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Married and Previously Married Men and Women's Perceptions of Communication on Facebook with the Opposite Sex: How Communicating Through Facebook Can Be Damaging to Marriages

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ABSTRACT

Findings indicate a large variety of emotional and sexual content is exchanged by married men and married women with the opposite sex on Facebook, constituted as extramarital. Instigating spouses of these extramarital affairs are not cognizant of the total negative marital implications of their actions. Additionally, negative emotional, relational, mental, and spiritual implications are incurred to marriages, generally leading to separation, divorce, or both. These negative implications occur due to a lack of marital guidelines present for communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook. Finally, instigating spouses spiritually detached from their religious faith, whereas many victims became more devoted to their faith, and extended forgiveness to their unfaithful spouses due to the devotion to their faith.

KEYWORDS

Divorce; interpersonal communication; marriage; qualitative; social media

In the pervasive, rapidly changing media environment of the 21st century, strains on marriages that have been common in the past have been heightened and new issues have appeared. Many of these have involved the use of the Internet and related communication technologies, their applications, and their uses. Although married couples primarily use the Internet to communicate via electronic mail, social media, and other communication platforms casually and innocently with their partners, family, friends, and coworkers, many married men and married women exploit these platforms for personal, emotional, or sexual gain in clandestineness. “Falling in and out of love, flirting, cheating, even having sex online have all become part of the modern way of living and loving” (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004, p. i).

Facebook as a contributor to marital conflict

Divorce courts today provide raw data supporting the veracity that Facebook communicative interactions with the opposite sex are a detrimental factor

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contributing to marriage conflict, potentially leading to marriage breakdowns and divorce (DiOrio, 2010; Marshall, 2012). Furthermore, scholarly research is just beginning to uncover Facebook as a medium contributing to the issue. This matter is not limited to any specific marriage duration, short or long; rather, marriages of only a few years have been characterized by conflict over Facebook use, but lengthy marriages also have experienced such conflict (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013). Existing research suggests that spouses who use Facebook's private communication platforms to engage in emotional or sexual communication can construct virtual relationships that could lead to offline physical affairs (Alapack, Blichfeldt, & Eden, 2005).

Although communicative interactions with the opposite sex on Facebook are often casual and innocent in nature, research is beginning to suggest the aforementioned interactions can easily lead to inappropriate emotional or sexual communication, developing into relationships in opposition to marriages. Clayton, Nagurney, and Smith (2013) made a call for further research investigating whether Facebook use and interaction with the opposite sex attributes to the divorce rate, emotional cheating, and physical cheating.

Consequences from interpersonal relationships developing with the opposite sex on Facebook are a cause for concern for today's matrimonial culture. Many of these relationships online, outside of a marriage, develop innocently at first, progressing slowly to more inappropriate relationships involving precarious communication (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). As high levels of Facebook communication with the opposite sex other than a spouse continue, varying degrees of intimacy begin to develop. Emotional Internet affairs might or might not lead to sexual affairs, although emotional affairs are equally devastating to a marriage, leading to potential divorce (Parker & Wampler, 2003).

The seductive nature of Facebook relationships

Relationships on Facebook hold a seductive, addictive characteristic that can disintegrate and even interchange with real-world relationships (Marshall, 2012). There is an attraction and allure to being connected with a large number of people. This makes it difficult for many people to avoid freely revealing a considerable quantity of private information.

The line between appropriate and inappropriate dialogue in a virtual text context is often vague. Differentiating between "chatting" and "flirting" is often difficult to accomplish (Alapack et al., 2005). Alapack et al. (2005) asserted individuals in a virtual message context lack body language to help decipher ambiguous man-woman communication. They do acknowledge men and women can insert nonverbal messages into their texts, via symbols and abbreviations, and post pictures of them that are visually appealing to the

opposite sex. The ability to create more intentional messages with text and emoticons and to strategically upload images is appealing to users.

Many men and women engaging in flirtatious behavior, via online text, elicit physical and sexual reactions stronger than in a regular face-to-face conversation (Alapack et al., 2005). These reactions are based on a lack of “red lights.” In everyday, real-world contexts, there typically are illuminated rules and norms about social conduct. Until familiarity develops between the sexes, face-to-face interaction is subtle and friendly. In online interaction contexts like Facebook, there are no “red lights.” Interactions between men and women via text can quickly develop, revealing their deepest desires and wildest intimate thoughts with one another because of a lack of physical presence.

Religion in marriage

Religion plays a significant role in many U.S. marriages (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006). Over half of U.S. married couples indicate they attend religious services at least monthly and report that religious involvement is an integral part of their marriage and family life (Christiano, 2000). Additionally, Miller and Thoresen (2003) indicated that religion is “the single most important influence in life” (p. 5) for a substantial amount of Americans, primarily due, in part, to its link to traditional and spiritual roots.

