

## Looking for Love in All the Wrong Chatrooms: Men, Intimacy, and Technology

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This article is the result of a series of discussions among the members of the SDPA Men's Issues Committee (MIC) regarding ways in which we have experienced men- friends, family, clients, and ourselves- using technology to foster and/or to avoid intimacy. In these talks, we explored various perspectives on how masculinity relates to intimacy as well as the ways that advances in technology have changed the landscape of how we can express and experience intimacy. Initially, our focus was on how technology (video games, chat rooms, pornography, etc.) can serve to isolate men and functions as a means to avoid meaningful connections with others (a common bias for "old-timers" like the majority of the MIC members). However, we also uncovered ways in which men use technology to express intimacy and to develop closer relationships with loved ones. The topic turned out to be so engaging and relevant that we decided to continue the dialogue in a continuing education workshop at the SDPA Fall Conference in which we'll delve further into the themes we briefly cover here. Please note that while many of the points covered in this article may apply equally to women and girls, we focus here on men and masculinity. Although this piece is written *about* males, it is *for* everyone.

We feel that it is important to address masculinity not as a restrictive set of culturally-universal "man laws," but rather as a highly dynamic response to diverse developmental, interpersonal,

and contextual factors. Several leading researchers in the psychology of men have argued persuasively that the “sturdy oak” stereotype of the strong, emotionally unavailable male is problematic in part because it derives from a culturally-biased mainstream view of men. Given the tendency of males to behave differently in varying situations, it is useful to conceptualize men’s experience of masculinity from a social constructivist perspective. In this view, any given man or boy has a collection of masculinities that he enacts according to the specifics of the situation. Look to your own experience here for evidence- how many of us have had the experience of men crying and expressing vulnerability in our offices, but who report having difficulty doing so in their daily lives. The context is different, and so is the behavior.

Many men face the challenge of living up to often conflicting expectations from loved ones (“stoic and macho” vs. “involved and emotionally available”). One approach to understanding this conflict addresses how these seemingly opposing male gender roles result in a type of psychological strain. Gender role strain refers to the objective and perceived difficulties experienced when one tries to conform to traditional definitions of masculinity when engaging in the roles of son, father, grandfather, partner, spouse, etc. Men who have not developed the confidence, social support, or vocabulary to address their intimacy issues may ironically manage their stress in unhealthy ways that result in considerable problems for them personally as well as in their close relationships.

Each of the dizzying array of electronic communications options (phone, text, email, VOIP, video chat, etc) available today presents a unique context in which to interact with others. The

immediacy of these media vary from highly asynchronous (e.g. email, blogs, listservs) to synchronous real-time video chats and talking via cell phone. Level of synchrony is just one way to differentiate among these technologies, but it is one factor that may heavily impact how- and what- men communicate. Bearing in mind the argument that specifics of the context impacts behavior, it follows that men will express intimacy differentially as a function of the mode of communication, when and where it happens, and with whom. Again, look to your own experience. After you read this sentence, close your eyes for 30 seconds and clearly envision a person being emotionally expressive. Seriously, give it a shot. If you pictured someone whose voice and facial expressions did the bulk of the expression, you'd be squarely in line with a typical Eurocentric perspective, and one that is most characteristic of girls and women.

Research in this area has repeatedly shown that men are more comfortable with writing and physical activity to access and to express vulnerability as well as intimacy. It follows that men would be far more likely to express closeness and vulnerability in a written, asynchronous context such as texting a family member or partner than they would be in the locker room.

On the other hand, men also use technology in ways that block their experience of intimacy. Aided by a virtual environment that allows for instant access and anonymity, men who are dissatisfied in their relationships commonly look to other means through which to feel validated and connected to others. "Emotional infidelity" is a buzzword meaning that a person has an intimate yet nonsexual relationship alongside a romantic relationship. The hallmark of such relationships is that one or both feel the need to hide the relationship from others so as to maintain the connection. Hidden cell phones, secret email accounts, and opening credit cards

whose statements are sent to the office are potential signs of emotional- and physical- infidelity.

We also discussed the tendency of some men to get caught up in playing video games (such as “Halo 3” and “World of Warcraft”) and using pornography in ways that interfere with their lives. The reasons why men may turn to these outlets are not complicated- they provide an escape, a sense of control, and a means to feel powerful. Anything can become maladaptive (alcohol use, shopping, sex, etc), and technology is no exception. The MIC discussed ways to help to curtail such inappropriate uses of these outlets with an eye toward moderation. The excitement of video games, the anonymity of chat rooms, and the eroticism of adult films are just a few examples of technology-related experiences that represent a double-edged sword. Bearing once again in mind the importance of the context, each of these outlets has the potential to increase intimacy and closeness. However, when taken to extremes in the name of avoidance or aggression, they may cause serious problems. We are of course aware that suggesting video games or pornography can be healthy, appropriate outlets for intimacy is a somewhat provocative stance. However, when used appropriately, such technological outlets hold great potential to capitalize on men’s unique experience of intimacy and masculinity.

We encourage you to attend what we hope will be an engaging and dynamic discussion of men, intimacy, and technology during our 2 credit continuing education workshop at 2pm on Friday, Oct. 10<sup>th</sup> at the San Diego Psychological Association’s Fall Conference.

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