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Research Article

The Growing Popularity of Cyber Relationships: Implications for Relationship Counseling

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Abstract

Driven by advances in information and communication technology (ICT), cyber relationships are becoming increasingly common among people seeking easy and convenient relationships. This paper deals with issues that counselors should consider in the context of cyber relationships. To this end, a secondary analysis of qualitative data was used; pertinent case studies were extracted from articles and books. After examining the important aspects and characteristics of cyber relationships, this paper delves into the problems arising from the narcissistic nature of cyber relationships and the risk of cyber relationship addiction. Pointing out that relationship counselors ought to help their clients ensure a balance between online and offline relationships, the author calls on counselors to play a more active role in facilitating the fusion of technology and counseling.

Keywords: cyber relationship, counseling, robot, cyber relationship addiction, narcissism

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A cyber relationship refers to a relationship established in the cyberspace enabled by digital technology. With the popularization of the Internet, cyber relationships make up an important part of our lives. While cyber relationships have various positive functions, concerns have been raised about their adverse effects on our lives in the case of over-immersion (Cho, 2015).

In the face of the growing popularity of cyber relationships, experts are paying attention to their impact on people's self-concepts and real-world relationships. The cyber world interlinked through smartphones changes "not only what we do, but also who we are" (Turkle, 2012). What characterizes cyber relationships, and how do they change the attributes of the self and relationships? What role should counseling play amid these changes? Going one step further, how can relationship counseling leverage ICT technology? Because these issues have not been under-explored by previous studies, this study aimed to find answers to these questions.

Aspects and Characteristics of Cyber Relationships

Among the various aspects and characteristics of cyber relationships, only salient features were selected here. The example cases presented herein are secondary data obtained from books and articles.

"Connected but Alone" Relationship

On the Internet, people are connected with one another simply by accessing social platforms. This instant connection to others eases their loneliness and anxiety through the immediacy of synchronous communication online. People who have difficulty in establishing relationships in their real lives because they feel intimidated and nervous in interpersonal situations may be more comfortable with cyber relationships wherein they do not need to expose themselves (Cho, 2015). In this regard, cyber relationships present an opportunity for those who are socially withdrawn to satisfy their need for interpersonal relationships and to acquire social skills. The tendencies of higher social anxiety and e less mature self-identity are associated with a greater need to expend energy on image management and relationship management in social networks (Mazalin & Moor, 2004).

Also, Song et al. (2014) reviewed 18 previous studies on the association between Facebook use and loneliness and found that a recursive relationship exists wherein loneliness increases the use of Facebook and loneliness increases with increasing

dependence on Facebook. This implies that cyber relationships make people feel safe and "connected" to others but cannot be the ultimate solution to loneliness and anxiety.

Easy Disclosure of Weaknesses, Hostility, and Desires

In cyber relationships, which guarantee anonymity, social disinhibition arises. People's social disinhibition makes self-exposure easier, which is conducive to empathic communication and acceptance to "anything." Or rather, the algorithm that classifies users according to their ideas and tastes arranges cyber relationships by helping them easily select readily acceptable cyber relationships. In cyber relationships transcending time and space established among like-minded people, we frequently observe "me too" reactions validating the disinhibited disclosure of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

Empathy and acceptance occur easily in cyber relationships, which do not incur any physical or material costs. Once surrounded by cyber relationships characterized by such attributes, people find it harder to interact with others in their reality who do not say praise their thoughts, actions, and feelings. The deeper the immersion in cyber relationships, the greater the desire to stay in the cyber world.

The fact that violence and obscenity arise in the cyberspace is to a great extent ascribable to easy self-disclosure. People who commit cyberbullying do not actually feel the extent of the sufferings to which victims are subjected to. It also gives rise to peer pressure, spurring cyberbullies to be "tactful attackers," as a more aggressive culture takes place with their aggressiveness inexorably disclosed (Flores, 2014: 122-127).

In cyber relations, people experience maximization of self-disclosure of their own desires, especially sexual desires, which are stigmatized or tabooed in the offline world. This actuality makes the cyberspace flooded with pornography and cyber romance, exerting a negative impact on real-life sexual behavior and intimacy.

Cyber Infidelity and Leading Double Lives Without Feeling Guilty

Cyber infidelity and double lives are the typical problems occurring in the interface between online and offline relationships. Cyber infidelity is known to cause psychological harm and relational problems to partners in a similar manner as would be expected in offline infidelity, but the perpetrators of cyber infidelity have little feeling of guilt (Whitty, 2005). The example below shows how chatting develops into cyber infidelity.

