

Dynamics of Internet Dating

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This study examined the world of Internet dating. It explored the motivations of daters, their styles of courtship, and how they negotiated problems of trust and deception. The authors employed in-depth interviews and participant observation with men and women who met online. Internet daters sought companionship, comfort after a life crisis, control over presentation of themselves and their environments, freedom from commitment and stereotypic roles, adventure, and romantic fantasy. The authors also studied the development of trust between daters, the risks they assume, and lying online. Most participants in the study eventually met, which sometimes resulted in abrupt rejection and loss of face, but other times ended in marriage.

Keywords: *Internet dating; trust; interpersonal relations; identity*

Risk-taking, trust, and serendipity are key ingredients of joy. Without risk, nothing new ever happens. Without trust, fear creeps in. Without serendipity, there are no surprises.

—Rita Golden Gelman (2002)

Number 31 in Starbucks's The Way I See It series, the above quote was printed on a paper coffee cup that was served to the first author at a Starbucks Internet cafe in Philadelphia when she attended the 100th annual American Sociological Association conference meeting. The cafe was filled with people communicating with other individuals across the country. Internet dating, which has become increasingly popular in recent times, is an example of an activity that requires taking risks and trusting an unknown person who may be thousands of miles away. These risks are taken in the hope that romance will evolve.

The present research focused on the dynamics of Internet dating, a method of courting used by individuals who meet on the Internet and continue online correspondence in hopes of forming a supportive romantic relationship. It sought to determine why people choose to date online, what aspects of face-to-face relations are reproduced, and the rationales and strategies Internet daters use to negotiate and manage problems of risk accompanying the technology.

A Brief History of Dating Practices

Although the practices of courting vary from culture to culture and change over time, technologies of communication have historically shaped courtship, making it freer and expanding possibilities. The timeless love letter notwithstanding, courtship interaction in the United

States has been limited to supervised situations or contained within the bounds of engagement for marriage. This was especially true during the puritan, colonial, and Victorian eras (Hunt, 1959). Historians believe that freer dating practices, such as meeting privately and face to face for romantic interactions at scheduled times and places, emerged among middle-class teenagers in the 1920s. These practices developed alongside new technologies such as telephones, automobiles, and drive-in theaters, which allowed teenagers to become more independent from their parents: “The rise of the dating system fueled by [this] technology offered American youth new prospects for fun and for interpersonal and sexual exploration” (Clark, 1998, p. 161). Taking advantage of these opportunities, however, was risky. By the 1980s, stories about AIDS and date rape became common (Abbey, Thomson-Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan, 1996).

In the 1990s, the Internet became a major vehicle for social encounters. Through the Internet, people can interact over greater distances in a shorter period and at less expense than in the past. Theorists have debated the positive and negative effects this technology has on social interactions. Initially, theorists such as Zuboff (1991) believed “the Internet reduced face-to-face interaction” and created an “uncomfortable isolation” (pp. 479-482) for people at work. Conversely, Raney (2000) argued that online communication expands social networks. According to Raney, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found supporting evidence for this view in a study in which “more than half of Internet users reported that e-mail was strengthening their family ties. And Internet users reported far more offline social contact than non-users.” (p. G7). Cooper and Sportolari (1997) suggested that the Internet is especially helpful for promoting romantic relationships:

While many people think that electronic relating promotes emotionally disconnected or superficially erotic contacts, the structure and process of online relating can facilitate positive interpersonal connections, including the healthy development of romantic relationships. Computer-mediated relations (CMR) reduce the role that physical attributes play in the development of attraction and enhance other factors such as propinquity, rapport, similarity and mutual self-disclosure, thus promoting erotic connections that stem from emotional intimacy rather than lustful attraction. The Internet is a model of intimate yet separate relations. It allows adult (and teen) men and women more freedom to deviate from typically constraining gender roles that are often automatically activated in face-to-face interactions. (p. 7)

There is an abundance of literature about social interaction on the Internet (e.g., Baym, 1998, 2000; Bell, 2001; Clark, 1998; Dietrich, 1997; Fernback, 1997; Hardey, 2002, 2004; S. Jones, 1995, 1997; Markham, 1998; Reid, 1997; Slevin, 2000; Strate, 2003; Waskul, 2003; Zimmer & Hunter, 2003), though little attention has been given to the growing significance of Internet courtship. Today Internet video and sound communications are commonplace, and photographs, video, and sound clips can all be altered or fabricated entirely. These new technologies allow Internet daters enormous latitude to prepare their presentations of self.

