectual and Emotional Intelligence…….58

Lessons Learned…….....59

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION…….….63

Limitations……...……..68

Clinical Implications……..69

Future Research…….....76

REFERENCES……..79

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Prospectus…...…...……...86

Appendix B: Recruitment E-mail…...…….…..118

Appendix C: Informed Consent (A)……..……119

Appendix D: Informed Consent (B)…….……...……..121

Appendix E: Interview Questions……..…….……..123

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the assumptions, beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors of people who have engaged in romantic online relationships. Ten college students (five females and five males) from a public university in a southwestern state participated in this research study. Themes that emerged from the participants' stories relate to physical attraction, convenience, anonymity, ease, and depth of online communication, commitment, intimacy, and duration of romantic online relationships, trust, misrepresentation online, effects on academic performance and existing relationships, conflicts, selection of the fittest, intellectual and emotional intelligence, and lessons learned.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Use of the Internet has grown exponentially within the past decade. An authoritative online source for information about Internet related demographics and trends indicate that as of March 2005, almost 889 million people worldwide are online. The largest percentage of Internet users worldwide (67.4%) log in from North America (Internet Usage Statistics, 2005). Furthermore, the number of people connected to the Internet worldwide is nearing 14% of the entire world's population (http://www.census.gov, 2005).

In March of 2002, America Online (AOL), the world's largest Internet service provider (http://washington.bizjournals.com, 2003), reported its worldwide membership has surpassed 34 million people (http://dc.internet.com, 2003). AOL's chairman and chief executive officer indicated its members are using an average of more than 70 minutes a day online (http://dc.internet.com, 2003), and interpersonal communication has been found to be the number one use of the Internet at home (Kraut, Mukopadhyay, Szczypula, Kiesler, & Scherlis, 1998).

Seeking social connection to people online has become more prevalent in this technological era. For instance, a study of 760 undergraduate students found 41.8% of the participants had looked for relationships with new people via the Internet during the year prior to the publication of the study (Boies, 2002). Meanwhile, 12.5% of the participants reported using online dating services.

Match.com is a popular, worldwide online dating site. To join the site, one must complete a survey and numerous short-answer essays. Upon completion of both, one is asked to identify the maximum distance acceptable to meet a potential mate. The program will then list profiles of available prospects along with the percentage of similarity between the profiles of the new member and the potential mates.

The popularity of using the Internet to connect with a potential romantic partner is reflected in the growth rate of membership for Match.com. In its first year of operations, approximately 60,000 people visited the relationship site. In April 2005, Match.com stated that it has 15 million users and more than 60,000 new people register on the site daily (http://www.matchnewscenter.com, 2005).

In cyberspace, some web sites for individuals in search of romance and/or love are based on religious beliefs. Such sites are becoming more and more attractive to people who frequent the Internet for romance and/or love. One particular site, www.ldssingles.com, reported more than 118,800 postings since the start of the web site (Scott, 2002). This particular singles' forum primarily serves single Mormons or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The popularity of Internet use as a medium for romantic relationships thus warrants an evaluation of its characteristics to better understand the continuous proliferation of this phenomenon.

As with face-to-face romantic relationships, romantic online relationships have hopeful outcomes (i.e., meaningful and successful relationships) while some relationships formed and maintained online are vulnerable to relational difficulties. Yet, few studies to date have examined the nuances of online romantic relationships to understand the nature

and quality of this type of relationship. Likewise, few studies have shed light on the differences between romantic online relationships and romantic offline relationships.

While there appears to be an increasing number of people who are engaged in and/or seeking romance online, little is known about the attraction to and negative aspects of romantic online relationships. The purpose of this study is to explore the assumptions, beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors of those who have engaged in romantic online relationships to acquire an in depth understanding about the allure and drawbacks of romantic online relationships. A range of information about the assumptions, beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors of people who have engaged in romantic online relationships will be offered and compared the assumptions, beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors of those engaged in offline romantic relationships.

The present study is done in the hope that it will offer new information and insight regarding the dynamics and mechanisms of online relationships for the general population, as well as for mental health professionals working with individuals contemplating the initiation, maintenance, or end of online relationships. With more elucidation about romantic online relationships, clinicians may invite clients to and individuals may make well-informed choices and decisions about computer-mediated relationships. Mental health professionals would then be able to offer more sensitive and responsive services to clients facing issues related to romantic online relationships through individual counseling, outreach programs, support groups, etc. I hope that my study will invite questions about this area of research and stimulate more empirical research in the area of computer-mediated romance. This, in turn, may contribute to the

development and use of more empirically supported or validated treatments for individuals and couples and the clinicians they work with.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Differences between the participants' experiences of romantic online and offline relationships in the present study will illuminate some of the features and dynamics of both types of relationships. Even though literature on romantic computer-mediated relationships is limited, there has been a recent increase of available literature regarding Internet usage. However, there is a dearth of empirical research examining participants' experiences of both romantic online and offline relationships.

Computer-Mediated Relationships

Baker (2002) selected eight couples from a larger study involving sixty-eight couples who participated in the study from June 1997 to September 2001. The eight couples were selected because their ages and experiences were reflective of the overall experiences of the larger group of participants. These couples also met at a variety of places online, as did most couples in the larger study.

Baker found numerous emergent themes for successful and unsuccessful romantic online relationships: meeting place, overcoming certain obstacles, timing, and conflict resolution. The successful couples met on sites of common values or interests (e.g., occupational newsgroup for law enforcement officers), while the unsuccessful couples met on more general online mediums. Successful couples also were able to overcome obstacles related to distance, occupations, and relationships, while unsuccessful couples were not able to. A third theme identified was that couples who engaged in a longer length of correspondence prior to meeting offline, reported more physical intimacy and more durable relationships. Additionally, the couples that learned to manage each other's

communication style differences through conflicts experienced online and increased their offline relationship satisfaction.

Biggs (2000) conducted a case study to explore one woman's online, interpersonal experience after she was "…forcefully ejected from their home…" (p. 657) by her husband who had discovered she was communicating online with an unmarried man. The participant maintained a journal reflecting her 18 months of Internet usage to form platonic and romantic online relationships. Prior to being interviewed online using ICQ chat software in order to record the data as it was initially typed, she was asked to reflect upon the journal entries.

From the data, the researcher found that before becoming an active Internet user herself, the participant initially stereotyped other Internet users as "socially awkward or unsuccessful in offline relationships." Soon after she began communicating with others, she realized the stereotype was erroneous. Through her journey of using computer-mediated communication to connect with other people, she became less focused on the needs of others and became more social, assertive, and expressive. Additionally, the Internet provided a place for her to safely be her authentic self and for her to connect with others attracted to her true self. One difference between online and offline behavior she recognized was she tended to reveal more about herself in online relationships than she had previously done in offline relationships. Her stories highlighted her personal and interpersonal changes and growth throughout her online communication. More information about similarities and differences between the relationships the participant developed online versus relationships developed offline could have provided even more significant meanings to the participant's stories.

Characteristics of Internet Patrons

Availability of studies on the prevalence of people using the Internet to meet sexual partners is limited. However, the Internet has been identified as a common venue for sexually disenfranchised groups (e.g., gay, bisexual, sadomasochistic, etc.) to search for sexual partners because the number of potential partners is more plentiful online than offline. Several studies have investigated the prevalence of Internet usage to seek sexual partners. For example, one study surveyed 609 men attending a gay pride festival and found most of the sample (73%) had used the Internet to access gay-oriented web sites, while approximately one-third of the sample (34%) had met a sexual partner through the Internet (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002). McFarlane, Bull, and Rietmeijer (2000) found 16% (135) of patients from a sexually transmitted diseases clinic reported they used the Internet to meet sex partners. Sixty-five percent (88) of the patients reported having had sex with someone they met from the Internet, thirty-eight percent (34) of the patients with sexual partners from the Internet had four or more sexual partners from the Internet. Meanwhile, Elford, Bolding, and Sherr (2001) recruited 743 men who have sex with men (MSM) from gyms in London, England to look at their usage of the Internet for the purpose of seeking sex. Of the 81% (601) of participants who had access to the Internet, 34% (207) reported to have used the Internet to find a sexual partner. In a smaller qualitative study with twelve MSM by Shaw (1997) all the participants (12) had met someone face-to-face through the Internet and nine of the participants indicated they had sexual relations with someone they had met through the Internet.

Searching for sexual partners online seems to be a prevalent occurrence within the MSM community. Concerns about the established association between sex seeking

behaviors of MSM on the Internet and sexually transmitted diseases are discussed in numerous, recent medical journals (e.g., McFarlane et al., 2000; Klausner, Wolf, Fischer-Ponce, Zolt, & Katz, 2000; Elford et al., 2001). These studies may be reflective of the growing trend among the MSM community seeking sexual partners online. One should not ignore the possibility of the Internet becoming an increasingly popular and appealing medium for heterosexuals or bisexuals to meet romantic and/or sexual partners as well.

Individuals possessing stigmatized and/or marginalized identities may find it difficult to meet similar others within their physical community to meet and share experiences with. Risks related to personal safety and stability within relationships in one's life are likely to hinder one's desire and wish to approach others to share the stigmatized and/or marginalized aspects of themselves (McKenna & Bargh, 1999). Furthermore, for these people finding similar others in the mainstream society (e.g., rural Oklahoma) to form friendships or romantic relationships with may be extremely difficult. The Internet offers a safer alternative with more options for these individuals to connect with others with similar goals and belief systems.

In a study conducted by Bonebrake (2002), no differences were found between 104 college students' usage online, relationship formation, and personality characteristics. There have been some studies that reflect similar ideas. For example, McCrown, Fischer, and Page (2001) found no differences in social skills between people who did and did not form online relationships. Results from Bonebrake's study were surprising since the consensus from past research has been the inclination for forming online relationships is likely attributable to internal differences between people. For example, McKenna and Bargh (2000) found anxiety and loneliness to have a positive

relationship with the likelihood of forming online relationships. Loneliness may be experienced when one's social network and relationships are not as vast or satisfying as one would prefer (Peplau, Russell, & Heim, 1979). Vitkus and Horowitz (1987) found lonely people tend to have poor social skills. Likewise, they may have difficulties initiating social activity, maintaining friendships, and engaging with others in groups (Horowitz & de Sales French, 1979).

Various studies have found links, albeit the consensus of the direction is undecided, between loneliness and increased Internet usage. On the one hand, some studies have contended loneliness to be positively correlated with Internet usage (Kraut et al., Lavin, Marvin, McLarney, Nola, & Scott, 1999; Moody, 2001; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Young, 1998). Despite persuasive results suggesting Internet usage may result in increased feelings of loneliness, it would be assuming too much to draw a causal relationship between those two. On the other hand, pundits in the area of Internet usage have argued that the unique qualities of social interaction online contribute to increased Internet usage, thereby contributing to increased feelings of loneliness, isolation, etc., as culturally defined for face-to-face relationships (Morahan-Martin, 1999).

