



Psicologia: teoria e prática

ISSN: 1516-3687

ISSN: 1980-6906

Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie

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Psicologia: teoria e prática, vol. 22, no. 1, 2020, pp. 285-299

Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5935/1980-6906/psicologia.v22n1p285-299>

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Social Psychology

Virtual extimacy and conjugality: Possible repercussions

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To cite this paper: Mendes–Campos, C., Féres–Carneiro, T., & Magalhães, A. S. (2020). Virtual extimacy and conjugality: Possible repercussions. *Psicologia: Teoria e Prática*, 22(1), 285–299. doi:10.5935/1980–6906/psicologia.v22n1p285–299

Submission: 17/07/2018

Acceptance: 09/09/2019



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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the possible repercussions of “virtual extimacy” in the experience of conjugality today. The notion of intimacy has undergone significant transformations. Historically, intimacy had a strong connection with the idea of privacy. However, today, the transformation of intimacy is remarkable, since the shared information has reached visibility never before imagined. The notion of “virtual extimacy” was constructed to designate this new perspective of intimacy in the internet space. Six married people who were also users of the Facebook social network were interviewed. The interviews were analyzed using the content analysis method. The categories of analysis emerged from these narratives. With these analyses, it was verified that we are facing not a dichotomous phenomenon that separates the virtual from the real, but rather a novelty that joins and intertwines the threads of experience with the other inside and outside the internet.

Keywords: virtual extimacy; intimacy; conjugality; social networks; conflict.

EXTIMIDADE VIRTUAL E CONJUGALIDADE: POSSÍVEIS REPERCUSSÕES

Resumo

O presente trabalho tem como objetivo investigar as possíveis repercussões da “extimidade virtual” na vivência da conjugalidade de hoje. A noção de intimidade tem passado por significativas transformações. Historicamente, ela mantinha um forte vínculo com a ideia de privacidade. Contudo, é notória a sua transformação na rede, já que as informações compartilhadas alcançam uma visibilidade nunca antes imaginada. Por esse motivo, a noção de “extimidade virtual” foi escolhida para designar essa nova perspectiva da intimidade na rede. Entrevistaram-se seis pessoas casadas e usuárias do Facebook. As entrevistas foram discutidas por meio do método da análise de conteúdo. Das narrativas emergiram categorias de análise. Verificou-se, a partir das análises, que estamos diante não de um fenômeno dicotômico que separa o virtual do real, mas de uma novidade que une e entrelaça os fios da experiência com o outro, dentro e fora da rede.

Palavras-chave: extimidade virtual; intimidade; conjugalidade; redes sociais; conflito.

EXTIMIDAD VIRTUAL Y CONYUGALIDAD: POSIBLES REPERCUSIONES

Resumen

El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo investigar las posibles repercusiones de la “extimidad virtual” en la vivencia de la conyugalidad de hoy. La noción de intimidad ha pasado por transformaciones significativas. Históricamente, ella mantenía un fuerte vínculo con la idea de privacidad. Es notoria su transformación en la red, ya que la información compartida alcanza una visibilidad nunca antes imaginada. La “extimidad virtual” fue escogida para designar esta nueva perspectiva de la intimidad observada en el internet. Hemos entrevistado a seis personas casadas y usuarios de Facebook. El análisis de la entrevista fue realizado bajo el método de análisis de contenido. A partir de los relatos han aparecido categorías de análisis. La investigación fue llevada a cabo sin considerar el fenómeno como dicotómico, virtual y real separados, sino como una novedad que une y entrelaza los hilos de la experiencia con otras personas dentro y fuera de la red.

Palabras clave: extimidad virtual; intimidad; conyugalidad; redes sociales; conflicto.

1. Introduction

This study aimed to investigate the possible repercussions of “virtual extimacy” in the experience of conjugality today. The notion of “virtual extimacy” was constructed to designate the new perspective of intimacy observed in the internet space. Historically, intimacy was related to the private life. However, its transformation in the internet, with virtual windows interconnected throughout the world, is notorious. We sought to comprehend the possible repercussions that this new phenomenon is producing in the experience of conjugality, since the attention seems to be increasingly magnetized by countless virtual others.

