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Meet me in cyberspace

Purvaja Sawant, TNN | Dec 2, 2014, 12.00AM IST

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It doesn't feel like cheating but it's the cause of one in 20 divorces in India. As the rate of digital infidelity rises, Times Life peeks into the private lives of connected India



Meet me in cyberspace

It starts out rather innocently - you receive a friend request on Facebook, from an ex-lover, a friend's friend or a guy you got casually acquainted with at a party. You add them to your friend list and then take your conversations forward on the instant messenger. One thing leads to another and before you know it, the language of your online conversations becomes casual, the content of your chats more personal, even flirty. You discuss your day-to-day life, talk about your dreams and disappointments with the person on the other side of the screen, instead of your spouse or partner... Sounds familiar? If yes, you are indulging in 'digital infidelity', a rising urban trend among today's internet generation. According to a new study conducted at the University of Indiana, US, social media users in committed relationships, frequently use their online accounts to keep in touch with 'back burners' (also called back-up husbands or wives) i.e., exes or platonic friends they could connect with romantically. On an average, the participants revealed that they had romantic or sexual conversations with at least two people, besides their partner.

You may argue that a few cheeky SMSes, flirty direct messages (DM) or private emails don't amount to cheating. But when you are going through a rough patch in your existing relationship, these online friends become your temptations.

No guilt attached

Cyber lawyer Pawan Duggal says, "It takes one casual online encounter for cracks to appear in a committed relationship. In America, Facebook is the cause of one in five divorces, in India it is one in 20." Sujata Parashar, the author of *In Pursuit of Infidelity* explains why digital infidelity is easier and doesn't amount to guilt. "Internet has hugely impacted the nature of human relationships. People are available 24 x 7, they have wider choices, and can communicate without leaving a dent in their pocket. At times, these may happen when your spouse is sitting just a few feet away! Because it is virtual, people exchange intimate information without feeling fearful or guilty."

But it's not just accessibility Robert Weiss, an international sex addiction expert, says that in digital affairs, there is a degree of 'control' that one cannot have in real life. He explains, "For instance, when you are tired of a person, or feeling cranky, you simply log off, allowing you and your online partner to avoid a lot of bad moments. In a non-virtual relationship, you don't get that kind of space and land up arguing."

Theatre writer and director Meherzad Patel says, "Your phone or laptop never say 'no' to you; there is rarely any confrontation or intervention when you are in a digital relationship. Also, whether married or in a committed relationship, at some point, almost everyone regrets being with their partner or think they could have done better. At times like these, when an ex or someone available lends you a shoulder to cry on, the temptation of an easy, virtual affair can be very hard to resist."

What you are left with is all the highs of a relationship, while conveniently blindsiding the negatives. You constantly romanticise this alternate life. It's a bit of a fool's paradise. However, if it feels like paradise in our overstretched lives, who minds being a fool? Adds Weiss, "In cyberspace, you can also tweak your image, control how you are perceived by others. In reality, it's harder to maintain a facade."

Screen is the boundary

Social media expert Zafar Rais says, "When a connection is built over the phone, email or through social network, Sex people don't immediately see the warning signs of emotional infidelity." It's almost like the computer or phone screen acts like a boundary. But infidelity begins in the mind. Research shows that digital and in-person infidelity are equal in terms of how much harm it does to a relationship. "Betrayed spouses and partners say it's usually not any specific sexual act but

the constant lying, secrecy, and flat-out denial that hurts the most," says Weiss.

Psychologist Ty Tashiro says in his sought-after book *The Science of Happily Ever*, published early this year, "In the end, a successful and happy marriage boils down to two things: kindness and generosity." All the real life frustrations a couple faces, makes it impossible to find warmth and understanding from one another. The new person, the cute acquaintance or the ex-flame "who could have been" becomes a promise to a happier life. What hasn't been lived, as they say, is always dreamy, and just a click away.

Studies say...

Facebook users in relationships frequently use the site to keep in touch with "back-burners" - exes or platonic friends.

Men have back-burners at roughly twice the rate than women. But among both genders, the practice is widespread.

On an average, respondents in relationships had romantic or sexual conversations with two people besides their current partner.

As many as half of all women keep in touch with a 'back-up husband' they could contact if their current [relationship](#) doesn't work out.-Study by the University of Indiana, US

'Ping' anxiety

Digital infidelity can raise a few health issues. Here's what you need to know... Smartphone anxiety, which is a serious ailment of our times, takes over a person who is hooked on to his gadget to connect to his digital 'back burner'. If there's an emotional attachment with the person whose message you are expecting, your body language visibly changes. You get irritated when the battery is dying, you constantly leave family gatherings to secretly check your messages.

Then there's the 'typing awareness indicator' - the three dots that appear on your phone when someone is typing to respond to your message, and in anticipation, your heart rate goes up.

These added challenges, along with the constant nagging feeling that the person on the other side of the screen is the answer to all problems, can make you sad, and eventually [depressed](#).

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