In contrast, much has been written about the Internet as a positive avenue to develop new social networks and to enhance existing relationships (Activmedia, 1998; Katz & Aspden, 1997). Results from a study conducted by Shaw and Gant (2002) suggest Internet use significantly decreased loneliness and depression and significantly increased perceived social support. In addition, in a study comparing Internet users with nonusers, greater sociability and interconnectivity were found among users when

compared to nonusers, although this finding may be attributed to users having a higher likelihood of being more educated, wealthier, and younger (Nie, 2001).

Divergent views exist within the literature about the effects of Internet usage on pro-social behaviors. Some researchers concluded there are no significant changes within Internet users' social network and behaviors to maintain those networks (Franzen, 2000; Robinson, Kestnbaum, Neustadtl, & Alvarez, 2000; UCLA Center for Communication Policy, 2000). Among the participants of those studies, Internet usage did not diminish communication with family, friends, or professional colleagues. Yet, in others studies, such as the one conducted by Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society in February 2000, found an inverse relationship between number of hours of Internet use and frequency of social activities with family and friends (Nie, 2001).

Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2003) studied 277 undergraduate Internet users and their use of the Internet for social needs. The participants were separated into two groups according to their scores on the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The Lonely group consisted of those who scored in the top 20% on the UCLA Loneliness Scale while the rest were categorized into the Non-Lonely group. Lonely users were significantly more likely than those in the Non-Lonely group to use the Internet to meet people for emotional support and to talk with other people who share same interests. These findings are consistent with what has been written about lonely people using the Internet as an escape or coping strategy for negative emotions linked to loneliness (Booth, 2000).

Advantages of Computer-Mediated Communication

In cyberspace, a vast array of channels to communicate electronically, including instant messages, Internet Relay Chat, bulletin boards, chat rooms, newsgroups, multi-

user dimensions, etc. are available. The countless number of topics for those channels presents no limit to geography or preference possibilities to people seeking romantic connections with others anytime from anywhere around the world. The ability for someone to transcend time and physical distance—typical barriers of offline romantic relationships—in cyberspace could explain society's movement towards searching for romance and/or love online.

Research (e.g., Beavers, 1985; Murstein, 1980; Bachand & Caron, 2001) suggests similarities in the interests and values of partners to contribute to a satisfying romantic relationship or marriage. One's available time and computer's memory size appear to be the only limits to opportunities for connection with someone else who holds similar interests and values. Sites catering to the relating needs of people regarding specific occupations, hobbies, leisure activities, sports, political affiliation, spirituality, sexual orientation, etc. may be accessed with ease online. Most sites are open to anyone around the world through free and open access, limited access (e.g., register with name and e-mail), or through paid subscription or membership. Hence, a plethora of romantic prospect options exists in terms of quantity, quality, and geographic location.

The general population—ranging from the young to the old and those with or without transportation—may have felt confined and isolated (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000), especially in the face of very limited opportunities to find love. However, the Internet offered them the unique power to connect with millions of people without ever having to leave home. Residents of small, rural, and/or isolative areas all over the world and people with mental, psychological, and/or physical challenges now have more opportunity to connect with people from all over the world. Given the large

number of people online and the means to meet people online, the probability for connection with a romantic partner on the World Wide Web may be significantly higher and more appealing than the pool of possibilities at some remote location or at one specific location or region.

Physical appearance plays a noticeable role in the development of face-to-face relationships. Social psychologists (e.g., Brehm, 1992) have found people to have a tendency to assume physically attractive people are nicer on the inside and that their future seems brighter (i.e., what is beautiful is good stereotype). One may argue that beautiful people, then, have an advantage in dating or at least in offline dating.

In cyberspace, the playing field is leveled. Contents of a person's message to another person provide more meaning in becoming acquainted while physical appearance takes a backseat in importance (Cooper et al., 2000). Someone who may have been deemed by others in their lives as physically unattractive may now use words to express his/her personality, imagination, and ideas to suddenly woo romantic prospects. Becoming Casanova online is possible because how someone describes and presents him/herself when online becomes the bases of initial impressions. No matter what one looks like physically, when one is online one can connect and bond with others through words and not looks. One can connect with another through humor/wit, intelligence, emotional support, story exchanges, sharing of one's own idiosyncrasies, etc. Consequently, "The felt intensity and meaning of any unappealing physical traits are then more likely to be mitigated by the overall attraction that exists"(Cooper & Sportolari, 1997, p. 9).

The availability of different means of communication (e.g., e-mail, chat room, listservs, etc.) and the convenience offered through computer-mediated communication in romantic online relationships may make socializing online more appealing for some people. Primary communication methods for individuals communicating online include synchronous (e.g., instant relay chat, instant message, teleconferencing, etc.) and asynchronous (e.g., e-mail, bulletin boards, etc.) communication. Synchronous communication between individuals is more similar to offline relationships in terms of the speed at which communication takes place (i.e., real-time). Meanwhile, asynchronous communication may allow individuals to edit and produce more thoughtful and even-keeled responses because one may take however long necessary, reasonably speaking, to compose his/her message.

Many conveniences of computer-mediated communication may draw people to initiate or maintain romantic relationships in cyberspace. One convenience offered through online relationships is the issue of presentation. How a person dresses when communicating online with someone else makes no difference, unless a web cam is in use. Personal hygiene, clothing, and accessories become optional. Length of time between a person's last bath or shave is of no concern. A person may be dressed in t-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops while describing him/herself to be in a swanky Armani outfit and Allen Edmonds' shoes to his/her partner. In other words, a person may present for a chat session or to engage in cybersex as unkempt and disheveled as he/she wishes to be, a luxury—if one wishes to call it that—not afforded to most people meeting offline to consummate a romantic relationship.

On a similar note, timing of the computer-mediated communication is not an issue to anyone else but the parties involved in the relationship. The parties involved can coordinate a time acceptable to both parties to connect. A couple with in-home businesses may decide to meet at 3 a.m. for a romantic text exchanging rendezvous. One partner may write a heart-wrenching e-mail to his/her partner while on scheduled break (or not) at work. Likewise, a couple may decide to exchange sexy messages while one or both partners are working on school- or work-related projects on the computer.

On the other hand, the expression "timing is everything" may work against couples online and offline. Imagine the disappointment of someone not being able to seek or receive emotional support and understanding from his/her partner following the occurrence of an unforeseen event (e.g., loss of a pet, accident, etc.) because the partner is currently offline. Imagine a couple facing difficulties as they are struggling to resolve conflicts within the relationship. Comfort, solace, and escape from one's relational difficulties may be found just a mouse-click away. In fact, the President of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers reported that the number of divorce cases stemming from online infidelity has been on the rise (Quittner, 1997).

Another convenience of online dating may lie within its efficiency. Online dating services like Match.com request patrons to complete a multiple-choice survey along with some short answer questions. A search engine is then available to find romantic prospects according to the percentage of similarities in profiles. Individuals can also narrow the search by specifying parameters for physical distance of the people from oneself (e.g., 30 miles or no limits from your zip code). A list is then produced with e-mails and profiles of fellow members seeking romance with similar interests, goals,

values, and beliefs. This method of filtering out dimensions of incompatibility may match two (or more) people together with a higher likelihood of being compatible. Moreover, this process takes place much more quickly than having to filter out people with incompatible traits, qualities, interests, values, etc. when compared to finding someone the old fashioned way (e.g., one from school, church, club, social/sports event, etc.).

Meeting potential romantic partners through other avenues in cyberspace is rather easy. Various options exist to maximize the chance of connecting with a person of interest. There are an abundance of chat rooms, newsgroups, listservs, etc. tailored to singles in search of romance. Potential romantic connections can also occur through places online promoting the gathering of people to read about or discuss common interests and values (e.g., interior decoration, parenting issues, Bible study, etc.). Likewise, romance may also blossom between strangers chatting about random topics at random locations online.

There are people who avoid face-to-face relationships to prevent the possibility of spiraling towards feeling trapped or losing oneself in a relationship (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). The Internet offers opportunities for emotional connection with what appears to be more control over the situation. One has a choice over the duration and intensity of asynchronous or synchronous communications with his/her partner and may be able to express that choice more easily than in a face-to-face phone call or meeting. For example, one could simply disengage from the communication by deleting, canceling, or not responding to an e-mail, posting, instant message, or chat dialogue, whereas in offline relationships, one would need both bravery and diplomacy to bring a conversation to an

end. It is no wonder Cooper and Sportolari argued that online, "People are freer to engage and disengage when they want to, to modulate the intensity of their interactions" (p. 10).

People may be attracted to romantic online relationships for the freedom that dating online offers. One may maintain a romantic relationship via computer-mediated communication while having an almost completely separate life. Cyberspace lovers may not have to involve the partner in his/her life as much as with a romantic offline partner. For instance, online couples do not meet physically and spend time with each other's families, friends, and/or colleagues at social functions, as do most offline couples, although some couples are known to "broadcast" certain social events via web cams for their partners. Furthermore, in cases of online dating where physical proximity may not be of concern, the online couples may make more unilateral decisions regarding familial, academic, and/or occupational goals that may involve a move across the country or ocean.

It has been theorized that dating online may increase various dimensions of a relationship. For instance, intimacy may be achieved more quickly because dating online requires more emotional contact due to or to compensate for the lack of physical contact. At the same time, individuals engaged in online courtship may be more likely to feel more vulnerable or exposed at a more accelerated rate than in face-to-face relationships. On the other hand, dating online has the potential to allow for better control over the amount of identifying information disclosed. Individuals may also regulate how to present themselves with more ease than in face-to-face relationships. These situations may occur because the other partner simply cannot compare his/her own observations

with what is being presented or reported to them (Schnarch, 1997). Similarly, preference of online relationships could be attributed to fewer social concerns (e.g., physical proximity, impression management, etc.), creating an environment conducive to people becoming less inhibited and more willing to self-disclose (Joinson, 1998). Self-disclosure and partner disclosure have been established by research as playing an important role in increasing intimacy in relationships (e.g., Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). The privacy, anonymity, and being able to time and regulate the amount of identifying information to share with others has been compared to the "strangers on a train" phenomenon (e.g., Rubin, 1975), wherein people divulge intimate information to their seatmates. In both of these settings, people are less likely to fear the possibilities of disapproval or social sanction, which is not always the case in offline relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

Disadvantages of Computer-Mediated Communication

As with most things, disadvantages and risks exist. Online dating is no exception. If the aforementioned inclination to self-disclose is acted on too quickly, the "boom and bust" phenomenon may occur. This phenomenon refers to the premature revelation of a greater amount of information about oneself in computer-mediated relationships. According to Cooper and Sportolari (1997), if the process of becoming acquainted with one another in a romantic relationship is hastened, the relationship may "feel exhilarating at first, and become quickly eroticized, but then not be able to be sustained because the underlying trust and true knowledge of the other are not there to support it" (p. 12).

Research (e.g., Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire, 1984) has found computer users tended to exhibit more uninhibited behavior than people conversing face-to-face. With

this tendency, people could engage in compulsive behaviors and/or unhealthy dependence on the alter ego and/or relationships created by the alter ego while online (Turkle, 1995). The tendency to behave differently than one would offline may be carried to the extreme. One may take on an alter ego to develop a romantic relationship with someone else. Anyone could easily distort personal information (e.g., age, marital status, weight, athleticism, hobbies, etc.) in order to fit the different personality showcased online. Disappointments and resentments are likely to occur should the online couple decide to meet in person one day.