Researchers have found that married couples experiencing general crises within their marriage, and those married couples possessing religious affiliation, involvement, and participation as mentioned earlier, are more likely to exercise forgiveness toward each other as compared to married couples lacking religious affiliation, involvement, and participation (Seedall, Butler, & Elledge, 2014).

Spoken and unspoken boundaries

Literature suggests married couples should and sometimes do develop rules regarding acceptable or unacceptable behaviors when interacting with the opposite sex offline (Cravens, Leckie, & Whiting, 2013). Often, these guidelines are unspoken, and assumptions are made that one’s partner shares his or her convictions (Hesper & Whitty, 2010). Often, however, a general consensus between both spouses concerning what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviors when engaging with the opposite sex online or through Facebook is not yet established (Wilson, Mattingly, Clark, Weidler, & Bequette, 2011).

Research method

A qualitative phenomenological examination was used in this study to examine how communication through Facebook between married men and married women with individuals of the opposite sex other than a spouse affects marriages. Specifically the study examined in detail married and previously married men and women's experiences with Facebook during their marriage, with an emphasis on any initial interactions they or their marriage partners had with those of the opposite sex outside of their marriage.

This study implemented in-depth interviews with a carefully selected sample of married or previously married individuals who had experienced difficulties when one or both partners communicated through Facebook with persons of the opposite sex. Textual analysis of the transcripts of these recorded interviews yielded a detailed picture of each study participant's experiences, feelings, thoughts, knowledge, and meaningful direct quotations and discovered common themes reflecting the experiences of the participants as a whole.

Participants

Participants for this study were gathered by way of both purposeful and snowball sampling. Married and previously married men and women were selected from marriages that had been negatively affected by Facebook communication interactions with the opposite sex. Potential participants for the study were identified initially by a pastor associated with a Chesterton, Indiana, church, a pastor associated with a Norfolk, Virginia, church, by an administrator associated with an online national Christian counseling service, and on a Christian ministry Web site titled Facebookcheating.com.

Within the initial e-mail correspondence, the researcher asked the potential participants predetermined screening questions as a preliminary assessment concerning their qualification for this study. A total of 12 people who fit the criteria for participating in the study engaged in the in-depth interviewing process: four divorced women, three married women, one remarried man, one married man, and three separated women.

Procedure

A doctoral candidate at Regent University conducted this qualitative examination. He was the primary investigator (PI) conducting each interview. The PI conducted individual, semistructured, in-depth interviews implementing an interview guide. Individual interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours, with 1 hour being the average. Some individual interviews were

conducted at physical church locations, whereas other interviews were conducted via Skype, an online video interaction tool. Following the interview, each recording was transcribed. Prior to and immediately following each interview, the researcher documented private reflections on impressions and initial analysis and interpretations that supported the data analysis.

Confidentiality was of utmost importance before, throughout, and following data collection. Some respondents chose their own pseudonym at the offer of the researcher, whereas other respondents deferred the task of selecting a pseudonym to the researcher. All efforts were made to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Data analysis

Data gathered for this study were analyzed along an interpretive approach. Data were then arranged into classifications and codes that included relevant and numeric descriptions, themes, phrases, and words aiding the researcher to identify and recover data for additional examination. Data were organized into individual categories, including each of the six research questions.

The researcher completed a close reading of the text, looking to find regularities and patterns of thought, in turn developing codes to exemplify them. The researcher followed this process by applying identical sets of indexing categories methodically and consistently to the data. In this study, cross-sectional and categorical indexing was implemented to examine the data. Thus, as the codes were established and applied to units of texts, these units were examined comparatively to categorical variables. They were related or unrelated in an effort to discover relations, in turn producing significant conclusions.

Results

Types of communication on Facebook

The results of the study clearly show how quickly emotional or sexual communication outside of a marriage on Facebook can evolve into relationships and behaviors that undermine marriages. Routine, day-to-day topics of discussion can turn into exchanges about childrearing, job woes, and family issues. From there, marriage woes can become the topic and emotional confiding with each other can take place. Finally, sexual subjects can become the topic of discussion. As the experiences of the study participants indicate, face-to-face sexual affairs often follow.

