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IS IT (MICRO)CHEATING? HOW SOCIAL MEDIA CONFOUND ASSUMPTIONS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Margaret E. Foster
Cornell University

Aspen K.B. Omapang
Cornell University

Marina Johnson-Zafiris
Cornell University

Social media have changed how we communicate, meet others, and form intimate relationships. Technology can also mediate intimate partner surveillance and abuse (Muisse, 2009; Tokunaga, 2010). One way to understand these shifts is through relationship transgressions, defined and enforced by compulsory monogamy (TallBear, 2020). Anxieties around cheating have evolved along with our technologies, as evidenced by new, ambiguous terms like “microcheating” (Lusinski, 2018). In this in-progress, mixed-methods study, we investigate emergent definitions of cheating through computational and critical discourse analyses of discussions about potential transgressions on Reddit. Our analysis is informed by Indigenous science and technology studies, queer studies, and feminist theory.

Literature Review

In dominant western cultures,¹ romance and sex are structured through colonial notions of family and settler sexuality (Federici, 2020; Morgensen, 2011; Willey, 2016), which associate morality with monogamy (TallBear, 2020; Wilkins & Dalessandro, 2013). This creates compulsory monogamy, where monogamous relationships are naturalized into a “commonsense” norm. Compulsory monogamy is rooted in colonizing governments’

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¹ In this paper, “west” is lowercase to symbolically disrupt colonial power dynamics.

“property ethic,” which awarded single male heads of household property rights and control over their wives’ bodies (TallBear, 2020, pp. 473–474). An alternative to monogamy is ethical non-monogamy or polyamory (Rambukkana, 2015), which encourages cultivating multiple intimate relationships, whether sexual, romantic, both, or neither (Haritaworn et al., 2006; TallBear, 2020). While not a new way of relating, these terms represent their newest incarnation in western contexts. Critical polyamory applies Indigenous ontologies to intimate relationships with the goal of decolonizing relating. We draw upon this framing to interpret power dynamics embedded in relationship discourse online.

Compulsory monogamy can yield heightened suspicion and anger when a relationship transgression is perceived (Spade, 2006; TallBear, 2020). Otherwise innocuous behaviors can be construed as transgressive if they fall outside an established monogamous relationship (Kruger et al., 2013). Suspicious partners sometimes surveil their lovers to verify fidelity (e.g., reviewing text messages, installing spyware on a cellphone). This can escalate to harassment, doxxing, or physical violence (Freed et al., 2018). High-tech surveillance echoes abusers’ analog techniques, like opening mail or checking a car’s gas levels (Bancroft, 2002). Yet media ideologies (beliefs about the meaning of communication technologies) are ambiguous for new media. Instead, people develop localized idioms of practice, where communities develop perceptions about the “right” way to use new media (Gershon, 2010).

The phenomenon of interest in our study is discourse around what constitutes “cheating” as it relates to social media, that is, discourse around the limits of new technologies’ acceptable uses for relating outside an established relationship. Individuals have long used technologies to coordinate extramarital sex (Rambukkana, 2015), and social media have introduced spaces for new transgressions to emerge (Muisse et al., 2009; Tokunaga, 2011). Our investigation will illuminate 1) how definitions of infidelity have shifted due to the affordances of social media platforms (e.g., “microcheating”), and 2) how these new social anxieties enforce compulsory monogamy. Thus, our concern is how people identify and interpret transgressive behaviors.

Here, we turn to Reddit to see how pseudonymous users—self-proclaimed cheaters and victims of cheating alike—delineate transgressions through discussion of posters’ personal stories. Our research questions are:

1. What behaviors cause uncertainty for users concerned about romantic relationship transgressions?
2. How do posts about potentially transgressive behaviors naturalize the extension of settler colonial compulsory monogamy into online space?

Method

Reddit is a pseudonymous social media platform that consists of subreddits, interest-based message boards. This pseudonymity could lead to disclosure of taboo behaviors without fear of offline consequences (Ellison et al., 2016). Reddit threads also retain

peer-to-peer dynamics, which makes it particularly suited to studying discourse. Finally, Reddit is one of two major social media platforms yielding statistically significant growth; however, its relatively small size and homogeneity limit generalizability (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

Our study requires Reddit posts by self-identified cheaters and those who have been cheated on. Ideal subreddits to sample would include: Explicitly related topics; consistent posting by a diversity of users; primarily text-based post content; post text that includes self-disclosure; and an active comment section. These factors allow for analysis of common anxieties around technologically mediated infidelity.

We used two tools to quantitatively assess subreddit candidates for data collection. Subredditstats.com provides descriptive statistics about subreddits (e.g., posts per day) and subreddit similarity by userbase overlap. The latter identified other relevant subreddits. After identifying a list of subreddits, we manually assessed user interactions to finalize the subreddit sample. We proposed the subreddits r/cheating_stories, r/CheatingGF, and r/survivinginfidelity, then chose r/cheating_stories for our pilot analysis. At the time of data collection, it had approximately 207,000 members.

We collected Reddit data from a previously downloaded archive of submissions and their comments. We collected a consensus sample of all posts from this subreddit from January 2020–December 2022, capturing evolving idioms of practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. This dataset yielded 15,870 posts, many of which had been deleted or removed.

We then used computational techniques to elicit common themes across subreddit posts. To organize data at scale, we conducted Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), an unsupervised natural language processing tool that identifies latent topics from a large corpus of textual data (Blei, 2012). The LDA model's output is a list of common "topics" present in the aggregate of subreddit posts, akin to the middle-stages of a grounded theory analysis. To preserve the word order of the document semantics, we applied Multi-Class Text Classification (Doc2Vec), which allowed us to evaluate the context of words associated with each of the LDA topics and determine if and how similar words are being utilized in different threads, the outcome being a ranked list of the most important and common topics for this large community.

One topic that emerged from our initial pilot analysis was hacking services and requests. We performed critical discourse analysis (CDA) on the top 1000 posts that had the highest probability of association with the topic "hacking." CDA analyzes both text and ideologies underlying discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Our pilot analysis suggested a belief that proof of (in)fideliy can be found on a partner's smartphone, such as by reading texts. This orientation toward evidence then justifies surveillance and hacking of a partner's phone and computer presence, construing the invasion of privacy as the right to truth. There was also discourse that suggested an emerging media ideology around understanding a personal smartphone as an extension of one's body; entitlement to a lover's phone dovetailed with entitlement to their body. This preliminary finding indicates that discourse around transgressive behaviors on social media likely

reiterates compulsory monogamy and settler sexuality, including entitlement to control over a lover's body both physically and as it extends into online space via smartphones.

Future Directions

We will continue using CDA to analyze samples from the topic model to understand Redditors' attitudes about relationships (especially compulsory monogamy and ethical non-monogamy) and how technology affects understandings of trust, transgression, and socially acceptable surveillance. Our theoretical contribution will be twofold: First, contextualizing social anxieties around cheating by drawing on critical polyamory, and second, challenging compulsory monogamy to create healthier and more harmonious communities.

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