On the same note, researchers have found when a person becomes attracted to another person, it is the idealized notion of the perfect lover that navigates thought processes about that person (Tesser & Reardon, 1981). The Internet and computer-mediated communication is saturated with ambiguity open to reinterpretation and idealization. If a man writes to his online partner that he has his own place and does not need to work due a well-established income, his partner could interpret the statement to mean he is independently wealthy with his own penthouse. In reality, he could simply be living in the garage of his parents' home receiving public assistance and/or taking allowances from his parents. Similarly, if a woman writes the only time she spends outside is when she performs community service duties. Her cyberspace partner could idealize that statement to mean she is a successful and busy executive whose free time is spent contributing to the greater good of society when she is actually a prisoner on a work rehabilitation program.

Slouka (1995) made the observation that some theorists have declared computer-mediated relationships to be superficial and without meaning. The theorists' assertions

stem from a deficit of all the nuances of verbal and nonverbal communication in computer-mediated communication. For instance, a recipient of sarcasm in textual communication may not fully appreciate the scope of the sender's intent. If someone writes good-naturedly to a distracted and/or slow to respond partner, "Looks like you are too busy for me!" in hopes of accelerating the speed of response, the sender is unable to add in sarcastic tone to his/her voice. Hence, instead of humor/sarcasm, the message may simply be interpreted as conveying anger and spite.

A multitude of methods to convey feelings and nonverbal cues exists to buffer the inability to transmit nonverbal cues. The length of parentheses indicates the magnitude of one's hug. For example, "(((hug)))" is a smaller and weaker hug than "((((((((((hug))))))))))." Facial expressions may be demonstrated through symbols. A smile may be a simple one, such as ":-)," or typed with a wink ";-)." Displeasure—":(("—may also be expressed. Loudness (i.e., shouting or yelling) or emphasis on words may be communicated by capitalizing letters. Needless to say, numerous methods are available to encapsulate feelings, behaviors, or changes in speech.

Some theorists have contended the mere absence of social cues do not deter online relationships from becoming as intimate and fulfilling as some offline relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996). For instance, in a study of communication between groups, group members rated interpersonal, computer-mediated communication as more positive than communication offline (Walther, 1995). Communication researchers (e.g., Walther, 1996) have also asserted that differences between online and offline relationships lessen with time.

Through gender-related research, Lea and Spears (1995) asserted complex gender information could be transmittable through computer-mediated communication texts. In their study of social, online behaviors, women received more attention from men than vice versa. Meanwhile, in occupation-related forums women's messages received less attention from both sexes, and women initiating discussion were less likely to receive a response. These findings suggest social cues may be more visible online than one may think at first glance.

As mentioned earlier, the convenience and ease with which one may access a plethora of alternatives to relational difficulties could serve as a source of temptation, support and/or emotional outlet. In cyberspace, it may be easier to find someone more interesting, supportive, caring, exciting, etc. than one's familiar relationship of twenty years. Nevertheless, the Internet may also be a source for empathy, reassurance, guidance, etc. to cope with current relational difficulties. One may also seek purely platonic friendships online as a means to vent, to become distracted by other people's problems, etc.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who have engaged in both romantic online and offline relationships for the purpose of data collection. Inclusion criteria were that the participants must have met at least one partner online and maintained the relationship via mostly electronic means of communication (i.e., through the use of a computer or telephone) prior to meeting in person. Participants have met at least one online partner in person at least once.

Understanding Internet usage among college students is important because they appear to be the primary users. A Harris Poll report found 87% of college students to be online, compared to 56% of American adults (Taylor, 1999). Additionally, traditional undergraduate students are also at the prime age for dating and learning about themselves and the world through their dating experiences. Hence, it would seem logical to utilize college students for this research study on the phenomenon of online dating.

Participants of this research study were from a convenience sample of students from a college in the south central United States interested in contributing to this area of research and/or seeking research participation for course credit. Students received invitations to participate in this research study through campus wide e-mails, sign-up sheets in classes requiring research participation for course credit, and Experimetrix—an online experiment scheduler program.

A total of ten participants were interviewed. There was an equal number of female (n = 5; 50%) and male (n = 5; 50%) participants. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 42. The mean of the age among the participants was 23.7 years old.

When the participants were asked about their ethnicity, 7 identified themselves as Caucasians (70%), 2 Asian Americans (20%), and 1 Hispanic American (10%). Two male participants (20%) reported their sexual orientation to be homosexual, one male participant (10%) indicated he is bisexual, while the rest of the participants described their sexual orientation as heterosexual (50%).

The education level of these participants was relatively high as a result of the convenience sampling method. Nine of the participants (90%) are working towards bachelor degrees, while only 1 participant (10%) was working on a graduate degree.

The romantic lives of the participants were relatively similar. Most participants (80%) were single while only two participants (20%) were divorced. Additionally, more than half (60%) of the participants reported they were currently involved in a romantic relationship that developed from online encounters.

Only 9 of the participants (90%) reported an average number of hours they spent online daily to communicate with other people. Of the 9 participants who shared this information, 5 participants (55.6%) noted they spent an average of 1-3 hours of communication activities online. The remaining 4 participants (44.4%) reported they spent an average of 5-10 hours daily using the computer to communicate with other people.

Additional Demographic Information for the Participants

Linda is a 42-year-old Caucasian female. She is a full-time undergraduate student who works full-time as a nurse. She is also a divorced mother of three teenagers. She indicated she is heterosexual and that she is currently in a relationship with someone whom she originally met in person. She reported spending an average of an hour a day exploring her options for romantic relationships since her current boyfriend does not appear willing to move towards marriage. She has met two men from the Internet, both of whom she did not feel physically attracted to and thus, the relationships ended shortly after she met the men in person.

Trish is also a divorced mother of three small children. She is 30 years old, Caucasian, and heterosexual. She is also a full-time graduate student balancing responsibilities of work, school, and parenting. She has met numerous men after connecting with them online. However, none of those relationships were continued after meeting in person. She currently spends approximately 2 hours a day socializing with people online.

Michelle is a 23-year-old, heterosexual, and Caucasian female. She is a full-time undergraduate student who has experimented with online relationships since high school. She maintained a strictly online relationship with her ex-boyfriend for 3 years before meeting in person, although the relationship ended 5 months later. She is now in another relationship in which she met her boyfriend online.

Nick, a 20-year-old undergraduate student-athlete, is single and heterosexual. He indicated he tends to visit sites frequented by college students, such as the facebook.com. In fact, he has met two girls in person after finding and chatting with them online. He

indicated the lack of physical attraction attributed to the first relationship not working out, although they have since remained friends and still chat online occasionally. Meanwhile, he remains hopeful the second relationship could continue to develop. He continues to spend an average of 5 hours a day in cyberspace to communicate with other people.

Tom is a 19-year-old Caucasian undergraduate student. He is in the military and when asked about his sexual orientation, he discretely replied, "I fall under the military's 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy (i.e., homosexual)." He has chatted with romantic intentions with over fifty individuals online, although he has only met three of them in person. He reported spending approximately an average of an hour and a half a day online communicating with other people.

Frank is an Asian American undergraduate student. He is 19 years old, heterosexual, and involved with a girl whom he originally met online. They have been together cumulatively for approximately two years. He reported spending an average of 10 hours a day communicating with other people online. Approximately 2.5 hours of that time is spent communicating with his girlfriend. He noted that she is the only person from cyberspace with whom he has met face-to-face.

Jack, a 20-year-old Hispanic American, openly shared that he is gay. He is currently in a relationship with a man whom he met first met online. He is an undergraduate student. He talked about his current efforts to curb online activities to communicate with other people. He indicated that he used to be able to spend, on average, upwards of 10-15 hours a day chatting with other people. He has also met face-to-face with approximately 15 people from the Internet. However, being a student he has

learned to reduce his usage to an average of 5 hours a day chatting with other people and writing e-mails.

April is single, 18 years old, heterosexual, and a Caucasian female. A mutual offline friend introduced her to a guy online. After communicating online for a while, they began dating and dated for approximately 6 months. She is also an undergraduate student. Like Jack, because of her academic responsibilities, she has learned to curb her usage of online communication down to an average of 2 hours a day.

Cathy, an Asian American heterosexual female, is engaged to a man whom she originally met online. She is 24 years old and an international student from Southeast Asia. According to Cathy, her brother introduced her to electronic mediums to meet new people and friends when she became depressed a few years ago. After making and ending some friendships online, she connected with her fiancée. They have been together for approximately a year and a half. She related that she spends an average of 8 hours a day chatting and e-mailing.

Dan is a 22-year-old, Caucasian, bisexual, and single male. He is an undergraduate student also serving in the military. He reported that he spends an average of an hour a day communicating with others online. He maintained an online relationship with someone for approximately 8 months. He also took part in approximately 10 one-night stands with various men he met from the Internet.

Research Setting

The research setting for this research project was in public places, mainly campus locations such as library study areas, tutoring rooms, etc. Use of such public, yet secluded for privacy, facilities was intended to elicit feelings of safety and comfort for

the participants to become more open when meeting with this researcher to relate their personal experiences.

Protection of Human Subjects

To protect subjects' rights, this research study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at a south central university. Upon meeting in person for the interview, this researcher provided oral and written descriptions of the study, along with possible risks and benefits of participating in this research study, to the participant. Telephone numbers to contact this researcher and her committee chairwoman were made available for questions related to this research project. Participants were informed of counseling resources in the event a need for counseling related to participation should arise in the future. In addition, as a trained counselor, this researcher debriefed the participants after the interviews and offered emotional support on an as needed basis throughout the interviews.

The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty. Measures were taken to protect the participants' identities through a process of assigning pseudonyms to their interview information. Moreover, specific identifying information, such as the branch of the military a participant serves in, would not be identified to further protect the participants' identities.

Instruments

The length of each tape-recorded interview was approximately one hour. Questions asked during the interview appear in Appendix D. This researcher served as the instrument for collecting and analyzing data.

The participants' experiences were utilized as data sources that represent the phenomenon being studied. All participants signed the corresponding informed consent form shown in Appendix B or C. In addition, they were all treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 2002).

Data Collection

Data for this research study was collected between January and April of 2005. Questions participants have regarding the research project were answered via e-mail and/or phone by the researcher. In the event a participant submits a written request for the results of this research study, the primary researcher will forward a report of the completed study to the participant.

Procedure

Students of a south central university were invited to participate in this study through several approaches. Sign-up sheets were given to instructors of a few undergraduate classes that require research participation for course credit. An e-mail (see Appendix A) invitation to participate in this research study was sent out to some students. Students accessed through these recruitment modes were offered an opportunity to participate in a drawing to receive one of two $25 gift certificates upon the completion of this research project (see Appendix B). Moreover, students with access to an online research participation scheduler were invited to participate in this research study in exchange for credit in the course (see Appendix C). In accordance with the policies of the university's scheduler program, these students were not offered the chance to participate in the drawing for a gift certificate.