By exploring the history of intimacy in the literature, we find the frequent association between this notion and the idea of privacy, especially from the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century (Sibilia, 2015, 2016; Prost, 2012; Maluf & Mott, 2012; D’Incao, 2013; Sennett, 2014). With the advent of the modernization and industrialization of the Western societies, the boundary between public and private has been re-signified, placing the exploration of intimacy within the confines of home, family and marriage. Accordingly, there was a space surrounded by walls that protected it. Faced with this context that links intimacy to the private,

with the social networks of the early 21st century, we identified a significant transformation regarding the exposure of intimacy in the virtual space. The information posted on the screen reaches visibility never before imagined, loosening borders and shifting intimacy out of the private, in the contemporary “now” that is the internet (Cunha, Souza, & Lima, 2018; Vaz, 2016).

However, as proposed by Sibilia (2015), we ask whether in fact what we experience in the social networks of the internet can also be called intimacy. Although we consider that internet tools stimulate the disclosure of intimate information of the internet users, as well as favoring the formation of significant relational bonds, we chose not to address this new phenomenon by equating it with intimacy. Because we perceive specificities in it, we prefer to call it “virtual extimacy”, in order to sustain its connection with something that somehow refers to intimacy, while at the same time, indicates a new perspective, leaked outside, in the exteriority of the interconnected computer screens. This marks a fundamental contrast in relation to its traditional meaning, linked to the private life (Sibilia, 2016; Mendes-Campos, Féres-Carneiro & Magalhães, 2015; Sennett, 2014; D’Incao, 2013; Prost, 2012; Maluf & Mott, 2012; Tisseron, 2008).

The term “extimacy” is a neologism first explored by Lacan (1988), in *The Seminar. Book 7: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in the context of the discussion of Freud’s Das Ding. The author points out that Das Ding is marked by a kind of internal exclusion, that is, this lost object, this thing we seek to rediscover, which is Das Ding, something that is interior without ceasing to be exterior, such as an intimate exteriority, or even an “extimacy”. Subsequently, Lacan (2008) resumes the discussion of Das Ding and states that it was necessary to create the word “extimate” to designate what is closest to us, while being external.

Tisseron (2008) also used this term, giving it a particular meaning in his work. The psychoanalyst draws attention to the fact that, in French, the verb “se découvrir” – to discover yourself – has a double meaning, “it is at the same time ‘to place yourself naked in front of the other’ and ‘accessing the knowledge of yourself’” (Tisseron, 2008, p. 39, our translation). These two conditions correspond to what he calls the desire for “extimacy”, that is, the desire to publicly expose the secret parts of oneself to be known and validated by others. Thus, the desire for “extimacy” does not need new technologies to exist. Quite the contrary, it has always existed as a necessary structure for our way of being. However, today, inter-

net spaces are new mirrors in which we seek to experience this desire for “extimacy” (Tisseron, 2008).

Although we do not use the term “extimacy”, in the present work, with the meaning given by these authors, we cannot fail to emphasize that, in both, important inspirations are manifested. With Lacan, we find the possibility of thinking of “extimacy” as a paradoxical notion; with Tisseron, the possibility of linking the dimension of “extimacy” to the relationship with the attention of the other. Therefore, replacing the prefix “in” with the “ex” allows us to think of an exteriorized facet of intimacy, thus marking the paradoxical condition of talking about something historically linked to the “inside”, but now suffering from mutations and manifesting itself “outside”.

In short, while intimacy is associated with the idea of privacy, ‘virtual extimacy’, from our perspective, is linked to the publication of information that was previously predominantly private. Therein lies the paradox of this new notion and our challenge is to better comprehend its meaning and its repercussions. It should also be emphasized that this term has become increasingly common in studies dealing with the relationships established in this ambiguous territory of the internet, although these are still few (Bolesina, 2017; Sibilia, 2016, 2015; Bauman, 2012; Tisseron, 2008).

