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## Cyber Intimacies

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Abstract:	This entry examines 'cyber intimacies' by outlining the nature of computer mediated communication between newly met strangers and individuals with pre-existing relationships. It covers the use of CMC in already established relationships, in meeting new people (in particular online dating) and for cybersex and outlines the positives as well as the potential risks of such practices.

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## Cyber Intimacies

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“Cyber intimacies” is a rather nebulous term that refers to sexual or otherwise intimate relationships that are initiated or maintained via computer mediated communication (CMC). Breaking down the term helps us to narrow down what cyber intimacies typically relates to. ‘Cyber’ refers to the online world known as ‘cyberspace’ where computer software produces a virtual reality (Whitty 2003), and intimacy refers to romantic, sexual, or close personal relationships (Santore 2011) which involve the process of physical and personal disclosure (Jamieson 1998). Identified as part of the globalisation process, which involves the expansion of information and communication technology (ICT), cyber intimacies are in many ways (re)shaping how we seek and do ‘connectedness’. Although there is uneven access to this technology worldwide (Valentine 2006), CMC allows many individuals a low-cost, round-the-clock, and anonymous mode of contact. The academic literature related to cyber intimacies has largely focused on how people use the internet to maintain already established relationships when there is a geographic separation, how new relationships are formed via the internet, and how the internet is used for erotic purposes or contact. The main focus of this research has been examinations of online dating and cybersex.

### *Already established relationships*

Certain trends associated with globalisation (e.g., increasing rates of in trans-national migration, fluid employment placement) means that friends, families and romantic partners increasingly find themselves separated from each other geographically. This separation can be temporary, for short periods of time, long-term, or permanent. CMC allows individuals with pre-existing intimate ties new ways of maintaining contact. In this context, face-to-face video calling via webcam (e.g., Skype), instant messaging (e.g., MSN messenger), social media (e.g., Facebook) and email become useful tools for maintaining intimacy. This process has been termed *living together apart* (Valentine 2006, Couch and Liamputtong 2008) and allows the maintenance of closeness during separation, although not replacing or making up for *in person* communication, touch or contact.

### *Meeting new people*

Not long after its inception, the internet rapidly became a site where individuals could meet *new* people who they would not normally come into contact with, in person, during their daily routine. These connections often centre around particular interests or hobbies (e.g., book clubs), provide space for 'specialist' sites linked to specific sexual practices (e.g., BDSM), minority ethnic groups or sexual communities (e.g., LGBTQ), and allow individuals to search for romantic or sexual partners (rather than leaving it to 'chance' social encounters) (Hardey 2004, Cooper 1998). *Online dating*, for example, is a burgeoning industry where people can search for dating or sexual partners, longer-term relationships and 'love'. The online dating platform came into use during the mid-1990s and has largely replaced 'personal ads' in newspapers in the search for intimate connections. Unlike newspaper advertisements, online dating websites allow more space for detailed profiles, where individuals can represent who they are and what they are looking for, in a sexual or romantic partner, through a process of selective information sharing (Toma et al, 2008). The characteristics that individuals can stipulate include: sexual orientation, age, height, weight, hair colour, eye colour, occupation, education level, income, marital status, geographic location, personality type, hobbies/interests and future goals (Whitty and Gavin 2001). The process of online dating involves constructing the 'ideal' profile (via self-reflection on who you are and what you are looking for), reading others' profiles, exchanging messages/information and building rapport via mutual self-disclosure). This mutual self-disclosure online often leads to face-to-face meetings, which determine if a connection that was instigated online will continue offline (Zakelj 2011, Davis et al. 2006, Valentine 2006). Although initiated and maintained online, once an online dating relationship is established, it moves offline and takes on the characteristics of typical dyadic or monogamous relationship.

Online dating is sometimes likened, historically, to telegraph use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for facilitating romantic courtship. This is evidenced nicely in the novel *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* that was first published in 1880 (Cheever Thyer 2013). Contemporary online dating has moved far beyond a one-on-one communication to and 'widened the net' for individuals searching for sexual or romantic partners (Dawn and Farvid Forthcoming) by providing a 'smorgasbord' of (ostensibly) available singles to choose from (Hayden and Farvid Forthcoming). A market place metaphor appears to operate on these sites, where one is marketing 'the self' and buying 'the other' under the rhetoric of 'choice' (Heino, Ellison, and Gibbs 2010). The process of 'choosing' who to contact and meet offline involves a filtering or screening system where individuals can ignore/delete undesirable profiles or flag/contact individuals with desirable profiles (Hardey 2004). The anonymity that online dating provides also means that

individuals can choose to ignore contact initiated by members whom they feel they are not interested in (whereas in a face-to-face meeting, if someone initiates contact in pursuit of a date, for example, there is a requirement for on-the-spot response). The *nature* of online contact involves asynchronous communication via textual conversations. Unlike a face-to-face synchronous conversation, asynchronous contact allows individuals to *really* think about how to construct a response (and communicate with a number of individuals simultaneously) (Döring 2002). CMC via online dating is typically more expressive and hyperpersonal than offline communication. The sense of online anonymity may provide space for more disclosure and involve an 'acceleration of intimacy' (Padgett 2007, Mills 1998). Hence the norms of developing intimacy appear to be different in online relationships (where it is faster) to offline relationships (where it is slower) (Zakelj 2011).

Rates of online dating use appear to be around 10-15% of the western population, meaning that online dating is neither a 'niche market', nor has it 'taken over' as the means for meeting romantic and sexual partners (Döring 2002, Finkel et al. 2012). A country where online dating is quite popular is the United States. Here, out of 54 million single individuals, 40 million report having used online dating (Hefner and Kahn 2014), with 22% of the population have met their partner online (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). As well as providing a useful tool for meeting new people, online dating has been identified as providing a spectrum of risks. The main risks of online dating are deception (the most common being individuals who lie about their relational status), fraud, the social stigma (although decreasing) that is attached to online dating (e.g., it is seen as a last resort or for otherwise socially inept individuals) and sexual and physical safety (Buchanan and Whitty 2013). Physical safety is an arena that is gendered and mainly associated with women's online dating practices (Hayden and Farvid Forthcoming, Kreager et al. 2014).

### *Cybersex*

Sex that occurs *online*, without proximity of bodies, is typically defined as *cybersex* (Whitty 2003). The internet not only provides erotic material for consumption (e.g., online pornography), but allows individuals to connect with others for erotic play, sexual communication, masturbation, cyber-flirting, role-playing, fantasy enactment, and off-line sex (Valentine 2006, Ashford 2009). Cybersex involves chatting over video or text, via webcams and fast broadband, whilst one or both parties engage in some form of auto-stimulation. Such contact can also be taken offline where individuals meet specifically for engaging in some form of sexual contact (Wakeford 2000). Cybersex can eventuate between already established partners or strangers who have met in an online forum. Such 'virtual sex' opens up extra

computer mediated erotic possibilities but can carry some risks. The risks of cybersex are physical/sexual safety when meeting strangers offline, or developing compulsive cybersex behaviour (Daneback, Cooper, and Månsson 2005).

Advocates of CMC note that it reduces social boundaries, connects people and facilitates intimacies, whilst critics caution that CMC is dangerous, can be shallow and impersonal (Jerin and Dolinsky 2001). Whatever shape cyber intimacies take, the practice is altering the way many instigate and engage in connectedness.

**See also:** Communication, Computing, Cyberspace, Gender, Information technology, LGBTQ, Sexuality, Subcultures, Relationship forms

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