A, a mother of first and third graders has slid into chatting from gaming that she started to beguile herself. Ordinary conversations have gradually turned into obscene talks, and A is now addicted to chatting beyond the point of return. Seeing her spending five to six hours every day chatting with a stranger even in front of her husband, her husband starts to suspect her of infidelity. A confesses that she "has met her chatting partner but has not cheated" (Kim, 2011)

The example given below is a case of a man who is leading a dual life, juggling between his online and offline lives. This case captures dual lives in the context of conjugal relationships.

Ric (53) has two wives-one in the real-life world and the other in a virtual world. Three months ago, he had a cyber wedding at Second Life. Ric's avatar "Dutch" raises two dogs with his red-haired wife "Tenaj" and has cybersex, pays mortgage, goes to shopping malls, and travels with her. "There is a deep trust between us. We talk about everything with each other," say Ric and Tenaj, two actors of the virtual marriage. Ric's offline wife, Sue, cannot tolerate her husband's double life. Ric excuses himself: "This is just a game," but his heart is on his virtual marriage from 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. (Alter, 2007)

Cyber Relationships as Self-Identity and Role Experimentation

The online experience of creating a desired virtual world and playing the desired role in it can be an opportunity to experiment with an alter ego and expand one's identity.

Trish, a timid and anxious thirteen-year-old, has been harshly beaten by her alcoholic father. She creates an abusive family on The Sims Online, but in the game her character, also thirteen, is physically and emotionally strong. In simulation, she plays and replays the experience of fighting off her aggressor (Turkle, 2011, 179)

The next example concerns a timid and unpopular girl practicing how to flirt in the cyberspace.

Online, Hannah practices the kind of flirting that does not yet come easily to her in the real. The experience of the on-line dating relationship with Ian allows her to explore

what it might be like to have a boyfriend and give herself over to a crush (Turkle, 2011, 249)

People can compensate for the unfulfilled aspects of their real lives and expand their self-identities through such identity experimenting and role play. However, it is questionable whether such virtual experiences can be carried over to offline settings. The worst scenario is the total neglect of offline relationships and roles due to overindulgence in their roles in the cyber world where fantasy is realized and actions are rewarded.

Cyber Relationships and Social Robots as Alternatives to Family Relationships

Amid the decline in conventional marriage and family, cyber marriage or social robots are emerging as alternatives for singles to mitigate their loneliness.

Wo, a 27-year-old Beijing citizen, is a single woman in her offline life, but has recently married her chat boyfriend and is living in the cyber world as a housewife, buying a home and giving birth to a child. Most of such platform customers are young netizens aged 20 to 25 (Digital Times, 2005)

Kim, who is preparing for a civil service exam, spends 12 hours gaming in an Internet cafe during the day and studies in the evening, which leaves him with no time for dating. He confesses, "I am more comfortable with the relationships I get into in the game world. Offline relationships are difficult to make. I would say we are looking at others with colored glasses on ... There's no such thing in the game world. We just become friends without giving much thought to it" (Kim, 2013)

The "personification" of robots is moving closer to reflecting reality owing to their ability to adapt to different objects to interact with depending on the self-learning features of artificial intelligence (AI) even in the same robot. With more and more people experiencing interactions with robots, the possibility of interacting with robots as an alternative to family members is becoming feasible.

A Japanese woman, who adopted an emotionally engaging social home robot "Pepper" as a member of family, states: "I have not tried it, but I think I can pick out my Pepper from a row of ten Peppers. I just feel it" (tvN "Fantastic Family" producing team, 2017)

Family has been a sphere wherein we have been able to experience basic human relationships. What if the only one family member I have is a robot specifically programed to be suitable for me? What if my family life is only with (a) cyber family member(s) tailored to my taste? If cyber partners and robots substitute family members, where shall we learn how to relate with other human beings who are not always tailored to our preferences?

Questions Surrounding Cyber Relationships

Is a Cyber Relationship a "Real" Relationship? Narcissistic Attributes of Cyber Relationships

Nowadays, with cyber relationships constituting a part of our lives, our self and relationships are subjected to constant changes. For individual selves surrounded with multiple tasks and networks, solitude is an unbearable state. For humans, solitude can be a good starting point to build a reciprocal relationship because it gives self-satisfaction, self-collection, and self-knowledge. However, today's networked people tend to project their needs through cyber relationships instead of making efforts to reach the "real self."