Participants received verbal and written descriptions of this research study along with potential risks and benefits of participation in the research study. Resources to cope with unforeseen risks were offered prior to the interview. All interviews lasted no longer than one hour. Participants were informed and assured of measures to protect their identities from their responses. For example, the informed consent was stored separately from their responses during the interview, and pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Analyses/Coding

This research project was a qualitative study. Qualitative research methods are the appropriate method to meet the goal of providing an extensive, in-depth understanding of the experiences of being in romantic computer-mediated and face-to-face relationships. The phenomenological approach best encapsulates the participants' experiences. Focus was placed on understanding the phenomena or the participants' experiences from their own perspectives (Creswell, 1998).

To maximize information acquired, saturation point or redundancy served as the criteria for determining the number of participants in the sample. In this case, saturation point was reached with ten participants. Sampling ceased when no new information was found (Creswell, 1998).

This researcher carried out verbatim transcriptions of the interviews. Content analysis—analysis of the contents of the interviews for themes and recurring patterns of meaning—was performed (Creswell, 1998). Simultaneous coding of the raw data was executed, followed by the construction of categories or themes that best depicted the research questions being explored. Summaries of the themes were provided as they relate to the research questions.

Member checks and peer review functioned as forms of validity in this study. Throughout and at the conclusion of the interviews, participants were offered the opportunity to ensure the interpretations of the interview were consistent with their own accounts of their experiences. Peer review was conducted by one of the researcher's colleagues (someone with the same training in qualitative research as this researcher), who simultaneously coded and investigated themes by this researcher from the contents of an interview to ensure understanding, consistency, and accuracy with this researcher's coding schemes. These steps served to further enhance the validity of this study.

The extent to which research findings may be replicated serves as the reliability of a qualitative research study. Qualitative research does not factor out human behavior. Instead, it investigates, describes, and interprets the subjective experiences of its participants (Merriam, 1998). Gruba and Lincoln (1994) introduced the terms of dependability or consistency when assessing the "reliability" of qualitative research. On the same note, the researcher worked towards dependability or consistency of the data collected.

CHAPTER IV

Results

Themes

Nine themes were identified throughout the contents of the participant's interviews. The themes include physical attraction; convenience, anonymity, ease, and depth of online communication; commitment, intimacy, and duration of romantic online relationships; trust and misrepresentation online; effects on academic performance and existing relationships; conflicts; selection of the fittest; intellectual and emotional intelligence; lessons learned.

Physical Attraction

Physical attraction was reported by eight participants or 80% of the participants to be an important ingredient for the start and continuation of a romantic relationship. Dan talked about his belief that the "initial physical attraction" between partners is very important. Linda noted that upon meeting face-to-face with her not-so-attractive online partner, she realized that "physical attraction is probably more important than I believed it was…" In looking at the life of a relationship, Frank believed that the physical attraction "needs to be there" if there is to be a future in the relationship. He explained that "You can't go to sleep every night with someone you think is not attractive in the same bed as you and wake up and see that every morning and not be attracted to that person."

Seven of the participants (70%) found their partners to be physically different than they expected upon meeting their partners in person. This occurred despite having seen pictures the participants' partners sent and having asked for and/or received descriptions of the partners' "stats" (i.e., hair and eye color, height, weight, etc.). Such a realization came from Cathy, who exchanged photos with her fiancée via e-mails shortly after their courtship begun. When they finally met in person, she had expected to see a taller and better built man than the one before her eyes. She described her initial impressions of his physical attributes:

> Well, I think when I first met him, I expected to see him like a big person according to the picture. When I met him, he was kind of small, not really small, but just a little bit bigger than me and not really tall like I expected. I think he looks different from the picture because the picture seemed to make him look like a big guy. He was just skinny, not really this big guy.

Jack also experienced discrepancies between pictures he saw online and what he encountered in person:

> Some people I've met they might say they look one way or have an older picture and in real life they're completely different than what you thought they were. There was a guy who had a picture online and it was an older picture. He was actually older than what I thought he was and I thought he was a lot younger. When I met him, I realized he was about 30, and I decided to turn around and go. I guess if you're meeting face-to-face, you can't hide who you are, at least the physical aspects.

For six of the participants (60%), no difference in the general level of the physical attractiveness of the people they met from cyberspace and people they met through traditional face-to-face methods was found. Michelle simply and directly stated, "I don't think there is a difference between online and offline attractiveness of people." She has met both attractive and unattractive people on- and offline. For one participant in particular though, differences in attractiveness could be tied to the person's gender and sexual orientation. Dan talked about the differences he perceived:

> I see lot of attractive people when I go clubbing, but I also see lots of attractive people online. Typically women look better if you go out. If I go out to meet girls, girls look better when I go clubbing or when I meet them at parties. Guys, on the other hand, when it comes to homosexual or bisexual type guys, usually guys like me would prefer to be more discrete. And so, going out would be a little bit more difficult to meet guys. So you typically find the more good looking guys online.

Convenience, Anonymity, Ease, and Depth of Online Communication

All of the participants (100%) reported they experienced differences communicating online with someone whom they just struck up a conversation with or with someone whom they are dating or courting when compared to communicating with someone whom they originally met in person. There were four elements of online communication identified by the participants as contributing to the distinction between online and offline communication. These elements include convenience, anonymity, ease, and depth of communication.

The convenience of online dating was what initially drew Trish, the divorced mother of three children, to the Internet. As a mother, full-time student, and working part-time, she found that with electronic communication, she is better able to control when and for how long she communicates with other people. She did not have to search for childcare for her children before signing online to chat with and meet new people. She could easily begin her search for friendship and much more online soon after her children were tucked into bed or when they were busy with homework, games, etc.

Jack and April both talked about being online often as a result of doing homework or research for school-related projects. They found that it was fairly convenient for themselves or someone else to initiate and/or respond to instant messages and to check and/or respond to e-mails while they were in the midst of doing school-related activities on the computer or online. For instance, Jack stated that while he is online he sometimes ends up meeting new people even when he did not initially have the intention to do. "I don't actually have to do anything but push a couple of buttons and I am signed on and I can meet a hundred people. I can meet people online sitting in class or at the library."

Likewise, Jack, Tom, and Dan found that using the Internet as a socializing venue is more convenient than the traditional club, party, etc. scenes. Jack compared the online method of meeting new people with offline methods:

> If I want to meet someone face-to-face, I actually have to like take a shower, get dressed, go out, meet my friends, and we'll go do something. I can meet people online in one night by just being online. I can do other things while I am at home. I can do laundry, get something to eat, clean my room, or do my homework, like I

said. It doesn't take the preparation that you usually go through when you meet someone face-to-face. It's just more casual and really, really convenient.

Tom noted that online communication affords convenient access to people despite the time zone one is currently living in:

> If it's 1 a.m. where you are and 10 a.m. somewhere else, you can get on a computer. You can't go to a friend's house or go somewhere to meet people. You can start conversations with people online and maybe something will ring a bell. Online is just convenient.

Six of the participants (60%) described feeling a sense of safety and security conducive to speaking more openly and freely when communicating with people online that is stronger than when talking with people they met in person. April commented that when it comes to expressing emotions, "You can talk about anything online" because it is almost as if no one will read what you write. When Cathy communicated with people she met from the Internet, she did not feel the level of embarrassment she usually felt when talking openly and honestly with someone she knew in person. She attributed the difference to her belief that the person online cannot see whom they are communicating with and vice versa. Trish found "On the Internet, you open yourself up. You tell more about yourself than you would in person in the beginning of a relationship." Furthermore, the two (or more) people communicating are unlikely to ever meet in person or know each other's identity.

The aforementioned feeling of safety and security may contribute to reductions in one's own inhibitions when transmitting messages to other people online. Tom noticed online relationships tend to move faster:

> You will say what you want to do or say things you want to do that are really advanced in terms of intimacy, but if you are in person and you just met, you are not going to be so forward, I'd imagine. You are going to be more reserved or conservative and apt to get a feel for things to see if you have a chance at whatever it is you want. You may or may not go for it. Online, what the hell, you don't have anything to lose.

Jack found that in face-to-face interactions, people are more aware of their actions because they are all "right there." He contrasted his own behaviors in the two types of settings:

> I am less inhibited while I am online, just for a lot of the same reasons as they are. I am more pushy and risky than I would be in real life. In real life, I am more inhibited and more cautious about what I say and what I do because it has immediate consequences versus being online where I can say or do anything I want to do. If I am with a group of people, I am going to be more cautious about what I say because one of those people may end up being in one of my classes or maybe I do know one of them. If I am talking with someone on Instant Messenger, I do not know them and they do not know me. Online you are more apt to do whatever you want to do because there are no consequences. In real life face-to-face environments, there are consequences, not necessarily bad consequences, just society's views of what you should and should not do.

The lowered inhibition may also appear in message exchanges between people in platonic relationships. For example, Frank indicated he has observed emergence of people's "immature side" when they are online:

> …When you communicate with people online, it's like you're talking to a machine, you can say whatever you want…Nothing bad can happen. You could 'flame' lots of people and say whatever you want to make people aggravated, whereas when you communicate face-to-face, you wouldn't do that because you might get hurt and be criticized…I run into that a lot (immaturity), especially when I play online games. When I play face-to-face, after whoever wins, you shake hands and say good game. But online, it's like they will start shouting expletives and stuff.

Michelle, Dan, and Trish all discovered that they are less nervous and may fumble around for words less in online, rather than offline, interactions. Michelle views the other person online as "just a computer screen." Nothing can really happen unless I make it happen, whereas if I am out dancing and meet someone, something can happen. There is not the security." Likewise, Trish, with her self-identified shyness, feels less anxious and become less inhibited online than offline. She traced the difference to how rejections are perceived in romantic online and offline relationships:

> On the computer, if they reject you, it's like no loss here. Rejection online doesn't hurt unless you've talked to a person for a long time. You don't have that face-to-face rejection. There is something about being told no to your face that it's more impacting.

Tom speculated that bolder behavior may come from the fact that "It's easier to get out of an online conflict. Exit out. That's real easy. When you're face-to-face, you may have a chance of running into them again." Jack also found he did not have to be as concerned with consequences of spontaneously terminating message exchanges with

people online because "They are not going to go back and say, 'I remember him from ya-di-ya-di-ya-dah and he was a real asshole."

All of the participants (100%) reported sharing in the common ability to become more open with their emotions when communicating online. For Nick, he found it easier to share his true feelings with someone he cannot see or know in person because "When you do not actually know the person, you are more likely to speak openly and tell the person, if something is bothering you, you can say it." Furthermore, "You're free to, you know, say what you want. If something wrong happens, you have nothing to lose because you don't know the person."

Linda noticed that she and other people tend to be less inhibited emotionally when they are online. She believes it is because, unless a web cam is in use, how the other person responded to you is a mystery. In contrast, when people share a conversation, one is able to "portray to your audience as you gather data about what you believe they're feeling from their facial expressions and body language." Dan agreed with the absence of this opportunity to "read" someone else when communicating online. Additionally, Linda and April, perceived writing messages online to feel as if they were "writing in a journal" for one's own benefits. This is the case because there are few concerns for the reactions of the other since the reactions of the other person are usually unverifiable.

