



REEL CULTURE

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Webdultery

The Costs & Rewards of Internet “Cheating”

EXCHANGE THEORY is both spot-on *and* unfeeling. Its basic tenets are clear in the name: our behaviors are guided by a kind of exchange. We gauge the costs and rewards of something and act accordingly. Are the benefits greater than the costs? Great, then I’ll do it. Hard to argue with this theory. Another aspect of it has to do with alternatives. That is to say; do you have any? If you are living in a small, closed society, surrounded by people who know the intimates of your life, it’s unlikely that when discouraged by the course

of your relationship that you’ll consider straying. First, the costs probably outweigh the rewards (you are likely to be caught) and there is a dearth of alternatives in your closed off world. Where are you going to go when everyone knows your name?

However, imagine the opposite of that small community. Imagine the communities of today with the anonymity that exists in modern life. Now, add to that the internet and the ability to reach out to zillions and, well, the likelihood of straying just

increased since 1) the costs are limited since your secret is easy to keep in an open society and 2) the alternatives are falling at your feet.

Exchange theory can guide your reading of *Webdultery*, the 2010 film by Charles Wahl. Like so many other films this one tells the tale of the modern couple who have grown bored with one another. Together since they were young, their sex life has dwindled and their commonalities are focused almost exclusively raising their son. Each finds a "chat room buddy." There's no guilt initially since, after all, they are "only talking."

The stage is set for the classic story of webdultery. The wife is buried in her work. The husband is struggling with his writing. We might go as far as to say that he feels a bit emasculated by her earnings and his lack thereof. So, both

reach out to a website for married people who want to stray. They both find someone who says, "I understand." There's such allure in the sense that someone really gets you! The alternatives to working on the relationship are far too easy. The costs to this kind of renewed excitement are low. Who the hell wouldn't do it?

So, each forge into new encounters. The internet has made it easy to avoid feeling like some key life experience is eluding them. She notes, "I want something now so I don't look back and feel like I missed out on all these things." Later she ponders, "Don't you ever wonder if the person you were meant to be with were still out there?" In this post-modern world we can ask that question and we can indeed explore it. Get thee to the nearest chat room.

All the signs are there for this couple. The boredom. The excitement of leaning into their laptop for the latest flirt from a stranger who is feeling less and less strange and more familiar. The eventual touch of a hand that feels as intimate as anything they've felt in a while. At home they "don't joke around anymore." Online they can be clever, witty and alluring.

Again, the rewards simply outweigh the costs. It's not really adultery to "just talk." We are still debating where the line begins and ends with internet intimacy. Thus, it's easy to discount it and claim innocence. And the alternatives to the sameness of a relationship are so abundant that, well, I don't need to tell you how abundant they are. Cliché but appropriate to say, "it's a click away".

Webdultery, while not the most original work (you might find yourself humming "If you like Pina Coladas..."), is an interesting look at the lure of the chat room and where the lines of "cheating" might be drawn. Watch it with a partner. Or not, depending on the costs and rewards of such a topic surfacing!



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