In this context, a cyber relationship is closer to a relationship akin to what may be called "self-object" (Kohut, 1978) or "narcissistic self" (Turkle, 2011, 177) rather than interest in the relationship partner. The term *self-object* refers to any narcissistic experience in which the other is in the service of the self, the latter being defined as a structure that accounts for the experience of continuity, coherence, and well-being (www.encyclopedia.com). That is, people seeking cyber relationships pursue narcissistic gratification while maintaining online relationships with people reacting to and sympathizing with their desires, pleasures, anger, and hatred they disclose in cyberspace.

A true relationship is one based on accepting and respecting the relationship partner despite differences even when the relationship arouses discomfort, and such a relationship can only be maintained when egocentrism is overcome. However, once accustomed to narcissistic cyber relationships, people will gradually become more and more egocentric; this repercussion will render communication, conflict-resolution, empathy, and acceptance more difficult in real-life relationships with "uncomfortable" individuals who have different personalities. In other words, it will become increasingly hard to break down the emotional walls in our relationships with others who are different from us even slightly.

A conclusion has yet to be drawn as to whether humans can be emotionally by having cyber relationships alone. Meanwhile, from the perspective of social constructivism, some

aspects of notions such as "self," "relationship," or "healthy life" are constantly changing amid interpersonal interactions. We are walking down an untrodden track that will show how the ever-growing popularity of online relationships will have repercussions for offline interpersonal relationships.

Are Cyber Relationships a Salvation or a Snare for Maladaptive Individuals? Risk of Cyber Relationship Addiction

Cyber relationships can a blessing for people who are disadvantaged in offline relationships as these relationships can enable them to satisfy their sexual, relational, and recognition desires. It can be viewed in a positive light that cyber relationships that self-injurers, who used to be loners, build an online subculture of virtual communities and relationships in a cyber society (Adler & Adler, 2008). However, no consensus has yet been reached on whether such a subculture leads to psychological health in offline settings.

The worst conceivable outcome would be cyber relationship addiction. Loneliness and negative self-identity induce people to seek online relationships away from offline relationships. This aggravates the loneliness experienced in the real world, which, in turn, exacerbates negative self-identity, rendering those involved caught in the vicious cycle of cyber relationship addiction (Cho, 2015).

Internet-based spread of traditional addictions to sex, games, gambling, and pornography is rampant and accelerating (Young, 2017). With the concept of "cyber-relationship addiction," "relationship," which is not a traditional object of addiction, was added as a new type of addiction. Vulnerable groups, namely people with insecure attachment, low self-esteem, social isolation, and frustration, are susceptible to cyber relationship addiction (Wong et al., 2015). Will cyber relationships serve as a salvation or a snare with no way out among these people?

Tasks and Prospects of Relationship Counseling

Assistance with Maintaining a Balance Between Online and Offline Relationships

The deeper that people are immersed in cyber relationships, the more likely their ability to create genuine offline relationships is to deteriorate. This can dilute the concept of commitment and bring about a society devoid of a true sense of empathy. The less people are trained in relationship skills through experiences of real relationships, the more

intensely inclined they are to pursue online relationships, which may result in increasingly serious side effects.

Solving sex and love matters in the cyber world would amplify the tendency to objectify and depersonalize sex and love, changing the very notion of human intimacy. As more and more people choose not to marry because of the difficulties associated with marriage, traditional families in our society tend to be replaced by virtual or temporary relationships. How can the gap be filled if humans are deprived of experiences of various interpersonal and social relationships that have traditionally been cultivated through family relationships?

In view of these changes, more efforts need to be made to understand what contributions relationship counselors can make and to expand and deepen that understanding. The main focus of counseling should be on helping people develop and maintain the ability to face themselves in solitude, the ability to endure and persevere to establish genuine relationships, and the capacity to feel the joy of engaging in self-abnegating acts for the sake of others. It is also necessary to provide psychological education on communication and conflict resolution skills in dealing with offline relationships. Counselors are called to raise questions about narcissism and egotism prevailing in cyber relationships. On a related note, we cannot overemphasize the importance of restoring relationships based on mutual respect and maintaining a balance between online and offline relationships.