Commitment, Intimacy, and Duration of Romantic Online Relationships

For seven of the participants (70%), romantic online relationships tended to have a shorter span than romantic offline relationships. Even before April began her romantic online relationship, she struggled to envision any romantic online relationship that would last a long time. She further commented that she "never really pursued it (online

relationship) to progress. We have what we could have. I think once you get to that part, the only thing you can do is meet and start the face-to-face part." Her romantic face-to-face relationship (3 years) lasted significantly longer than the romantic online relationship (6 months) and this is a pattern that resembles all but one of the participants' experiences (90%).

Dan made the observation that in face-to-face relationships, he tends to "pursue it fervently" while if he met someone online he likes, it is not as serious:

> If I get online and go there, it's great I can talk to them. If not, no big deal. I don't leave the computer on and check every five minutes to see if they're online or anything. It's easier to take a face-to-face relationship more seriously, work harder. Those seem to be the relationships to pursue because those seem to be the relationships that will last.

Linda also noticed differences in the way she pursued her romantic online and offline relationships:

> In the face-to-face, hey, I will get in the car and drive 250 miles…and spend 8 hours on the road there and back, a little over that…I am more interested in face-to-face contact than online…I am much more in tune with providing whatever he (romantic face-to-face partner) needs. If he didn't feel good, I'd want to run over there to help him, whereas online, I don't really know you, and surely you've got friends who can help you with that. I mean, I can feel for you, but I am not physically motivated to do anything for you…

Tom verbalized that he still cares deeply and thinks more of his former romantic offline partners while the romantic online relationships are a distant memory. In Tom's

experience, he has found that face-to-face relationships tend to have a larger impact on him while online relationships are more transitory:

> You're associating all the sight, sound, and smell of that person. Online, unless you've been talking for a serious length of time, you can pour your heart out on the computer one night and the next day, get lost, venture off to another game. Sometimes people just need a release.

Jack seemed to believe "When you meet someone face-to-face, you have a longer relationship in the sense that you do things the old fashioned way." Online, people do not have that option. Similarly, Linda indicated she "must have 3-D for chemistry" and to want to invest in the upkeep of a relationship. Even if she sees a picture, she is

> Still not sure about chemistry, physical chemistry, because I cannot see how they react to me, if they're digging me. I think that's probably a lot of it. If you're into me, I'll probably be more into you. In my experience, a picture is not going to alter that in my opinion.

It appears that for Linda, only face-to-face interactions could offer opportunities to "read" the other person and determine the other person's level of interest to accurately assess the outcome of the relationship.

A person's intention when signing online may help to explain the difference in duration of romantic online and offline relationships. Tom pointed out that online there are many types of chat rooms to suit people with particular interests (e.g., gay sex, married but looking, bisexual and curious, etc.) and interested in connecting with people with those same interests. While these types of options exist and are available through more traditional routes than the cyberspace realm, access and availability are still not as

easy and abundant. As a result, Tom made the following observation regarding the short-term nature of relationships with people one meets online:

> If you go into a chat room looking for something cheap and quick, then of course, it's not going to be what's considered a long-term, successful relationship. If you go to a meeting offline (e.g., singles group at church), it may be more oriented toward something more serious and have more of a chance for a long-term thing.

Likewise, from Jack's experience:

> If I've met someone at the library and I was interested, we might go get coffee and sit down and talk. If I met someone online, and we each thought the other was interesting, we might meet at one of our houses. If you meet in a public place, it might be a longer time before you actually get to a private area where something like that (physical intimacy) may happen.

Half of the ten participants (50%) suggested that commitment is higher in romantic face-to-face relationships than in romantic online relationships. Nick believed that people tend to "become more attached to a person when you meet them face-to-face. You can be more committed to a person that you actually know physically." For him, commitment in online relationships is something he has yet to hear about or experience.

On the same note, April spoke of difficulties she experienced with commitment towards her romantic online relationship. She struggled to feel committed to her online partner because she did not know what he was doing offline. Stated in another way, she did not know if he was maintaining another romantic online relationship with someone else or if he was dating someone he may have met face-to-face.

Without her online partner's physical presence, she also had to struggle against desires to be with other men when she went out with her friends. For her, physical intimacy contributes to the growth and bond within the relationship. She reported feeling more committed and had a higher level of intimacy with her ex-boyfriend whom she met in high school than with her romantic online partner. She explained that the difference is that the commitment and emotional intimacy she and her ex-boyfriend shared were enhanced by their physical intimacy.

Frank also felt more intimacy within his romantic face-to-face relationship than the romantic online relationship. He believed the strength of the intimacy had to do with getting to spend more time together with his romantic offline relationship. Furthermore, his romantic online relationship was long distance, so they could only spend a few days together at a time instead of daily or on more days than not during the week, as in his offline romantic relationship.

Being able to engage in activities other than just communicating online was discussed by 6 of the participants (60%) as an important ingredient to increase intimacy and commitment within any romantic relationship. For instance, Nick asserted that in a face-to-face relationship, a couple can go out on dates and be interactive. "It's not like you don't talk, but you can also do activities (e.g., hiking, mountain biking, sex, etc.) that make you happy. If there are problems, you can kind of forget about it." Reflective of the other 5 participants' views, Nick also found that in romantic online relationships, all that one can do in a romantic online relationship is talk.

Dan made the following comments about the need for the physical presence of a romantic partner and being able to do activities with the partner in the two types of relationships:

> I think one of the bigger parts of a working relationship is having the person there. Having the person wake up next to you and all that really play into it. It's a lot easier to take a face-to-face relationship seriously than an online relationship. There are just times spent together. You're used to having someone around. You miss them when you get away from them. You miss having them to talk to and to touch. I miss not seeing them all the time and having them around.

He later contended that his lack of commitment to his romantic online relationship was linked to the absence of physical presence as a result of the long distance between their residences.

Trust and Misrepresentation Online

For half (50%) of the participants, using the computer to connect with people in cyberspace stemmed from a combination of boredom, curiosity, and readiness to try something different. For example, Cathy reported when she began feeling depressed and longed for someone to talk to, her brother introduced her to the Internet as a mechanism for meeting new friends.

As for Jack, he related that when in high school, he witnessed those who came "out of the closet" faced persecution. To avoid being on the receiving end of such maltreatment, he remained "in the closet" until he started college. While on campus one day, he saw a flyer for a web site that caught his interest—www.gay.com. Soon thereafter, he logged onto the site and found "this whole network of chat rooms to the gay

world. He began initiating and responding to conversations with men for both platonic and romantic purposes. He now attributes his ability to be open and comfortable about his sexual orientation to having communicated with, learned from, and participated in experiences with other gay men online.

The majority of the participants (80%) had family and friends who expressed negative views about people who use the computer as a social outlet. Trish stated that news of her communicating and meeting people online "took an adjustment for (her) family." Initially, her family feared that "those people can be killers." By the same token, Linda's friends from work would caution her against dating or meeting people online since they "could be a serial rapist or killer."

Nick's friends discouraged him from chatting with girls online because they believed it to be a "waste of time." Trish's friends thought of people online looking for romance as "desperate." In addition, Jack pointed out that his parents and friends he met through face-to-face methods either "do not understand why you meet someone online or they think it's unsafe, risky, or dangerous."

Half of the participants (50%) found that trust is of special importance within a romantic online relationship. Cathy stated that while people can be unfaithful to their partners in romantic online and offline relationships, cheating can happen more in online relationships simply because they cannot see each other. On the same note, Dan and April could not help but question their partner's, as well as their own, fidelity within romantic online relationships due to the inability to be face-to-face with each other.

Six participants (60%) noticed that in a romantic online relationship, they had to exert more efforts to evaluate the truthfulness of what they were being told by their

partners, as compared with romantic face-to-face partners. Meanwhile, eight of the participants (80%) talked about the surprising feeling they felt after interacting with their online partners in person and discovering that some non-physical dimensions (e.g., goals, intelligence, etc.) of their partners deviated from what they were initially led to believe from previous computer-mediated communications. Such observations resulted from observations that in computer-mediated interactions, more opportunities exist for planning, modification, and/or withholding of information shared with one's partner. Comments were also made regarding the limited ability to use one's own resources to learn about one's partner online due to the nature of computer-mediated relationships.

Trish maintained an online romantic relationship with a military man deployed overseas for approximately five months. While he was overseas, she stated that his communications through instant messages and e-mails reflected what she wanted in a long-term relationship (e.g., caring, sensitive, family-oriented, etc.). Yet, when he returned, his personality and demeanor changed completely. For example, when she asked him why a woman began answering his phone, he accused her of being paranoid. Eventually, their relationship ended because for her, he became a completely different person from the one he had presented to her via the computer.

Trish and a few other participants formulated numerous hypotheses regarding the drastic contrast between the person online and the person they encountered face-to-face. From Trish's perspective, she related the following about people online that she learned from experience:

> They have time to manipulate what is being said. They think about what they're saying. They may change what they say and to say what you want to hear

because of having that time. They can analyze and think better. When you meet someone face-to-face, there's a lot of pressure to impress somebody, more so than online. Actions—the way you move, look, what you wear—are all pressure versus online, the only thing you have to worry about is what you say. I let my guard down with Tony…I don't know why he was being that way with me.

Some of the participants themselves also participated in the monitoring and regulating of information exchanged with their partners. Trish indicated that in relationships, "In person, I am probably a little more guarded." While talking about her former online partner, she made an observation about differences in her own communication styles online versus offline:

> In person, I am probably not able to say things I want to say out of anger. When anger is a factor, you say things you don't want to say or should have said, but didn't. On the Internet, I can think better about what I want to say. I can go back and change things I shouldn't have said.

Linda also found differences in communication from her end when it comes to romantic online and offline relationships:

> I will go back and change things 4-5 times to make sure the thing I am trying to say is interpreted exactly the way I say it. I don't do that on the telephone. I just blurt out something and I think that's not exactly how I meant that to be. So I analyze what I am saying online, much more than in person. I analyze it, review it, reanalyze, and rewrite.

Tom contended that "People online can present themselves a certain way." From his experiences, he has noticed that:

> …Online, you can come off a lot more different, either a lot smarter or better. Chances are, no one will follow up with who you are and your personality. On the computer, it's a lot easier to pull off whether you're smart or stupid. If you have a dictionary, you may come off as Einstein. Offline, it's harder to mask who you are…It's very easy to make people perceive one thing. You can talk to people you already know if you come up under a different screen name. You can act like a whole different person.

According to Cathy, "If you meet a person online, you just hear whatever they say. You have to totally believe that person, whatever he or she says." She noted that unless a person meets his/her online partner face-to-face and become more acquainted through offline means, the type of person that the partner truly is may not be identified.

As for the fear that one's partner may misconstrue emotions and intentions attached to electronic communication, half of the participants (50%) indicated they chose to talk about important issues within their online relationships, even if it is to end a relationship, via the phone or face-to-face interactions. Michelle reported that "Even through e-mails you can write what you want to say and how you feel; the person doesn't always interpret it the way you want them to. Face-to-face you can always make them see what you mean."