Interest in this theme arose due to the increase in reports in the clinical practice of problems in loving relationships caused by the phenomenon of self-evasion in social networks. Faced with the huge flow of information available in the virtual space, comments that are read can become suspicious, photos that are posted can become blatant and the screen seems to have turned into a privileged space for seeking information about others. In addition, we often hear the complaint that the love partner does not leave the cell phone, which, according to the people, has made exchanges and communication between the couple difficult. As Bauman (2012), Turkle (2011), and Tisseron (2008) indicate, the fashion for online experience has become increasingly distant near and near distant from us.

In order to advance these questions about the new “virtual extimate” face of relationships, we conducted a field study with the aim of investigating the repercussions of “virtual extimacy” in the experience of conjugality today.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Seeking to give voice to those who make the new perspective of “extimacy” on the internet possible, we interviewed six independent, married/stable union/cohabitating subjects, with at least two years of union, three men and three women, from the Rio de Janeiro city middle classes that used the Facebook social network. Considering the participants’ confidentiality, in the description we present the following fictitious names:

- Ana was a woman, aged 33 years, married for two years; she had no children, though her husband did, from his first relationship.
- Bruno was a man, aged 31, married for eight years; the couple had no children.
- Carla was a woman, aged 55, who had been in her second marriage for 18 years and had two children from her previous relationship.
- Daniel was a man, aged 33, married for four years; with a one-year old son.
- Elisa was a 43-year-old woman, married for six years; the couple had no children.
- Fabio was a man, 32 years of age, married for six years; he had an eleven-month-old daughter.

2.2 Instrument

The participants gave their authorization to carry out face-to-face audio-recorded interviews, which were later transcribed for analysis. We conducted the interviews with open questions, based on an invisible script, which covered themes related to the previous literature review. The interview script included the following questions: “How do you use Facebook (more frequent posts, what are you looking to see)?”; “How do you relate to your partner’s social network?”; “How do you and your partner communicate on the social network?”; “How do you and your partner communicate outside the virtual world?”; “How do you define intimacy?”.

2.3 Procedure

The participants were nominated by the main researcher's social network contacts as frequent Facebook users, thus characterizing a convenience sample. All the nominees agreed to participate and were interested in sharing their virtual experiences. The invitation was via email as follows: "Would you like to participate in a study on social networks and their repercussions on relationships?". The interviews lasted from one to three hours and the location, date and time were scheduled according to the availability of the participants. We used the Content Analysis method, in its categorical perspective, to investigate the data collected in the interviews. We sought the meanings attributed by the participants to the phenomenon studied, from the discursive material obtained (Bardin, 2011). Through the categorical technique, we observed the similarities in the material collected and organized some thematic categories. We resorted to free-floating reading, grouping, identifying and relating the meanings attributed by the participants to the phenomenon studied until the analysis categories were highlighted. From the narratives of the participants, categories of analysis emerged, among which, we will discuss: between the "extimate" fragments and the intimate dramas, in order to achieve the objectives of this study.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Between the "extimate" fragments and the intimate dramas

The interviews vividly revealed the intertwining between "virtual extimacy" and the intimacy of the couple. Each of the six participants, with their own style, some more reserved and some more spontaneous, eventually provided an example of a situation in which "extimate" fragments seen on Facebook eventually echoed and triggered intimate and quite concrete dramas, as we will see in the following.

In addition, all the respondents made some reference to the most appealing facet of social networks, in which posts attempt to produce a "commercial" version of the internet participants. According to them, what people show is not exactly what they are, but what they want to appear to be to feel good in the view of others. Elisa related the posts to a marketing ploy, stating that what is exposed is far removed from intimacy. Bruno said that people love to appear on social networks and that Facebook is actually a tool for sharing what they are doing or what they

have achieved for themselves. In his words, the posts serve to “massage the ego” of the internet users.