Using the Internet for Dating

The Internet is a new social institution that has the ability to connect people who have never met face to face and is thus likely to transform the dating process. Beginning with newsgroups such as Usenet and various bulletin boards that operated under the now-obsolete

Gopher system, the Internet facilitated the formation of communities. Baym (2000) traced how users of <http://rec.arts.tv.soaps>, an online newsgroup dealing with soap operas, gradually came to recognize and know each other through their styles of posting. They then began to communicate on personal subjects apart from soap operas. As a result, people who had never met and could not even see each other ceased to be strangers. Internet dating extended this process of incidental acquaintanceship to the specific task of recruiting partners.

We explored the phenomenology of Internet dating, which we defined as the pattern of periodic communication between potential partners using the Internet as a medium. We examined the respondents' concerns over the risk of being deceived, their anxieties about physical appearance, and the hazards of romantic involvement.

Method

Participants

Because we needed a sample of respondents who could be tracked over time and whose reliability could be verified, we began to investigate the phenomenon of Internet dating by interviewing people who were personally accessible, such as coworkers, acquaintances, and students. Soon the sample expanded because respondents told us about people they knew who dated online, which resulted in a snowball sample. It was not a uniform sample with respect to such attributes as race and socioeconomic status because it favored a White middle class and was instead a sample dictated by sampling logistics. However, we believe that the phenomenon of Internet courtship is largely a White, middle-class phenomenon as one can see by examining such public meeting places as hotornot.com. For this reason, we believe our sample to be qualitatively representative: It was composed of 32% students, 24% business and clerical workers, 14% trade workers, and 14% professionals and semiprofessionals. The sample also included unemployed persons, small business owners, and housewives.

Because we were interested in romantic dating relationships that could result in commitment, we did not include people interested only in pornography or online sexual encounters as their primary focus. We defined dating as setting up specific times to mutually disclose personal information with potential romantic partners on an ongoing basis. We did not place any other restrictions on whom we were willing to interview. Consequently, the sample included homosexuals and unhappily married persons. Romance was not necessarily the goal of online dating, but in our sample, three married persons changed partners as a result of Internet interactions.

Interview Questions

Interviews were open-ended and informal. We asked respondents to (a) describe their experiences with Internet dating, (b) state whether these experiences were positive or negative, (c) state how and why they entered the world of online dating, and (d) state whether they used online dating services or met incidentally through chat rooms, online games, or common interest groups. Respondents were eager to relate their experiences, and many interviews lasted an hour or longer.

Interviews were conducted during lunch in restaurants, at respondents' homes, at the home of the first author, in the university cafeteria, and on walks in various neighborhoods. All

respondents had ready access to computers in their homes, dorm rooms, or places of work. We watched while they talked back and forth online. In addition, the first author invited three newly paired couples to her home for dinner. Follow-up data were collected in person, on the phone, by e-mail, and by mail. Interviews were later transcribed and coded by keywords according to concepts that emerged through the dialogue, such as trust, time, risk, and need satisfaction.

We limited the number of respondents to 25 men and 25 women because we wanted to compare gender variables in a balanced sample. The men ranged in age from 18 to 58 with a mean age of 32.6. The women ranged in age from 15 to 48 with a mean age of 33. In all, 17 men and 11 women were single (never married), 7 men and 10 women were divorced, and 1 man and 4 women were married. Two men and one woman were gay. Two women and one man were African American. One man was Indian. Six men and seven women were the parents of young children, and as previously stated, five respondents were married when they began to interact romantically online.

Results

Beck (1992) argued that people must risk social dependency on others even though this dependency harms their ability to function independently “in the life that basically must be or ought to be led alone Circles of contact must be built up This requires readiness by people to help bear the burdens of others” (p. 122). Similar to Hardey (2002), respondents revealed multiple affiliation-related motivations for becoming involved in Internet dating.

Companionship

Lonely people tend to report being dissatisfied with their relationships and are often cynical, rejecting, bored, and depressed. They also have difficulty making friends, engaging in conversations, getting involved in social activities, and dating (Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980; W. H. Jones, Hobbs, & Hockenbury, 1982). Their tendency to engage in minimal self-disclosure and be unresponsive to conversational partners often results in poor interactions that are unrewarding for both partners, which leads lonely individuals to feel dissatisfied with their relationships (McAdams, 1989). Both relationship dissatisfaction and difficulty with social behaviors may lead lonely people to seek online relationships.