Emotions within a conversation could easily be masked, misrepresented, or misconstrued. Dan explored the issue of emotions in online conversations:

> Face-to-face, it's easier to read somebody. Sometimes when you're talking to somebody online, you never know how a person is reacting or feeling. They can say something and you can take it entirely another way. You don't have the facial

> expressions or the voice intonations or any of those things to be able to read a person. Same thing, vice versa, they can't read you so much. If you meet somebody in person, you know how they react. You know what they're feeling, most likely.

Tom spoke of the difficulties of "reading" people online:

> Unless they express emotions in words online or on web cams, you can't tell if they're having emotions or not. It's what they want you to see. They can put a smiley face when they don't feel that way. Face-to-face, you can generally get a perception of how they feel and what type of mood they're in. You're not going to be able to read those things online. Face-to-face is much better suited for that.

In addition, April described her former online partner's tendency to take certain things she said more personally than her original intention:

> …If you were to say something online, you can't see if I am laughing or smiling while I am saying it. So you can take it as sarcastic or you could take it as me being silly or mean. You can take it so many different ways…

Effects on Academic Performance and Existing Relationships

Four participants (40%) pointed to having greater control of time as one of their reasons to use the Internet as a source for romance. For instance, Linda and Trish are both divorced mothers of three children juggling the responsibilities of family, school, and work. They found that in general, using the Internet seemed to be less invasive in their lives and less of a burden on their time than conventional methods of dating. At the same time, as Trish reported, involvement with a romantic online relationship did eventually lead to displaced and later restored priorities:

> With Tony, I spent a lot of time online with him. One thing that makes me mad is when I talked to him online, it took time away from my kids. One time he called me in the morning. My son kept crying he needed to go to school. I was like, 'You can be ten minutes late.' Well, I forgot that was the day he was going to do the announcements. That broke my heart. So now I am like, 'He didn't get to do the announcements and the guy turned out to be a huge jerk.' Now I have my priorities back in line.

Most of the participants (60%) related that either their romantic online relationships did not interfere with their academic performance or that the romantic face-to-face relationships affected their academic performance more. For example, Frank recalled that his face-to-face relationship limited his academic performance since "sometimes instead of going to class or lecture, (he) would go spend time with her. Instead of studying, (he) would go hang out with her."

On the other hand, the remaining four participants (40%) felt their sense of responsibility as a student falter when they became involved in romantic online relationships. April stated that her online relationship interfered with her academic responsibilities more so than her face-to-face relationship. She explained how her computer-mediated relationship affected her schoolwork:

> In school, I usually do a lot of homework on the computer. So when I was online, a message would pop up, like to check my e-mail. Instead of working immediately or concentrating really hard on my homework, in between every little sentence, I'd be sending back another message or in a conversation. That's really hard to focus and do all your work when every time you get on the Internet,

you'd talk. That was really hard to get stuff done, actually. Every time I get on the computer, I'd want to talk and see who was on and who has been talking to me or something.

For Cathy, whose romantic online fiancée lived in a different time zone—14 hours difference to be exact—communication with him contributed to her neglecting to complete her homework assignments, study for exams, etc. She commented that this was partially due to her staying up late in the evening or waking up early in the morning to respond to his electronic communications. Eventually, her lack of sleep and declining grades propelled her to set limits with him and with herself.

Most of the participants (80%) arrived at the realization that romantic face-to-face relationships took more time away from their family and friends than romantic online relationships did. Nick found that in offline or face-to-face relationships, "You spend more time together as a pair and less time with friends and family." In the same way, Dan's relationships with family and friends were more affected by face-to-face relationships than online relationships:

> The online relationships didn't affect my time with friends and family at all. Face-to-face relationships you have to devote the extra time. You have to be there. That's just something you have to do in a face-to-face relationship. I guess that's one of the benefits of online relationships. If you want to call it a benefit, it is also a bad part. You're not seeing them all the time and at the same time, you don't have to give as much time to it.

April acknowledged that she is extremely close to her parents and would want their approval of her romantic partner. She noted that her parents "loved" her former

face-to-face boyfriend after meeting him in person and getting to know him. Later on, when she told them about her online boyfriend and how much she liked him, they asked her to "bring him around sometime" for them to meet him. She expressed her understanding of their wish to meet her online boyfriend because she believed it would be difficult for parents to watch their child fall in love with someone they cannot or have not met in person.

Conflicts

Half of the participants (50%) reported they did not find any significant differences with the conflicts that resulted in the demise of their online and offline romantic relationships. In both types of relationships, these participants did not face issues that are exclusive to either type of partner. As Tom noted, the end of both types of relationships were "all for the same reasons. It was something that could not be addressed. So unless there is a compromise between the two, online or offline, the relationship won't be successful."

The others participants had different experiences. For instance, according to Nick's experiences, his online relationships started out romantic in nature and transformed into friendships and those friendships are still ongoing. His offline romantic relationships were just the opposite. They started out as friendships before transforming into romantic relationships and ending later.

Six of the participants (60%) related that in romantic online relationships, fewer conflicts arose than in romantic offline relationships and that those conflicts were resolved more easily than conflicts within their romantic offline relationships. As an

example, Tom provided his observation that conflicts within his romantic online relationship were:

> …definitely not as dramatic. If you're talking to the computer screen, you're not getting the multiple sensations of being physically touched or feeling the presence of someone near you, or deal with the awkwardness of getting up and leaving or taking them home.

For Cathy, conflicts within her romantic online relationship were few and far in between. She recalled that in her romantic offline relationship of 2 years, she and her ex-boyfriend were constantly quarreling with each other. Yet, even though she has been with her fiancée for a year and a half, she ascertained that there has only been one conflict within their relationship thus far. The reason being, she indicated, they do not see each other on a regular basis. Consequently, they believe their time together online and on the phone are "precious" and they "treasure" time spent together.

Similarly, there were no conflicts between April and her former online partner. But unlike Cathy, April did not perceive tranquility within a relationship as a healthy quality:

> The problem with my online relationship is there were no conflicts. The problem with that is our relationship could never grow. It was never weak so it could grow. In my face-to-face relationship, things would happen to where we argue…disagree or something happened that made the other person upset. Doing that to each other it'd upset each other, you'd grow from there and it'd get stronger and stronger after that. But online I never really saw conflicts or anything. Seeing each other you can see each other's true colors in person. You

> can see what bothers you about the person and what's going to make you mad and how you're going to react to that.

She added that in face-to-face relationships, people are able to face and learn to deal with each other's personalities. In online relationships, she felt she was more limited to only focus on the positive aspects of the relationship or the dimensions of the relationship that worked well.

Selection of the Fittest

Almost all of the participants (90%) declared they searched for romance online primarily for reasons associated with availability, selection, and access. They found the extensive availability of people also searching for romance online and the larger selection of people to choose from compared with what the participants normally encounter in their daily lives appealing. The other appealing feature of searching for romance online, as described by the participants, is the ease with which one may access and filter through selected people online to find the best fit for a romantic partner.

Even though Frank is an Asian American male from the only Asian American family in his town of 15,000 people, his parents maintained their expectation that his future wife be an Asian American. This expectation, along with his discontent with the intelligence and personalities of the girls from his hometown, limited his options for dating. It is not surprising then, that he found the Internet to be an opportunity for romance not to be passed up. He went on to note that if he had lived in a city with a wider array of selection for dating, he would not have chosen to initiate a computer-mediated romantic relationship.

Trish, a mom of three children, full-time student, and employed part-time, disclosed her reasons to turn to online dating:

> I actually went out to the club the other night…At 2 o'clock, it's last call and all the guys are hurrying up trying to find a girl to hook up with. It's ridiculous. I go to church, but I am not there to meet a guy. I don't have too many opportunities to meet somebody when I have my kids. Being on the computer, you look through profiles and you find who you want to talk to…You can see who has kids and who wants kids, and if they don't want kids, then obviously we're not good together.

For her, dating online gives her a different alternative to look for a romantic partner than the alternatives that have yet to work (e.g., the club scene). Moreover, she is able to screen for certain criteria she is looking for in a mate.

According to Linda, when she became tired of being a long-term girlfriend to her boyfriend, she began looking through profiles online of men interested in forming a romantic relationship. She indicated that this method of searching for romance was what drew her to online dating. She explained that not only is she able to have a larger selection of men to choose from, she is also able to "weed out the jerks" more easily than through traditional methods of dating. In other words, she has more "shelf goods" to look through than in offline dating methods and is also able to be more selective in choosing men she believes to be a good fit for her.

The Internet provides easier and more access to more people with similar interests and goals than offline avenues to meet romantic partners. Tom commented that he could enter a chat room or use instant messenger service and have "hundred and hundreds of

people to choose from," a feature not available when going to the clubs and parties. Dan stated, "If I am getting online, it's usually to find somebody for sex." Whether for sex or for a long-term relationship, they discovered that they could meet more people for romantic purposes online more easily than through face-to-face experiences. And as Tom said, selection is uncomplicated:

> Some of them may or may not share your same interests. So you gather information about them and make decisions about if you want to talk to them. If you find you made a mistake, just exit out of there.

Tom, Jack, and Dan all made the observation that the Internet served as the vehicle by which they were able to explore and identify their sexual orientation. Communicating with and meeting men with similar sexual interests facilitated the unfolding of their sexuality. Jack shared his account of how the Internet helped him to arrive at the place he is at with his sexual orientation:

> I knew a couple of gay people who were in my high school that everybody made fun of and picked on. Coming to college, I was not going to go looking for a gay club. Being online, that anonymous part of it, I was able to find, like on gay.com, all these people who were college people who were gay. So it opened me up to it. It was from the comfort of my dorm that I found a bunch of college people who were gay. Because of that, I was able to grow. If I hadn't gotten online, I would probably still be in the closet now because I wouldn't have met any gay people.

Tom also verbalized how his online experiences enabled him to find answers he may otherwise have not found:

> If you're curious about one thing, you can find what you're looking for. If you like what you find, then make some decisions. If you don't, make the decision not to pursue something. There were things I was unsure about that I had interests about or just curiosities and questions to ask. So I went to some places to find answers.

Michelle highlighted the ease with which one may connect with a potential mate:

> I'd say it's somewhat easier to meet people online as opposed to face-to-face…People look at people. If they're not pretty, this skinny, or this big or whatever, it's a turnoff or it doesn't count…whereas online, it's easier to just start talking to somebody and send them a head picture. It's easier to start a relationship, even if it's not romantic, just to start a relationship with someone.

Part of the ease of communicating online seemed to be linked to her personality: "When it's face-to-face, I get more nervous. I can't talk and I can't be myself, whereas online, I can be more myself…I don't get as nervous." Likewise, Trish attributed her preference for online dating to her shy personality. She indicated she can "get to know the person better than when (she) meets people in person."

Intellectual and Emotional Intelligence

Four participants (40%) related that they did not perceive significant differences between the intellectual capacities of partners they met online and those they met offline. From Nick's experiences in searching for romance, he presumes both intelligent and not so intelligent people are available in both online and offline mediums. Dan has also met people of high intelligence online and at clubs.