These ideas, presented by Elisa and Bruno, are in agreement with the studies by Sibilia (2016), about the spectacularization of our daily life displayed on the internet screens. For the author, it is necessary to convert the self into a show, spectacularizing the personality, seeking to position oneself well in the market, creating a kind of personal label. The market to which Sibilia (2016) refers is the competitive market of attention, inflated with the new network devices.

We think that this need to be seen is intrinsic to the human, however, it is undeniable that this need finds, in the contemporary situation, a series of appeals and devices that intensify and favor its exploitation. In other words, people have always desired the attention of each other. However, it is quite true that, in our days, media appeals and versatile technological devices foster and enhance this need and this quest for recognition.

Facebook, for example, is famous for propagating the famous and longed for “likes”. Everything that is shared as a photo, a phrase, or a video is primarily expected to be liked by others. Fabio and Bruno happily remembered their posts with the greatest repercussions, achieving immense satisfaction from the high number of likes. This relationship between satisfaction and the number of likes is addressed in Tisseron’s analysis (2008) of the internet. For the author, one of the main purposes of this space is precisely to make people seek, through sharing, confirmation of what they intend to be. For him, this novelty of our time causes the spatial boundaries to be redefined, because the internet makes this space of self-evasion almost limitless. While highlighting a critical tone in the interviewees’ statements about this media facet of the network, they also recognized themselves as addicted to this contemporary posting and spying habit. This habit, according to them, slips into the dynamics of intimacy, since the attention is directed toward the screens and not to the partners.

Many of the participants directly addressed this topic of the invasion of the internet in the time and space of intimacy. Elisa demonstrated a more incisive way to deal with this “invasion”, choosing to turn off the phone or disconnect the internet when she is with her husband. Bruno and Daniel, who declared themselves addicted to the internet and social networks, particularly stressed the need to constantly police themselves, so that the mobile phone does not overlap the moments of socializing together.

Daniel also added other intimate moments of the couple, in which the network is present. He reflected that, several times, he found himself lying in bed next to his wife, without any dialogue, as both had their eyes glued to the phone, captured by Facebook or some other virtual window. He said he has been trying to police himself so that it does not become a “path of no return”.

Fabio also commented on a similar situation experienced with amazement by him and his partner: “We have seen each other do this a few times and then immediately deactivated that trap... So, we are together and each one is here (points to the phone), which is ridiculous!”. He related a scene of the two of them sitting in a restaurant sipping wine and suddenly realizing that they were not talking because they were both on their mobile phones. For Fabio, this is clearly a bad side of the technology.

Many of the participants also mentioned that they use the internet to communicate with their partner. Bruno said he talks to his wife at home through Whatsapp, as did Daniel. The latter contributed a strong description in this regard:

I was talking about this... That today, many times, the couple at home are no longer being a couple, but they are two lonely islands that are communicating through the internet [...]. I think it interferes, it interferes a lot, I think it can shake a relationship... Like, you're together, but you're not together, right? Because you are online... (verbal information, Daniel, 33, married for four years).

Daniel's statement reveals, in our view, an incarnated reflection of the contemporary problem of the virtual that we highlight in this work. The image of the two lonely islands expresses what, for us, represents the new challenge of being a couple today: “How can we combine the individualities, the conjugality and all the virtual others that enter the space of intimacy via small and addictive screens that are everywhere?” Féres-Carneiro, Ziviani & Magalhães (2011) emphasized that the challenge of establishing a couple identity is, precisely the difficult interaction between the individualities and conjugality, that is, the delicate task of articulating the I, the you and the we of the couple. If this was already a huge challenge, intensified by the individualistic values of our society, now this challenge becomes even greater through the flood of virtual intersections that pass through various inti-

mate areas of daily life, as our interviewees revealed. Accordingly, the challenge of being a couple today also seems to be announced by seeking balance between the spheres of intimacy and “virtual extimacy”. Our interviewees realized this fact, but still seemed to look for the best way to deal with this novelty.