Jill, a 44-year-old from Indiana, whose husband's correspondence began by being contacted by an old high school girlfriend, also observed a

progression of dialogue from trivial topics to emotional and sexual content. The dialogue began innocently according to her:

I remember at one point his computer was open and I saw that they were chatting but it was about kids. She had twins, we had twins, and they were just communicating about twin issues. And I did ask him about it afterwards and he just said it was them discussing twin issues and how to deal with some children issues. And I dismissed it after that and didn't know that it continued on. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

Jill's husband's trivial communication with his former high school girlfriend transitioned to emotional and then sexual dialogue. This led to meeting her face-to-face and then leaving Jill for this woman. Jill made note of what she would have done if she had the opportunity to revisit the situation:

I would have watched his communications more. Or I would have asked that they stopped. I didn't. I didn't even ask that they stop because I just trusted that all they were discussing was just parenting advice. But looking back, that's not even appropriate. She should have been asking me, not him. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

Similarly, Wilma, a 42-year-old from Virginia, discussed her ex-husband's progression in dialogue on Facebook with the woman from his high school he located on a high school classmate Web site. She explained:

They just started initial communications, which were, what have you been up to? Tell me about your kids, what do you do for a job, and those types of things. Eventually [it] lead to her emailing or messaging to him late at night, and he would respond, hey, how was your day? What's going on? ... He'd say his frustration over our marriage, childrearing, his dissatisfaction with his job. She was very empathetic. Eventually, it led to, um, them exchanging personal emails and then the sexually explicit communications back and forth began. I want to see you, I want you to do this to me, um. I know at one point, he went out and purchased a prepaid cell phone. They could talk and have phone sex. (personal communication, December 26, 2014)

The results of this study also illustrate how those who participate in Facebook-related extramarital affairs develop manipulation strategies and compulsive lying tendencies to deceive their spouses about their actions. As their Facebook-related experience with the opposite sex outside marriage progresses, it appears to become increasingly addictive. Immersed in their growing extramarital relationship, this addictive characteristic encourages even more emotional and sexual involvement with the opposite sex and Facebook becomes their central location to communicate.

For example, Jake, a 31-year-old male from Illinois, indicated his wife's first inappropriate communication on Facebook was with a man from her past. He went on to state that, following this initial affair, she would use Facebook as a means to communicate and initiate face-to-face affairs with

men she knew in her everyday life offline, such as coworkers and male friends. He mentioned, “And whenever she would leave [the house], she would post [on Facebook] herself as single for other people, other men [in her life]” (personal communication, January 5, 2015).

Equally, Bethany, a 42-year-old female currently living in England, was still married to her husband who had multiple extramarital affairs. She provided the following concerning the addictive characteristic communicating through Facebook holds:

He had a second Facebook account that I never knew of. He had a secret Skype account when Skype first became popular. Oh and he also had a second cell phone that I had no idea about. But that [Facebook] was his main mode of, ya know, communicating with these women. But in total there were 10 women and four of them were serious so two of them were long-distance relationships ... for his job he'd sometimes have to fly to Maine. He'd sometimes fly to California, and on those trips he would detour and go see these women. (personal communication, January 5, 2015)

One affair transpiring from Facebook communication ignited subsequent affairs. Facebook was not only used as a catalyst to initiate communication with individuals of the opposite sex, but also was used as a central location to organize the affairs.

Spouses' cognizance of the potential implications of Facebook-related affairs

This study revealed those who have engaged in Facebook-related extramarital affairs and their spouses were, more often than not, completely cognizant of the actual effects of their behavior on their marriages. Not until either the affair(s) ended or were made visible did the guilty spouse feel the full emotional impact of his or her actions.

Roxanne, a 42-year-old from Florida, who instigated an affair with a former significant other from high school through Facebook communication, voiced an emotional hardening that she incurred, saying:

I knew that this is not how a married woman should be behaving, but I became very quickly to view myself as, uhm, I don't want to say not married but legally, done. I was done ... There's an emotional divorce long time before there's a legal divorce. I emotionally divorced my husband ... a long time before [the legal divorce]. I may have divorced him before Tony and I became a thing but my ethics and morals wouldn't allow for a legal divorce. I certainly wasn't putting anything into the marriage like I should have been. I was taking a lot out of the marriage and complaining a lot and that sort of thing, so yea, I knew what I was doing was not right but I justified it by saying I was so unhappy, God wants me to be happy. (personal communication, December 20, 2014)

Similarly, Jake, the 31-year-old from Indiana whose ex-wife communicated with multiple men on Facebook emotionally and sexually and engaged in face-to-face sexual affairs, described how his wife was aware of what she was doing and of the marital implications. Jake's wife was not completely emotionally hardened. She was on the verge of it. He said, "She knew it (the affairs) was hurting me. She knew that could destroy our marriage. And at different points, at different points she would come back to me and be repentant. And obviously other times she was unrepentant" (personal communication, January 5, 2015).

These unfaithful spouses found ways to justify their Facebook-related affair in their own minds or in incomplete or dishonest explanations to their spouse of what was occurring. Even when their extramarital affairs became more fully revealed, offending spouses represented in this study tended to downplay their significance.

Referring to her ex-husband's Facebook and face-to-face emotional and sexual encounters, Miranda, a 42-year-old from Washington, said, "I think he thought he was done with the marriage at that point and it didn't matter. As far as apologetic, maybe I'm sorry I hurt you but nothing beyond that" (personal communication, January 6, 2015).