Regardless of their marital status, respondents of all ages tended to report being lonely. They all talked about needing more communication, emotional support, and companionship. Fred, a 19-year-old student who had never been married, said, “I hate being alone. You want to know someone out there at least cares.”

Greta, a 43-year-old, unhappily married mother of a 9-year-old, worked a night shift. Her husband worked during the day, and they both dated others online through chat rooms. Chat rooms often require only token (username) identification. The face presented is largely cloaked, but marital status is usually not hidden. Rather, it is explained:

I guess the big problem is that my husband works 6 days a week, is gone all day long, and doesn't spend time with me. It is like we are strangers living in the same house. We haven't actually gone out with anyone.

Kelly, a 48-year-old, unhappily married student also blamed her lack of communication with her husband for why she dated online:

I think I qualify for this interview because I date someone online. In our house there is no communication. That is no way to be. It's two people living in the same house like roommates that have totally different lives. We never talk. That is how my life was before I met George [online].

Mary, a 30-year-old, recently divorced student, also blamed loneliness and the lack of communication:

It just kind of happened. And I am glad it did because you know this man is very supportive of my going to school . . . He is interested in what classes I take; he asks me how they are going, when I have a test; usually he calls me 5 out of 7 days a week. I am not used to that kind of treatment.

Phyllis, a 20-year-old student, agreed: "It's easier to meet people. The numbers are up, right? Especially in a small place like where I live."

Regardless of their marital status, all of the above individuals seemed to perceive their social lives as incomplete. This may be a reflection of the separation of family and friends because of current societal structure. Thus, it is not surprising that they were highly motivated to become involved in online relationships with people who were willing to talk, listen, and serve a supportive function.

Phil, a 19-year-old, never married student, said, "The Internet is fast and easy when you want to meet women. You can meet more women in less time. You don't have to wait for a letter or search bars."

Comfort After a Life Crisis

The Internet has been used by people seeking social support and information while coping with cancer (Fogel, Albert, Schnabel, Ditkoff, & Neugut, 2002; Klemm, Hurst, Dearholt, & Trone, 1999; Ljungman et al., 2003), heart disease, (Dickerson, Flaig, & Kennedy, 2000), suicide (Hollander, 2001), and Alzheimer's disease (White & Dorman, 2000). Vanderwerker and Prigerson (2004) found that people with major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and complicated grief who used the Internet and in particular e-mail were more likely to report higher energy levels and a better quality of life after they began using these technologies. Similarly, several respondents in the present sample reported seeking comfort after a life crisis, such as the loss of a job, a divorce, or a death in the family. Robin, a 32-year-old, never married woman, said,

I had suffered such a great loss when my grandpa died. We were very close and he raised me. I guess at that particular point in time in my life I needed someone in my life. One night I was searching for someone to talk with. There is a button you can hit to find a random chat partner. I must have gone through about 10 to 15 different people until his name popped up. I read his details that he provided about himself, and I sent him a message. The first night we talked for about 5 to 6 hours straight, nonstop.

Anna, a 39-year-old, divorced woman, also got online because of her recent divorce: “After my divorce, I cried all the time. My friends were tired of listening to me. I wanted a support group so I went into this chat room.”

Judith, a 44-year-old woman, divorced for 8 years, was going through a series of crises:

I mean I was having a real hard time with my job; my parents were splitting up, and my son was going away to college. I couldn't handle it. It was everything at once. I even blew off my close girlfriends. But Mark was willing to listen.

Our society's lack of support structure for individuals who experience life crises may lead them to seek out comfort from online sources. Real-life friends and family members often prejudice and blame people for their predicaments. A desire to avoid being judged may motivate people to seek support in an environment where pretyped descriptions of self and where true expressions of unhappiness are invisible. The online setting allows them to select which aspects of themselves to reveal to their online companions, which lessens the probability of unfavorable judgment that may be leveled by real-life friends and family members.

Control Over Presentation and Environment

The Internet provides a medium for people to present themselves in a way that that they think is flattering. Clark (1998) reports that girls describe themselves as “thinner and taller” and otherwise prettier in Internet communications than they actually are. Because contact is mediated, individuals do not have to expose themselves directly on the Internet. In general, “the surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur” (Goffman, 1967, p. 15).

Jean, a 35-year-old, never married woman, said if you were heavy, you could get to know someone who might like you instead of having to attract people with your looks before they wanted to know you:

Many of the women I met from my chat room were way overweight. It's easy to sit at home and talk online, say things, and be appealing. I mean it's safe. It's totally safe if you don't ever plan on ever meeting anyone [face to face]. If later on, you do meet them, maybe they will like you anyway. By that time it's worth the risk.