Two of the participants (20%) disagreed and pointed out that they have noticed people online to be more limited in their intellectual capacities. For example, Tom reported, "If you're really an intellectual and consider yourself that, then you're not going to spend a lot of time online. You are going to always be in a book. People find things to do besides the computer screen." Frank went a step further in his analysis: "If you go into general chat rooms, I don't know a lot of smart people that go into chat rooms and just chat. It depends on what forms of online communication you use. If you use AOL messenger or Yahoo, you're going to find, I find, less intelligent people who use that than Internet Relay Chat and other forms of communication online."

For four of the participants (40%), the issue of intellectual functioning is important in romantic online relationships. Jack connected intellectually and cognitively with a man he met online, without knowing what he looked like, and was able to carry on endless conversations whereby they "talked and talked and talked." When they met in person, however, Jack was not attracted to him physically. Nevertheless, they remained good friends to this day. Similarly, April recalled that in her online relationship, intelligence was an important element of the relationship:

> All we could connect on was intellectual stuff. We could not see each other and do new things together. So we would just talk about what we had in common…All you can talk about in the online one is about what you know and he knows and what he believes and what you believe.

When comparing emotional intelligence of mates met online and offline, four participants (40%) identified partners they met through face-to-face means to have higher social or emotional intelligence than people they met in cyberspace. Jack thought aloud

about the emotional intelligence of offline people he meets: "I think emotional intelligence runs higher in face-to-face because they're right there with the person while saying what they're saying or doing what they're doing. They're more self-aware." His perspective parallels that of the others in that one can better monitor and regulate their emotions and behaviors when with other people in face-to-face interactions. Likewise, Dan referred to his belief that the "emotional intelligence of (online) people is dimmed because of the online factor" or rather, being online the emotional intelligence of people may be minimized because of the inability to "read" the other person.

Lessons Learned

Eight participants (80%) reported that because of the unlimited geographic regions in which people in cyberspace reside, if they do not limit the locations of people they speak with, the romantic online relationships tend to be long distance. For Tom, the face-to-face relationships are "generally within close enough radius of where (he) lives." Moreover, for these participants, they found long distance relationships are more difficult to maintain, not to mention adding the online factor into the mix. In thinking about the long distance relationships Tom has formed and the potential for romantic long distance online relationships, he simply finds them to be a "hassle." He added, "When you're talking about different states or countries, then of course there are logistical issues there."

Four of the participants (40%) related they experienced feelings of initial discomfort when meeting their online partners. It was difficult for them to pinpoint the cause of that discomfort. April shared her thoughts aloud about the initial discomfort she felt:

> But as soon as we met, it felt like we had never met because we had talked about so much and knew each other so well that when we saw each other face-to-face, we're like wow, this is who I've been telling my life story to. It was actually really uncomfortable. So you went to complete comfort to meeting for the first time and being like, you know everything about me. It was a very weird feeling. It was hard, too, when I did start a face-to-face relationship with him. It was very uncomfortable at first, like starting a new relationship, but just with a lot more on the table. It was different. It was hard to get into that at first. That was a huge difference for me. It did become more comfortable, for sure, because we knew what we were about, but the initial reaction was very different.

On the same note, even though Frank has been with his online girlfriend for over a year and a half, that initial discomfort continues to pervade the first few days of their offline interactions.

> Every time I go to see my online relationship, there would be that awkwardness at first, especially when we first met, like the first couple of days. After that, we were comfortable with each other. And now every time I go to see her, the first day I'll be more reserved and distant, and she will be, too. As we spend a couple of hours just talking and hanging out, we'll be real comfortable and get back to where we were (online).

When asked about growth experiences from dating online, six of the participants (60%) noted their online experiences were helpful in determining qualities they now want and do not want in a romantic partner. For Jack, the people he met and developed relationships with from online helped him to narrow down qualities he liked and did not

like in a romantic partner. By Linda's account, her former romantic online relationships were also helpful for her in learning how to become more selective about the type of man she would want to date and be with in the future.

In the end, more than half (60%) of the participants indicated that taking into consideration what they know now about romantic online relationships, they now prefer face-to-face relationships. In fact, Nick realized that despite the advantages (e.g., being more open emotionally) he initially saw in online dating, those advantages are not sufficient to sustain a true romantic relationship. He also realized that he can also achieve the same advantages in face-to-face relationships, although it does take longer.

Four of the participants (40%) arrived at the conclusion that they prefer to use the Internet as a means for meeting people to have romantic offline or face-to-face relationships. Dan stated that for serious relationships, he prefers meeting people through face-to-face methods. At the same time, when he is looking for a short-term or purely sexual relationship, he will turn to the Internet to find people to have physical encounters with.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Results from this research study revealed parallels as well as deviations from the findings from existing literature. Baker (2002) examined themes among successful online couples to identify ingredients leading to their success with romantic computer-mediated relationships. Participants of this research study shared similar and different notions with participants from Baker's study. First, the three individuals who, at the time of the interview for this research study, were still involved in ongoing, romantic online relationships met their partners in general chat rooms instead of in mediums of common values or interests, such as the successful online couples interviewed in Baker's study. In fact, the remaining participants in this research study who only experienced relatively short-lived romantic online relationships (i.e., one-night stands, strictly physical relationships, relationships lasting less than a few months, etc.) met their partners through mutual friends or on goal-oriented sites (e.g., gay.com, facebook.com, etc.). These sites are intended to help users find relationships, both platonic and romantic, with other users of the sites.

Successful online couples from Baker's study tended to share a longer length of correspondence before meeting in person and becoming physically intimate with each other. Likewise, participants from this research study who waited a few months before meeting in person were the ones who are still in relationships with their romantic online partners. The other participants who met face-to-face with their romantic online partners within hours, days, or weeks of meeting online did not deem those relationships as long-term.

In the qualitative, individual case study by Biggs (2000), the participant entered online relationships with negative stereotypes about the qualities of online users. At some point during the interview process, most of the participants of this research study related their own and their family and friends' lack of faith—prior to their initiation or involvement in online relationships—about any positive qualities possessed by people searching for or involved in romantic computer-mediated relationships. The participants' and their family and friends' pessimism about the outcome of a romantic relationship that began online was also repeatedly verbalized.

The woman in Biggs' study noted that she revealed more about herself to her online relationships than she did in face-to-face relationships. This may be comparable to reports by six participants in this research study who found that when communicating with other people online, they tend to speak more openly and freely. Perhaps, part of the ability of the participant from Biggs' study to disclose more about herself than in face-to-face relationships resulted from her feelings of being safer when revealing herself to people online. Most of the participants of this research study also experienced this phenomenon whereby they felt more secure to disclose information to others about themselves than in offline relationships.

The relatively high prevalence of sexually disenfranchised men using the Internet to search for sexual partners was reflected in the experiences reported by the gay and bisexual male participants of this research study. These three males indicated that they have engaged in multiple sexual relations with people they initially met in cyberspace. Moreover, they all spoke of intentional searches for sexual partners when communicating with men online.

External factors appear to be the primary force for these three men to search for physical intimacy with men they meet online. Tom and Dan are both military personnel following the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy of the United States Armed Forces. In other words, they do not freely disclose their sexual orientation of being homosexual to other people, especially those with whom they work. They also lead very discrete lifestyles to protect their careers as well as their physical safety.

In contrast, Jack is "openly" gay. However, this did not happen until after he began college and found communities online and offline to support his development in his acceptance and openness about his sexuality. Both he and Dan commented about their inability to explore their sexual orientation due to fears of retribution by members of the community to which they belong. These three men made the observation that having access to the Internet allowed them to explore their sexual orientations and to search for and find answers about their sexual identity. Using online mediums to connect with other men seemed to be a safer route and posed less risk of retribution by anyone disapproving of their sexual lifestyles. Consequently, answers and lessons learned from experiences with partners online they found contributed to their identification and acceptance of their sexual orientation and their willingness to be more open about their sexual orientation than they had been prior to entering cyberspace in search of romance.

Regarding the interference of romantic online relationships with the participants' existing face-to-face relationships, the majority (80%) noted that romantic face-to-face relationships took more time away from other existing relationships than did the romantic online relationships. This departs from the findings of the literature on this issue. Most of the results (Franzen, 2000; Robinson, Kestnbaum, Neustadtl, & Alvarez, 2000; UCLA

Center for Communication Policy, 2000) contends that there are no significant conflicts between Internet usage and relationships among their existing social networks. Nie (2001) even found that as the number of hours of online activities increase, frequency of social contacts with one's social support system tended to decrease.

Research conducted by Cooper et al. (2000) determined that for participants of their study, messages exchanged between romantic online partners carried more weight than one's partner's physical appearance. While this research study did not specifically examine how the participants weighed the importance of physical appearance with communication, eight of the participants (80%) disclosed that they placed a strong emphasis on physical attraction with a romantic partner because it is indeed an important component to any successful romantic relationship. It is also unclear, with the exception of one participant, whether the realization of the magnitude with which physical attraction influences the quality and outcome of a romantic relationship results in "ugly" terminations of romantic online relationships. One of the participants, Linda, did specifically note that she learned from her encounters with men she met online that physical attraction is more important than she realized for the success of a relationship.

Cooper and Sportolari (1997) had asserted that part of the allure of online dating is a greater sense of control over the frequency and intensity of an online relationship. Stated in another way, one may be attracted to online dating because of the ease with which one could "engage and disengage" at their whim within online relationships. Some observations made by the research participants from this research study supported that assertion.

According to Trish, there are less emotional repercussions from being rejected online than there are in face-to-face rejections. Perhaps there is something to rejection online that makes it less painful than face-to-face rejections, or one may accept "virtual" rejections as a pattern of people's behavior online. Five other participants shared their perceptions that it is much easier to end a romantic computer-mediated relationship, no matter what stage the relationship is in, than in face-to-face relationships. References were made to the relative ease with which one may exit out of a chat room, ignore/cancel an instant message, delete an e-mail, etc. Several participants also shared their observation of the ease with which people may "pour their heart out" to someone else online and then "dis" that same person the very next evening.

One of the themes that emerged from the experiences of some of the research participants of this research study was that in romantic online relationships, the participants could only rely on information given to them by their romantic online partners. They could not see, observe, or test the data provided to them by their partners. Schnarch (1997) discussed this element of romantic online relationships as a quality that may or may not be liked by people choosing to enter or remain in romantic online relationships.

Joinson (1998) described the lowered sense of accountability of one's own behaviors when online as compared to in face-to-face interactions. Participants from this research study reported feeling this way since there are no immediate, tangible consequences of their behaviors when online. They may receive criticisms and feedback from other people, but the lack of face-to-face contact lowers the fear of future retaliation in whatever form. As a result, some participants reported feeling less inhibited, more

risky, and pushier in pursuit of and/or while communicating to their romantic online partners—a phenomenon revealed in the behaviors of participants in other research (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984 & Turkle, 1995).

Parks and Floyd (1996) theorized that romantic computer-mediated relationships could be equally intimate and fulfilling as the romantic face-to-face relationships. Only two of the ten participants (20%) would characterize their romantic online relationships as more intimate and fulfilling than their romantic offline relationships. The majority of the participants found face-to-face relationships to be more intimate and fulfilling. In addition, these participants also felt more reverberating effects from romantic offline relationships than they did with romantic computer-mediated relationships.