Proactive Use of Technology in Relationship Counseling

Technological evolution continues to hurtle forward, widening the potential of cyber relationships to transform human relationships. Given the technological landscape evolving toward satisfying human desires for "comfortable relationships" neither too close nor too far, counselors need to use this very rapidly evolving technology to ensure a balance between online and offline relationships.

Technology is already playing a significant role in the counseling process. Various forms of online counseling services have already been developed and implemented under the umbrella of cyber counseling. A wide spectrum of online counseling services is offered without any spatiotemporal constraints in the form of comments on dedicated websites, real-time counseling using Facebook Messenger or KakaoTalk Messenger, or AI-based chatbot counseling. Counselors need to direct their focus toward disseminating efficient low-cost counseling services by integrating increasingly sophisticated technologies into counseling services.

Counseling using robots is one of the hottest topics in the field of digital counseling. Much research has been underway to investigate the effectiveness of robot counselors, and

the efficacy of robot counselors has already been demonstrated in manual-based counseling such as motivational interviewing (da Silva et al., 2018) and communication-oriented couple and marital counseling (Utami et al. al., 2017; Utami & Bickmore, 2019). Favorable client feedbacks of clients about robot counselors report no feeling of being judged, no hierarchical order, clear and attention-grabbing instructions and messages, and no exposure to counselor frustration or countertransference (de Silva et al., 2018; Utami et al., 2017; Utami & Bickmore, 2019).

The value of Socially Assistive Robotics (SAR) for aiding the rehabilitation process for people with disabilities or addictions and alternative caregiving for the sick elderly is rapidly increasing. Robot therapists who provide constant support and assistance to patients, without incurring emotional frustration or ethical judgement, have demonstrated the efficacy of SAR in responding to the needs of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (DiPietro et al., 2019) and children affected by communication and relational difficulties (Turkle et al., 2006).

Sex robots (sexbots) that are capable of carrying out social communication have emerged and are already commercialized as enabling a risk-free sex life (Levy, 2007). Positive responses and concerns over sexbots coexist; some consider them a solution to the moral issues surrounding prostitution and therapy for sexual dysfunction, while others criticize them for objectifying and instrumentalizing sex and intensifying conventional gender ideology (Döring & Poeschl, 2019).

Virtual reality (VR) technology is a system that provides realistic effects through three-dimensional simulation. VR technology will make it possible to simulate the counselor's face and voice as requested by each client and will thus be employed in a range of behaviorism-based training programs. Before long, we will witness the advent of customized online counseling services commercialized with a maximum accessibility to elaborately programed AI counselor's services.

The fusion of technology and counseling will have a great effect on the development of counseling theories and models as well as the delivery modalities of counseling services. Clearly protocolled, evidence-based counseling theories and techniques easily embracing technology will likely develop into a wide range of counseling resources and models. For the fusion of technology and counseling to be successful in implementing the essence of counseling, proactive cooperation among counselors is required. To this end, more attention needs to be paid to the parts where technology is employed in the counseling process .

Conclusions

Regardless of the extent to which the cyber world expands, real-life relationships between human beings as individuals with physical bodies will always exist, which highlights the need for a mature human personality with balanced online-offline relationships. As technology advances, there is a growing need for individuals with "healthy" philosophies and beliefs about people and the world. Also, efforts need to be made to train people to handle ICT and maintain a healthy balance between their online and offline lives under the given circumstances, leveraging cyber relationships, and this is where the mission of relationship counselors comes in.

In these circumstances, in devising the future counselor education, two considerations need to be made. First, counselors need to be trained to become all-round counseling providers capable of designing and delivering various counseling services by fusing counseling theories and skills with technologies. Second, the goal of counselor education is to inspire counselors to be balanced people rather than counseling technicians. In order to achieve this goal, current counseling curricula need to be supplemented with humanities education.

This paper is likely to help relationship counselors better understand and address the changes in interpersonal relationships occurring in consequence of technological progress. Relationship counselors are called to reflect ceaselessly on how counseling can contribute to making the future society a warm and caring society worth living in.

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Biography

Eunsuk Cho is an assistant professor in the dept. of Family Welfare at Sangmyung University and a licensed supervisor of marriage and family counseling in South Korea. She is interested in strengthening the various styles of human relationships. From the experience of her field work at the Internet addiction center, she has keen interest on the cyber relationship and its implication in counseling area.