In addition, it was those study participants or their spouses who have never given their spouses reason to distrust them who appeared to be more likely to deceive their spouses indefinitely until they chose to either end the extramarital affair or leave their spouse for that affair, as their spouse was less likely to be suspicious of extramarital activity. As the results of this study showed, once their extramarital affairs were discovered, spouses who engaged in them had difficulty facing the truth and reality of their actions because they had been mired in the perceived reality and deceit of their affair for so long. In cases like this, it seems that true remorse and marriage reconciliation might not occur.

For instance, Jill, the 44-year-old from Indiana's husband appeared to display a record of marital loyalty and Jill had previously seen no reason to mistrust him. However, she described that her husband would find situations or pretenses for which to communicate on Facebook with his mistress. She said:

He would go for bike rides and I later learned from others: oh, we saw him on the trail. And he'd always be sitting on his phone. So it was just progressing. When it got to the point that he couldn't hide it in front of us he would do more of it outside of the home. To be honest, the last 2 months I thought things had been improving (laugh). I was like everything's going to be okay. I'd ask what's wrong, what's the matter? He'd say, nothing's wrong nothing's the matter, ya know. Is there anything we need to talk about? No, everything's fine. Okay. There was never any indication and I fully trusted him. He had never been untrustworthy. Up until that point. He was always a very loyal person. He was always a man of integrity. So, there was no reason to question those things. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

Marriage consequences of a Facebook-related affair

The tell-tale signs there might be emotional or sexual communication occurring outside of a marriage can be seen when emotional detachment occurs. This can include a lack of verbal and relational intimacy with one's own spouse, increased critical and harsh dialogue exchanged with their spouses, emotional depression, lack of physical presence in the family, unwillingness to reconcile their extramarital affairs with their spouse, and overall feelings that their marriages are beyond repair and desires to abandon the marriage.

For example, Jill, the 44-year-old from Indiana whose husband was known for being a loving and family-oriented father and husband, observed this emotional detachment. She explained:

I began wondering the last 2 months, which would have been right after he had the physical part of the affair, I began thinking things weren't right. He was very distant. There was just a lot of unexplained things. He spent a lot of time on his phone, a lot more than usual. He was a techy person, and he always was doing gadget stuff. He was doing more, and he was much more distant from the family. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

As Jill was accustomed to her husband being relationally intimate with her and the children, it was difficult to find explanations for his emotional detachment.

Similarly, Holly, who also said her husband initially was a devoted father and husband, noticed the emotional detachment during the time he was communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook outside of their marriage. She said:

Now that I look back and see things, Alan just wasn't with us. He was constantly on his phone . . . I remember one time in our kitchen my oldest said, "Dad you love that phone more than you love me" . . . I mean it was true and it still is true . . . She was an outlet for him that he didn't have to answer to anybody. (personal communication, December 26, 2014)

Comparatively, Kim, the 41-year-old from California, related her husband's emotional detachment to severe depression he had been experiencing. She said:

My husband . . . had been extremely depressed. Uhm, and that he said he didn't want to be married anymore. I just thought that we would work it out. And I figured it was his motivation. I thought his words, his thoughts, and his feelings were motivated by his depression. So I suggested that he get help in some way medically, or spiritually, or mentally. He was very extremely emotional in a negative way. He was just over the top mood swings. More than a way I had ever seen him before. Maybe an accelerated way. Like, it would be an emotion cycle of three to five days of nice and loving and passionate, to extreme anger and volatile. (personal communication, December 21, 2014)

Only occasionally was it seen that study participants or their spouses who engaged in extramarital communication with the opposite sex on Facebook were able to multitask their emotional, relational, and sexual communication and behavior. As a couple of the study participants' stories suggest, only an extremely clear recognition of the depths of their marital betrayal and their level of detachment from their spouse or family seems to foster the possibility for those engaged in the affair to emotionally reattach with their spouses and reconcile their marriages.

Again it seems to be loss of trust of their spouse on the part of the victim of Facebook-related affairs that also contributes to the great difficulty for marriages to be restored. Once the affair is suspected or revealed, communication with the unfaithful spouse about it, sometimes in abundance, merely causes the instigating spouse to become detached further from the marriage relationship and any original marriage covenant that brought them together.

Kassie, the 40-year-old living in Australia shared this:

I didn't trust him. I didn't trust him. And I would always look on his Facebook and I'd always look on his phone. I'd look on everything. I'm not a distrustful person. It's such a bizarre thing. On one hand I would never have thought he would have done it to me, and this is when he had the affair and I found out about it and it really sucked, it really, really did. But on the other hand, it made me really insecure and it was like, have you cheated on me? And I'd ask him and he'd be like, no, I would never cheat on you. Blah blah blah, this and that and the other. And he had been cheating on me all the time. (personal communication, December 27, 2014)

Complete distrust in her husband occurred. There was no gray area where misinterpretation might have existed. This caused her husband to withdraw further emotionally from the marriage relationship and cling to his extramarital affairs instigated via Facebook communication.

