

A new study warns: If someone's flirting with you online, beware—it could ruin your relationship

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Two new studies conducted by Prof. Gurit Birnbaum of Reichman University's Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology reveal that online interactions, such as flirting over chats, can be destructive to a

relationship. The studies' findings show that the potential damage caused by online interactions often occur on the unconscious level and may result in the perception of your current partner in a less appealing light. These feelings facilitate the release of passionate feelings towards people other than your partner—feelings that you may have been better able to suppress in the past.

The introduction of social networks into our lives has posed a significant challenge to monogamy. When people enter a [relationship](#), they define as monogamous, they hope to remain faithful to their [partner](#). However, today, more than ever before, they are flooded with temptations by alternative partners, who lurk in all corners of the web. People tend to deal with the conflict that these temptations elicit by using relationship-protective strategies, such as ignoring suitors or perceiving them as less attractive than they are. These strategies, however, are not always effective, as the high infidelity rates will testify. In her latest research, Prof. Birnbaum examines how people deal with the conflict between short-term temptation and long-term plans, or in other words, what factors help people be more resistant to temptation and what factors weaken this resistance.

In order to assess this, two studies were conducted in which romantically involved participants chatted online with an attractive person, who was a member of the research team. Half of the participants were assigned to a research team member who conducted a chat that was neutral in content, and served as a control group, and the other half were assigned to a team member who flirted with them over the course of the chat. In the first study, following the chat with the stranger the participants of both groups reported the degree of attraction they felt towards their current partner, and also took part in a task that examined their unconscious perceptions of their partner. In this study, it was found that the participants who were flirted with perceived their current partner in a more negative light, on both the conscious and unconscious levels,

compared to the participants of the [control group](#).

In the second study, after the chat with the stranger, the participants described in writing the first sexual fantasy that came to their mind. These fantasies were analyzed by independent judges who examined the level of desire expressed in them towards both the current partner and the alternative partner. The findings showed that in the flirty [chat](#) condition, the participants fantasized more about the alternative partners, and expressed more desire towards them than the participants in the control condition.

Prof. Gurit Birnbaum, Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology, Reichman University says that "previous studies that examined factors predicting infidelity focused on partners' personalities or characteristics of the couple's relationship. In the current study, I chose to focus on the behavior of the suitors, and to assess whether a suitor who is more active in expressing his interest in an individual who is already in a relationship is better able to penetrate the defense mechanisms, jeopardizing relationship quality and stability."

The research was published in *Personal Relationships*.

More information: Gurit E. Birnbaum, Temptation at your door: Receiving mate poaching attempts and perceived Partners' desirability, *Personal Relationships* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/pere.12433](https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12433)

Provided by Reichman University

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