In addition, in several excerpts, the respondents highlighted how much Facebook can cause problems in the daily life of couples, for different reasons. Two respondents commented on situations experienced by friends, in which their partners discovered “suspicious” content on Facebook. Fabio, for example, emphasized that there are more favorable times for flirting with people in the chats. The early hours of the morning is taken as the period when this kind of approach happens most. Because of this, he said he doesn’t usually go online then.

Ana also said that she seeks to protect herself from this kind of flirtatious situation on the internet because she knows it can arouse her partner’s jealousy if he reads something out of context. These statements reinforce the arguments of the study by Muise, Christofides and Desmarais (2009), who consider Facebook a “poison” for today’s couples. The authors clarify that Facebook, because of its extensive scope, involves astronomical numbers of users and has significantly affected many relationships. They point out that a banal comment about the partner’s profile made by a contact of the opposite sex can lead a participant to have feelings of distrust and jealousy, leading them to closely monitor the profile of the potential “suspects”. Muise et al. (2009) also pointed out that much of this information produces a real spiral of jealousy, because, most of the time, it is accessed out of context, that is, what are seen or read are fragments of conversations. Therefore, there are many possible intonations and interpretations, which, according to the researchers, may end up producing distrust and misunderstandings in intimate relationships.

As we have mentioned, in every interview we saw “extimate” fragments resonating in intimate dramas. Ana, for example, told of her curious searches on her partner’s page, where she read single sentences and produced suspicious interpretations, which made her follow the page of the alleged suspects, as highlighted above in the study by Muise et al. (2009). The intertwining of the “extimate” and intimate dimensions is noticeable in Ana’s attitude of demanding that her partner exclude from his Facebook someone who aroused jealousy or distrust, that is, for Ana, what is seen on the network, is taken into the intimacy of the couple and what is discussed in the intimacy must also reflect on the internet.

Carla cited as, an example, an episode of misunderstanding between the couple that occurred via Facebook: her partner would have, according to her interpretation, posted a message to criticize her during a fight. She said she was so upset that she decided to delete the Facebook of her partner from her account. After this decision, she felt reassured, as she was no longer exposed to “extra” information that left her insecure and prone to fantasies.

The participants that did not report a marital drama provoked by “extimate” circumstances contributed equally by narrating disagreements with friends.

Bruno and Daniel mentioned disagreements with close people through Facebook. Carla and Ana spoke about problems experienced online with relatives.

Elisa also reported an intimate drama experienced with a friend, which had its root in a Facebook post. In this case, the disagreement started between Elisa’s partner and a friend, caused by a misunderstanding between them. Elisa’s partner got upset and deleted the friend, who in turn deleted both of them in retaliation.

Thus, we can perceive, in the interviewees’ reports, the strong place that “virtual extimacy” occupies in the couple’s intimacies. Whether as a means of communication, as a space to construct an image, or as a screen of indirect “messages” or seeking information about the partner, what is shared on the internet has repercussions in people’s daily lives. The interviewees’ statements made this clear, and also reinforced the maxim of the scholars of the area who say that we are closer to those that are far away and further away from those that are close (Bau-
man, 2012; Turkle, 2011; Tisseron, 2008).

This strong magnetism of the network, which seems to be increasing, despite producing so many problems in intimate relationships, can be understood as an attempt to escape loneliness, as shown by the studies by Sibilia (2016) and Tisseron (2008). In this context, Sibilia (2016) considers that loneliness, increasingly intolerable nowadays, finds a supposed antidote on the screen, as there is the illusion of having “a million friends”.

Fabio confirmed this idea of Sibilia (2016). He said he finds an escape from loneliness in the virtual dialogue, since on the network there is always someone available to talk. However, he stressed the lack in this virtual interaction, which does not pass through the skin, as a concrete encounter with the interlocutor would, and, therefore, always leaves a feeling of absence in the air.