Jake also experienced this recoil and withdrawal from the marriage relationship. The 31-year-old from Illinois whose spouse used Facebook as a means to communicate with other men emotionally and sexually, explained it this way:

I think the biggest thing was the lack of trust. Once trust is lost in a relationship it's just cancerous. So I think um, when I stopped trusting her. She felt that it actually made her pursue sometimes other people more because she felt imprisoned. And then she almost started trusting me less, which doesn't make a lot of sense, just because she saw how easy it was just to connect with people at work. (personal communication, January 5, 2015)

As Jake communicated his loss of trust and disapproval in his wife's extramarital affairs, his wife further withdrew emotionally from the marriage relationship.

Formal marriage guidelines for communicating with the opposite sex through Facebook

The shared experiences of the participants in this study revealed the great importance of establishing formal, agreed on guidelines for using Facebook, particularly when communicating with the opposite sex. Such spoken guidelines were nonexistent in the marriages of these study participants. In the case of the two study participants whose marriages had been reconciled, spoken guidelines for their Facebook activity and communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook had been established.

Many study participants explained their marriages had possessed assumed unspoken guidelines adequate enough as parameters for communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook. Sheila, the 44-year-old from Virginia, described the “open” situation she and her husband had concerning Facebook communication and access to one another’s accounts. She said, “I mean when we first started on Facebook I had his password and I played games and sometimes I’d get on his account” (personal communication, January 5, 2015).

Similarly, Kim, the 41-year-old from California, assumed Facebook communication guidelines were “common sense” (personal communication, December 21, 2014). She described, “We didn’t have a rule. I thought that it was common sense.”

These assumed guidelines proved to be erroneous assumptions that were detrimental to the marital relationship. In fact, spouses who engaged in the Facebook-related affairs and those who were victimized by this apparently held different ideas about what was or was not appropriate because clear guidelines had never been discussed, agreed on, and lived out.

Kim’s situation reflected this, saying:

He showed me her message and it was a little bit odd, but I thought oh, maybe she’s very conservative because she was asking, why do you want to be friends with me, what do you want from this? [She said,] I’m not the same person I was in high school. And we both thought it was a little strange, so I guess that gave me a little security that, oh, it’s fine, she’s married and she sounds conservative. (personal communication, December 21, 2014)

Holly, the 40-year-old from Indiana, reflected Kim’s statement:

We didn’t have any really spoken guidelines . . . I felt like Alan and I would share [everything]. I mean if he went out to lunch with a coworker who was a girl, he would tell me and I would know who she was. There was never any secrets until this. So I dunno. I guess I never felt like [we needed guidelines]. I trusted him, so [I felt] why do I have to set these stipulations? (personal communication, December 26, 2014)

In instances where study participants tried to suggest guidelines once suspicions of or revelation of Facebook-related extramarital affairs, spouses engaged in those affairs simply were not receptive. At that point, their marriages had been too greatly compromised. Patricia, the 46-year-old from California, said about her husband's inappropriate communication with the opposite sex on his Facebook, "I told him you need to block her. You need to block her. They are a temptation. Not to have contact with them because it hurt me" (personal communication, December 21, 2014).

Overall, the findings in this study indicate the great importance of establishing clear marriage guidelines for using Facebook when communicating with the opposite sex.

Religious influences on marriages that have experienced Facebook-related extramarital affairs

As the findings showed, all of the participants in this study possessed religious beliefs and had been involved with religious organizations. The majority identified with the Christian faith. However, when they or their spouse became involved in Facebook-related extramarital affairs, those engaged in them became detached from and less involved with their religious faith. The study participants made it clear that this religious faith detachment was attributed to the inability of the affair-instigating spouse to emotionally justify to themselves their extramarital actions.

For instance, Wilma, the 42-year-old from Virginia, commented on her husband's detachment from his Christian faith during his extramarital communication with the opposite sex. She said:

My ex-husband got to a place where he was cheating ... and I was like, you can't sit here and go to church on Sunday morning and be the family man and say that you love Jesus and say you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ when you go out and do things that you know are against the Word. (personal communication, December 26, 2014)

Roxanne, who engaged in emotional and sexual communication with an old boyfriend, and then had a sexual affair, stated:

I thought who cares what God wants, I'm not doing it his way. I'm going my own way. And whether you go your way or Satan's way, you're going Satan's way. Any time you're not serving and following God, you're serving and following the enemy. ... Early on I just justified it. (personal communication, December 20, 2014)

The extramarital affairs were counterintuitive to the primary fundamental elements of their religious faith. Those involved in the Facebook-related affairs who were unable to return to their Christian beliefs and practices apparently continued on their extramarital route.