Limitations

Numerous limitations exist within the study to warrant their discussion. The first limitation relates to sampling and sample size. A convenience sampling method was utilized with nine undergraduate students and one graduate student who volunteered as participants. Generalizability of the findings from this research study could have been enhanced if the general public had received invitations to participate in this research study and if the sample size and the sample were larger and more diverse.

Self-selection bias could have contributed to the limitations of this research study. For example, several participants were turned away because they only had one or two very superficial and casual relationships with someone online. In other words, the other limitation revolves around the differences in quantity, quality, and duration of the type of romantic online relationships the participants were involved in. The spectrum of the differences ranges from a participant who has been involved romantically with and met

over fifty online partners to participants who have only been involved romantically with and met one or only a few online partners. Two participants reported they were still with their romantic online partners of almost two years. A few of the participants only use the Internet as a source to meet people face-to-face before deciding if they wish to continue the relationship. One could argue that if the researcher had required a certain range for the number of romantic online relationships the participants have had, including ones that transitioned to becoming face-to-face relationships, the accounts of the participants' experiences could have offered more depth in the results of this research study.

Clinical Implications

Despite the limitations just noted, numerous implications for clinical practice are worthy of mentioning. These implications for practice will be discussed in accordance with the themes found within the participants' stories. The multiple contexts (e.g., counseling, psychoeducation, etc.) in which these implications may be used will also be discussed.

Physical attraction appears to be a necessary, albeit not sufficient, ingredient to a romantic relationship. Physical appearance may refer to facial features, body weight, age, hair and eye color, etc. While people may not wish to be excessively vain or superficial by focusing only on physical appearances, it could seem naïve to refrain from acknowledging and following one's own desire for the presence of physical attraction in a romantic relationship. Counseling professionals could encourage individuals considering dabbling in the Internet or searching for something more serious in cyberspace to recognize the need for physical attraction and to take possible steps to ensure physical attraction would not be a barrier to the relationship. For example, photo

exchanges as well as use of web cams may decrease the likelihood of surprises when meeting in person. At the same time, one must keep in mind that even photographs and web cams cannot prevent disappointments and deceptions from occurring. In addition, people might act differently when they know they are "on camera" than they otherwise would in person.

Given the convenience, anonymity, and ease and depth of romantic computer-mediated relationships, it would be easy to understand the draw to romantic computer-mediated relationships. The convenience factor extends to people of different lifestyles, from carefree individuals to single parents balancing their roles and responsibilities. In order for individuals to find balance in their search for or in the maintenance of romantic online relationships, counselors may want to help clients consider how their schedules will be affected once the romantic online relationships become face-to-face relationships. For example, a single mom who is also a student and working part-time could communicate with her online partner for hours in the evenings after her children are tucked in for the night. At this point, she would not need to worry about introducing her online partner to her children. It is when the relationship becomes face-to-face that her children will have to meet the partner and she and her children may benefit from support, time management tools, etc. from a counselor to cope with the competition for time, attention, etc. between the partner and the children.

Conversations with prospective romantic partners could take place while one is multi-tasking (e.g., chores, homework, etc.). Conversations may be absorbed and processed better had both parties focused strictly on each other only. Communication is then likely to be hindered.

The anonymity that some participants reported they felt online allowed them to make more self-disclosures and speak more openly and freely with people online than in face-to-face interactions. On the surface, this appears to be a positive feature of interactions online. When looking deeper into this seemingly positive feature, one may wish to consider the ramifications of changing the stages of or hastening the "normal" development of a romantic relationship. It would then be helpful for clinicians to assist clients with exploring these ramifications, including adjusting to changes in communication style when moving from online to face-to-face interactions. Moreover, clinicians could also help clients acquire skills to identify internal and external motivators, as well as barriers, for movement towards intimacy at a pace that is comfortable for the optimal growth and health of a relationship.

People should also be cautioned against "flaming" (i.e., engaging in offensive and disparaging behaviors) others when online. Even though it may feel "safe" to do so online because of the perceived anonymity, possibilities do exist for the "flamed" to encounter the "flamer" one day in person. It is, after all, a small world.

The consensus among the participants regarding the commitment, intimacy, and duration of romantic computer-mediated relationships was that those relationships were not as significant or powerful as romantic face-to-face relationships. Some participants even noted they and/or their family and friends had negative stereotypes about romantic online relationships prior to entering into the relationships. Questions about the role that self-fulfilling prophecy has on the outcome of these relationships where at least one partner held negative preconceived notions about the outcome of the relationship before entering the relationship should be addressed. In addition, one's own hopes and

expectations when searching for a relationship in cyberspace should be thoroughly explored to invite behaviors that are more congruent with the expectations. For instance, if one expects to find only a one-night stand online but hopes to find something more lasting, one should avoid chat rooms named for people seeking sexual pleasure.

On the same note, some participants mentioned experiencing difficulties trusting themselves and their partners to be faithful within the romantic computer-mediated relationships. Difficulties establishing trust may be attributed to schemas about trust within a relationship that is built from past experiences, such as a parent's extramarital relationship, former lover's infidelity, etc. Then again, it could also be attributed to elements of romantic computer-mediated relationships that make trust more out of reach when compared to romantic face-to-face relationships. For example, there are seemingly more opportunities to plan, modify, and/or withhold information in romantic computer-mediated relationships than in romantic face-to-face relationships. One may hide with more ease marital status, children living in the home, biased views about roles of men and women in society, etc. Moreover, one may ponder, contemplate, and deliberate on something before typing and editing a few times before clicking on the send button.

In continuing the discussion regarding one of the perks of online communication, i.e., as being able to edit one's written expressions of thoughts and feelings more when communicating through a computer, counselors may want to point out the potential consequences of well-composed and even-keeled communication. As some participants of this current research study reported, fewer conflicts were experienced within romantic online relationships. People who tend to and prefer to minimize conflicts may be drawn to romantic online relationships. In working with individuals or couples in computer-

mediated relationships, clinicians may want to place the spotlight on the negative long-term effects of minimizing self-expression, conflict avoidance, and spontaneous written exchange. Also, people with reading and writing difficulties should be forewarned about the likelihood of misinterpreting and being misinterpreted in their text exchanges. Changes in how conflicts will be approached may take place once the relationship is moved offline. Also, conflict resolution skills (e.g., communication tools, problem solving skills, etc.) and exploration of the relationship dynamic (e.g., power differential between couples) could prove to be helpful.

While most of the participants found romantic face-to-face relationships interfered more with relationships with family and friends than online relationships, the participants' assessments may be limited in scope. For instance, time spent in front of the computer would likely take away from time and energy available to spend with family and friends. It may then be beneficial for individuals to receive guidance to consider the reality of the effects their behaviors related to finding and maintaining romantic computer-mediated relationships have on their previously established relationships with family and friends.

One of the biggest attractions to the Internet for romance includes the availability of so many potential mates from all around one's city, state, country, and world. Unless a person specifically asks or looks for someone nearby, chances are an individual will find someone from another geographic location. Clinicians may want to help individuals identify this possibility and offer support and guidance to overcome struggles of a long-distance relationship. For example, several participants spoke of feelings of discomfort when meeting their online partners for the first time, as well as during subsequent visits.

Clinicians may find it helpful to work with individuals by emotionally preparing them for the prospect of the discomfort and awkwardness of initial meetings and by helping clients construct strategies to lessen and cope with potential difficulties that may arise during these initial encounters.

Online, a person can search specifically for certain features of a potential romantic mate, such as physical characteristics, political affiliation, religion, career goals, sexual orientation, marital status, location, personality type, etc. and/or any combination of such features. With the Internet, people are no longer limited to finding potential mates through traditional means (e.g., through school, work, clubs, mutual friends, church, etc.). One would understandably feel excited by the opportunities that exist in cyberspace. On the other hand, individuals may benefit from clinicians helping them to tune in to the extent to which the online options affect one's behaviors within an existing romantic relationship. In other words, less effort may be exerted towards making a relationship work than if there were not as many other potential partner options available online. The expression "there are plenty more fish in the sea" may need to be tempered with the reality check that unless one is willing to work on building a relationship with one fish, one may always be on the search for something more. This may eventually lead to exhaustion and disillusionment from the constant search.

For people yearning for relational experiences, the Internet may be an ideal medium for exploration of relationships. Some participants reported that through the relationships formed online, they were able to narrow down qualities they liked and disliked in a partner. Online, these participants could search for specific dimensions of a relationship they would like to explore (e.g., gay relationships). Hence, clinicians may

work with individuals to "experiment" online testing hypotheses and adaptive strategies, including knowledge and skills about relationships that will be helpful once they encounter "the one."

Future Research

In light of the aforementioned limitations of this research study, several ideas for future research will be suggested to address those limitations and to answer questions that surfaced throughout the course of this research study. Use of a larger sample size and standardized instruments in future research studies may assist in strengthening the integrity of the clinical implications and conclusions. Use of broader sampling methods in future research could offer conclusions about the society at large versus only for college students. More diverse sampling would add to the richness of findings in future studies. On the other hand, research studies with mostly or all participants of one gender may better elucidate the similarities in experiences of one particular gender. It may also be the case that this research study will encourage and facilitate the construction of more comprehensive, controlled, and validated studies about romantic online relationships in the future.

Narrowing the selection criteria for participants may benefit future research in several ways. Using participants who have had at least two long-term romantic online relationships may lend more credibility to the opinions of those participants about romantic online relationships, including ingredients to building successful, romantic online relationships. Likewise, future research that invites only participants who have engaged in at least three or more brief, sexual relationships with people they met online

would likely give deeper and more specific information about elements of online dating or online relationships that tend to invite physical intimacy.

Numerous themes arose during this research study. The first question took form after finding that the majority of the participants revealed their family and friends hold at least one negative stereotype about people who frequent cyberspace mediums in search of companionship. Investigation into effective approaches to debunk negative myths and stereotypes may be helpful to remove the stigma—however real or perceived—attached to searching for romance online. On the other hand, research to seek evidence or support for truths to the negative myths and stereotypes about users of the Internet may help prevent ward off unnecessary harm to one's physical and/or emotional health.

Some participants suggested using web cams to bridge the gap between differences of communicating online and offline. Studies exploring differences between and within romantic online relationships of differing quantity, quality, and duration could shed light on the effectiveness, or the lack thereof, of using audio-visual aides to facilitate romantic online relationships. Additionally, information about "on camera" effects for behavior would be helpful when contemplating the use of web cams in romantic online relationships.

One of the emerging themes observed in the research study was that nine out of ten participants indicated they now prefer romantic face-to-face relationships instead of romantic online relationships. Yet, despite the lack of success with romantic online relationships, several of the participants continue to search for romance online. Mixed methodology studies could first use quantitative methodology approaches to identify the link and relationships between age, gender, personality, income, lifestyle, etc. with

outcome (e.g., quality, duration, etc.) of romantic online relationships. The association between certain populations that place higher values and emphasis on cooperation and harmony because of the low-conflict nature of romantic online relationships and the success rate of romantic online relationships in those cultures may bring understanding of the goodness of fit between certain populations and romantic online relationships. The qualitative methodology component may help flesh out the vast array of dimensions inherent in romantic online relationships. This may help explain the continued growth in the prevalence of romantic online relationships around the world.

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