For us, this reflection by Fabio quite accurately expresses the double meaning perceived in virtual extimacy. It is real, a form of encounter is effectively held there and even relieves the need to be with the other, thus seeming to be an escape from loneliness. At the same time, something seems to escape this meeting, precisely because of the lacking ingredient expressed through the body.

Even so, given the rush of daily life, small doses of online encounters seem to be a consolation for some or, perhaps, a defense for others, who have more difficulties in relating, as pointed out in the study by Turkle (2011). According to the author, due to the increasingly intense rush of contemporary life, people start looking to technology for the comforting feeling that there is someone listening to us. So, she says, we connect with devices that seem to like us. However, Turkle (2011) points out that, paradoxically, we are increasingly connected to each other, but strangely, we are also feeling more alone. This new contemporary condition fosters at the same time new forms of intimacy and new forms of loneliness. Therefore, the author summarizes this new condition of the internet as “alonetogether”, that is, paradoxically together and alone at the same time. Our interviewees confirmed this perception of Turkle (2011), because although absorbed by the screen, they were unanimous in protesting against this excess that empties the concrete relationships with partners.

4. Conclusion

We consider that it is no longer possible to conceive our history without this absolutely revolutionary framework of the internet and the virtual dimension opened by it. Among the benefits and harms, much is discussed about the exacerbation of loneliness, isolation and individualism that the internet fosters. The participants in our field study emphasized, at all times, the concern not to isolate themselves in this new and seductive universe. Primarily, they emphasized the desire to pay attention to their relationships with technology and the magnetic absorption of the virtual. They also revealed the desire to take care of relations not mediated by technique, that is, those that occur in the spontaneity of the presential encounter with the other, as in the case of conjugality. At least, that was the remarkably marked position of the six people we listened to in this study.

We perceived, in the interviewees' statements, the need to question the meanings that are being propagated through this invasion of technology in the

daily life. Our interviewees reflected in an incarnate way about their particular dramas, their provisional isolations, inventorying the pros and cons of “virtual extimacy”.

We also emphasize that, despite this critical attention perceived in the interviewees’ narrative, all of them also expressed the perception that “virtual extimacy” affects the experience of marital intimacy. With attention captured by the screen, experiencing and enjoying “extimate” contacts and posts, people have less time to devote to the intimate. This was a unanimous finding among the interviewees. The great challenge of contemporary relationships seems to lie at exactly this point, that is, if the presence of the virtual in our lives seems to be designed as a path of no return, we must learn to construct the boundaries between the spaces of intimacy and “extimacy” that seem to interpenetrate one another.

However, two important questions that derived from the present work should be highlighted. The first one refers to the surprising lack of studies in this area, which is talked about a lot, however, with little depth in research. We consider the continuity of studies in the line of relationships and the internet to be fundamental to better map this new paradoxical universe of the internet that problematizes and intertwines notions such as: virtual and real; near and far; “extimate” and intimate. Only by immersing ourselves in the contemporary experience, can we better comprehend the “roles” of these interpenetrating spheres.

Second, we perceived, as already highlighted, the respondents’ strong concern to maintain the intimate sphere, despite the magnetism of “virtual extimacy”. However, we question whether this result is not a consequence of a generational factor, i.e., our interviewees belonged to a generation that had to adapt to the novelty of the internet. As such, they have a solid reference to relationships before and after the internet. We question whether the perception of younger people, who were born in this universe, would be the same. Perhaps because they were born in a world already permeated by virtuality, their notions of intimacy and privacy are not the same. We emphasize the importance of developing studies that allow us to contrast this generational dimension and thus understand the impact of the internet on each of the experiences.

Finally, we learned from the interviewees that “virtual extimacy” is not a dichotomous phenomenon that separates the virtual from the real. Precisely because we realize its repercussions in intimate relationships, we can affirm that this

new condition of our time unites and intertwines the threads of experience with others, inside and outside the internet.

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