James, the 44-year-old from Pennsylvania, also described through his religious faith's lens how he felt emotionally when it was revealed his wife was involved in extramarital affairs instigated via Facebook. He stated:

You might think it's a strict rule, but once you start giving something when you marry someone, it's heart, mind, soul, and body in Christ. Once you start giving your heart and mind to another man, you're breaking that Holy Sacrament. You're giving something else to that person that doesn't belong to them, it belongs to me. (personal communication, January 6, 2015)

The study showed that those who associated with the Christian faith and were victims of their spouses' Facebook-related extramarital affairs, turned to their Christian faith and involvement for understanding, comfort, and reaffirmation of the fundamental elements of their faith.

Wilma acknowledged that she still followed her Christian faith when it comes to life pursuits. She said, "I know God's there. We just talked about this at church a few weeks ago. God exists and that he's there ... he's the author of life" (personal communication, December 26, 2014).

Similarly, although Jake was emotionally scarred from his past experience, he said, "I have a very negative view of Facebook and social media after my divorce and just knowing of people who struggled. It can also be a very powerful tool for good and for God. And I think I've seen my life as a witness to people" (personal communication, January 5, 2015).

Finding forgiveness when Facebook-related extramarital affairs have occurred

The results of this study strongly suggest that religious beliefs and practices, specifically Christian beliefs and practices in this instance, enable those whose spouses have engaged in Facebook-related extramarital affairs to forgive their unfaithful spouses. Some of the victimized participants in this study expressed great reliance and devotion on their Christian faith both during and after their experiences with their spouse's Facebook-related extramarital affairs. These victims clearly stated that they would have otherwise been justified to hold resentment and bitterness against their spouses for those offenses. Although exercising complete forgiveness was sometimes a process for them, when forgiveness was finally extended, these individuals received emotional satisfaction and an intrinsic desire to progress forward with their lives regardless of whether or not reconciliation had or might occur.

Kim described how forgiveness based on her Christian faith played a role throughout this situation. She said:

I feel that forgiveness is the main thing that has helped me even in this process. ... I feel like forgiveness is the key to life. I feel free. I feel free to keep loving my

husband independently of his behavior ... forgiveness is the number one key to freedom. (personal communication, December 21, 2014)

Similarly, Holly explained why she deliberately forgave her ex-husband:

My faith has definitely made it easier [to forgive]. I think Christ commands us to forgive. I think once, after a year after, that Spring, I had a good cry out and was like Lord, I felt like he was moving me towards that. And I'll tell ya, it was very freeing. And it doesn't mean that I'm not angry some days either. (personal communication, December 26, 2014)

Miranda, the 42-year-old from Washington, had similar thoughts concerning the need to forgive her ex-husband for engaging in extramarital affairs on Facebook leading to their ultimate divorce. She said:

Every morning I have to wake up and keep forgiving. I don't think I have totally forgiven him. I struggle with it on a daily basis. I think my faith has helped because if I can look and say if God has forgiven me for a multitude of sins that are no more or less, and in the Bible it says I need to treat others the same way, it gives me something to strive for and an idea of what I'm supposed to do. (personal communication, January 6, 2015)

For a few of the study participants, their Christian faith apparently was not strong enough to forgive their spouses, at least at the time this study was conducted. Their closeness with God and their faith had seemed to decrease because of the struggles and conflict incurred to their marriages. This hindered their desire to extend forgiveness fully to their spouses who had separated or divorced from them.

Wilma shared the difficulty she had extending full forgiveness to her husband:

There's been so many hurts not just to me but to my daughter, uhm, and it's like, he and I had a conversation a couple of weeks ago. ... At church they talk of forgiveness, but it's just been so hard because I see the repercussions of what has happened. And it's not easy to let go, and it's not the life God intended for us to have and it's not the life he intended for her to have. (personal communication, December 26, 2014)

It was interesting to find that the majority of study participants who were victims desired reconciliation with their unfaithful spouses, once they had forgiven them. The majority of unfaithful spouses were not receptive to the victim spouses' desire for marriage reconciliation. It was evident that this was due in part to the fact that the unfaithful spouses were too far emotionally and spiritually detached from their respective marriage, as well as their religious faith in some cases.

In rare cases, participants indicated marriage reconciliation did occur between them and their spouses who communicated with the opposite sex outside of their marriage on Facebook. In the few cases where

reconciliation occurred, forgiveness and recommitment to the Christian faith was a critical factor.

One of those two participants whose marriages had reconciled, James, the 44-year-old from Pennsylvania whose wife engaged in multiple extramarital affairs, described intently, confidently, and unquestionably the need to exercise forgiveness according to his Christian faith. He stated:

The bible is really clear about it. If I sin against you, it's really clear. I need to go and do my best, whether or not you want to hear about it. I need to make it right to you as a person, ask for forgiveness whether you know it or not, go that route. Whether you do accept my forgiveness or not, it doesn't matter. Then I go and ask God for forgiveness and repent. End of story. That's the way Christ told us to do it. (personal communication, January 6, 2015)

Finally, the majority of participants who were able to forgive their spouses regardless of whether or not marriage reconciliation occurred were able to emotionally, relationally, and spiritually grow in their day-to-day lives. This benefited family dynamics and their relationships with others.

Jill's ultimate sentiments concerning extending forgiveness toward her ex-husband went beyond her own personal or emotional growth. She voiced the spiritual benefits by saying:

I recognize that what happened was sin. But I recognize that I'm a sinner too, and if I want to be forgiven, I need to forgive as well. God's forgiven me much, so I need to forgive and to others. Our relationship won't be restored like it was. He's remarried. But I can at least speak with him about the kids. And we're very civil with each other and not adversarial. (personal communication, December 23, 2014)

Jill had received emotional, relational, and spiritual peace by deciding to completely depend on her Christian faith as the guiding tool for her life.

The 40-year-old living in Australia commented on her relational as well as spiritual growth that followed extending forgiveness toward her spouse because of what she believed her Christian faith communicated to her. She said:

My boss actually turned around to me the other day because I have my end of year review and he was like, "Kassie, you do so many things right, there's so many, you're like this most amazingly forgiving person." And I was like, me forgiving? I forgive people, really? I do that, you noticed that? I mean, that's the last thing anybody would have called me 3 years ago. Just the fact that I'm starting to bear that fruit, and people are starting to realize that. (personal communication, December 27, 2014)

Discussion

This study answers the call made by Clayton, Nagurney, and Smith (2013) for further research investigating whether Facebook use and interaction with the

opposite sex attributes to emotional cheating and physical cheating. The overall findings of this study suggest that communication exchanged through Facebook by married men and married women with individuals of the opposite sex often begins casually or innocently. But as the stories of the participants in this study show, it can transition to emotional and sexual dialogue, often leading to face-to-face sexual extramarital affairs. Additionally, the study participants' marriages incurred severe marital conflict when they or their spouses communicated emotionally or sexually with the opposite sex through Facebook. More often than not, instigating spouses were cognizant of the potential negative implications on their marriage but continued to engage in extramarital conversations and face-to-face sexual affairs.

It was interesting although not unexpected to find that agreed on guidelines for communicating with the opposite sex through Facebook were nonexistent in the marriages of the study participants. In a few instances, efforts to instill guidelines during the Facebook-related marital crisis were ineffective. Some also falsely assumed that unspoken guidelines were in place or their spouses were trustworthy. Once spouses who were victims of Facebook-related affairs on the part of their husband or wife discovered them, they experienced internal turmoil, doubts, anger, and other emotions and even questions about their religious beliefs. Spouses who were engaged in the Facebook-related affairs became detached from their spouses and family and detached spiritually, regardless of their respective religious denomination. Most study participants who were victims did express reliance on their religious faith for personal healing emotionally and spiritually. Finally, most of the victim participants shared that they had extended forgiveness to their instigating spouse, regardless of whether it was asked for or not by the spouse. Most did this because the principles and practices of their religious faith, mostly the Christian faith in the case of those who participated in the study, mandated it. It also facilitated their own emotional healing, growth, and progression in their lives.

Limitations

this study adds meaningful understanding of how married and previously married men and women perceive Facebook communication with the opposite sex generally and as it relates to communicating emotionally or sexually with the opposite sex outside of marriage specifically. It provides rich insights and details based on the shared experiences of those who participated in the study that could lead to further research related to this subject.

As a qualitative study relying on in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a small number of respondents, it is not a study that offers results that statistically represent all married and previously married men and women

who have experienced Facebook or other social-media-related issues in their marriages, particularly concerning communication with the opposite sex. The results of the study yielded many good insights and a great amount of detail about the experiences of those who participated in the study. However, the results cannot be generalized across a large and diverse population. The age ranges of study participants also were roughly the same. It might have benefited the study to include a more diverse range of ages.

The study also focused on a highly sensitive topic: communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook emotionally or sexually outside of marriage. This made locating respondents willing to participate in the study challenging. However, those who did participate were extremely open when sharing their personal Facebook-related marriage experiences and problems. Because of this, their individual cases and collective responses provided many useful insights that contribute to the scholarly conversation about this subject.

The study intentionally sought study participants who were affiliated with a religious faith, mainly the Christian faith in this instance. This also limited the representativeness of the findings to larger populations. Although a large majority of the study participants proclaimed their Christian faith was a determining factor in their day-to-day decisions and also within their respective day-to-day marriages, some participants were much less devoted to their faith than others, and a few did not appear to possess a Christian faith openly although they shared some values that were associated with Christianity. Although each of the study participant's experiences were unique and valuable, a more diverse group of participants might have yielded additional insights.

Directions for future research

This study can serve as a basis for many future research initiatives using a wide variety of research methodologies. Studies focusing on a greater array of married and previously married men and women whose marriages have incurred conflict due to communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook could be fruitful. Also, a greater selection of marriage lengths prior to divorce or separation due to Facebook extramarital communication with the opposite sex as well as diverse age variations of study participants would be beneficial.

Additionally, examining married couples who are presently experiencing conflict because of communication on Facebook with the opposite sex would be helpful. Working in unison with marriage counselors might prove to be beneficial in gathering such participants and dealing even more with the issues involved. Studies that examined married partners who have successfully avoided pitfalls from communicating through Facebook with those of the opposite sex outside of marriage could provide additional insights. Such studies could include those who had established effective guidelines for this purpose and were able to maintain them. Although it is evident there is a

Facebook and divorce correlation, there seems to be a need for studies that examine in more depth whether and specifically in what ways this form of behavior is significantly affecting the overall modern-day divorce rate. In addition, it would be helpful to determine how and how much other forms of Facebook might be contributing to this problem.

Recommendations for married couples

Providing helpful information to married couples concerning potential negative implications of communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook was an important consideration when conducting this study. This study and its findings themselves should be helpful in this respect. Although this study involved a small number of cases, their stories offer considerable insight for married couples about communicating with the opposite sex through Facebook.

It is worth noting again that only a few study participants' marriages reconciled following one partner's engagement in Facebook-related extramarital affairs with the opposite sex. This suggests the importance of establishing Facebook use guidelines that can be agreed on and continually discussed and updated before serious interactions with the opposite sex through Facebook have an opportunity to transpire.

Communicating with the opposite sex emotionally or sexually on Facebook with someone other than one's spouse was perceived as marital infidelity by the participants in this study. As a basic safeguard, this probably is a good way to view it. This study showed that once emotional or sexual communication occurs through Facebook, a face-to-face sexual affair had a good chance to follow. Thus in marriages, communication with the opposite sex through Facebook should be limited. Marital infidelity generally originates from the most trivial and mundane of dialogues through Facebook that often leads to emotional and sexual communication. Facebook as used today provides seemingly endless opportunities to communicate with those of the opposite sex outside one's marriage including individuals from the past, present, and even individuals never met before. The temptations to communicate in ways that counter one's marital covenant are great.

Establishing guidelines for communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook and continuous conversation between spouses concerning those guidelines were the fundamental elements discovered in this study to guard against inappropriate communication.

Recommendations for marriage counselors

Based on the previous recommendations for married couples when communicating on Facebook, it is advised that marriage counselors seek to implement within their counseling sessions specific advice and discussion about

how to communicate through Facebook. The research-generated guidelines presented in the previous section could be applied to these sessions.

Communication that occurs in marriages today is increasingly computer mediated and in this mediated environment there are numerous opportunities to communicate with others that serve as a distraction or even threaten a marriage. It is critical to the success of marital relationships that couples individually and collectively learn to use Facebook wisely and appropriately.

Marriage counselors need to remain vigilant regarding the latest social media and other digital media communication trends. This includes keeping up with a growing body of research dealing with digital media influences on relationships, including marriages.

The results of this study reinforce the importance of forgiveness in marriage relationships and communication. The stories of some participants in this study who had forgiven their spouses who were involved in Facebook-related affairs illustrated the importance of forgiveness when there is marital conflict, even that which is extreme in nature. Although most of these study participants were not reconciled in their marriage, they were able to move on with their lives meaningfully because they had extended forgiveness to their spouse. Forgiveness might be underestimated in the current cultural environment as a factor contributing to both marital stability and emotional healing, even when stability has been lost.

Finally, many engaged couples seek premarital counseling. It would be beneficial to discuss social media and other digital media use extensively in such counseling. In particular, expectations for communicating on Facebook or through other forms of social media with the opposite sex can be discussed and established.

Conclusion

This study marks a step forward in the understanding of how married and previously married men and women perceive communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook. This study demonstrated how married men and married women communicating with the opposite sex on Facebook emotionally or sexually can lead to devastating consequences for their marriages. The findings emphasize the need for more studies on this phenomenon that lead to an even greater understanding of the issues and problems involved and possible solutions to them. Facebook offers many benefits in contemporary society. They also present many challenges that scholars have identified. A highly important one is the negative effects they can have if used by married couples in ways that undermine their marriages. Scholarly study and practical advice that helps married men and women, and those men and women preparing to marry, navigate Facebook use within their marriage in a constructive, uplifting way should strengthen these marriages and help preserve the marriage institution.

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