Ted, a 40-year-old, never married, legally blind man, said the Internet gave him confidence:

The Internet makes me feel safe, knowing that I can talk to someone because when you live almost in the dark, it is hard to see what is really going on out there. I am legally blind, and the first thing I tell them about is that I am blind and cannot drive. The last ad I placed said, “Hey, ladies, how about a blind date?” Ha! Ha! Most women don't seem to care. Although I am blind, my problems have not hindered my ability to talk to a lot of women and sometimes visit them. If they do have a problem, I will write back and say, “You don't know how much fun braille can be.” Most women in the bar stay away from me because they know with my eyes I can't drive them home.

Reid, a 37-year-old, divorced father with two children, said,

The Internet is a place where people can take risks without consequences. You can experiment with people you wouldn't normally meet or get involved with. You can grocery shop. There are more people to meet. You can play games for a long time. You can look at so many pictures; it's fun like a candy store.

There is a large body of social psychological literature on social anxiety and dating behavior. In a review of the dating frequency literature, Leck (2003) found:

Infrequent daters are likely to be shy, introverted, lonely, and have a low sense of self-esteem and self-competence. They also tend to be less attractive, more anxious, less socially skilled, and hold more negative beliefs than do frequent daters. Shy men are sensitive to rejection. (pp. 36-41)

For people who are shy, anxious, and deficient in social skills, use of the Internet may facilitate social interaction because it requires different skills that are necessary for initiating heterosocial interaction in a face-to-face setting. In one study, college students reported using the Internet to meet people because they found it reduced their anxiety about social interaction (Knox, Daniels, Sturdivant, & Zusman, 2001).

Some respondents of both sexes claimed they found it difficult to talk to strangers in social situations such as parties or even in places such as the school cafeteria or a classroom. Rick, a 32-year-old, never married man, said he liked using the Internet because "I'm shy. That is why I went into a chat room. I can say things online that I can't say in person. I am so quiet. But, I can talk on the telephone too."

Pete, a 22-year-old, never married man, did not trust dating in general, but he liked the Internet better than bars:

Bars are a meat market, and I feel that everybody there is putting on more of a show than actuality. I mean when you meet them [women] in a bar, it's like they are a different person than in real life. And it's the same thing with the Internet, you know, with a lot of women. So many haven't returned messages, or they just leave you hanging, or they pretend to be someone they are not. I'm too shy, too afraid of getting turned down. It's easier, less painful getting turned down on type than it is in person.

Men and women respondents complained that bars were not a good place to get to know prospective partners. Harry argued that he did not trust the character of bar pickups:

One thing I found with the bar is that most ladies who go there will say yes and say yes to about anybody given the time of night. Some ladies have propositioned me! Let's just say I don't like being in that situation.

Anna also said, "I don't want to go to bars to meet people. This is a lot safer."

Societal expectations for appearance and behavior can result in individuals who do not fit the norm and perceive themselves as deviants who will not be accepted. Furthermore, they may fear negative reprisals from more mainstream members of society and thus may retreat into an online setting where they feel safer and have control.

Freedom From Commitment and Stereotypic Roles

Clark (1998) found that Internet dating is particularly appealing to teenage girls because it allows them to be aggressive while remaining sheltered. Clark argued that “Internet dating affords teenage girls in particular the opportunity to experiment with and claim power within heterosexual relationships,” but she questioned whether the resulting relationships were any more emancipative than those found in the real-life experiences of teenagers. She suggested that “power afforded through self-construction on the Internet does not translate into changed gender roles and expectations in the social world beyond cyberspace.” The teenage girls in Clark’s study were “not interested in meeting the boys with whom they conversed as they might undermine (their) attractive and aggressive on-line persona” (pp. 160-169).

Danet (1998) suggested that typed text provides a mask for both men and women and found that

men are curious about what it is like to be a woman or seek the attention that female presenting individuals typically receive. Women want to avoid being harassed sexually or feel free to be more assertive. As a result, some people are leading double or multiple lives online, even with different gender identities. Others are trying out what it might mean to be gender-free, neither male nor female Masquerading in this fashion promotes consciousness-raising about gender issues and might contribute to the long-term destabilization of the way we currently construct gender. (p. 130)

Traditional gender norms that dictate that women wait for men to ask them out and men be assertive leaders are still common today (Mongeau, Hale, Johnson, & Hillis, 1993; Simmel, 1911). However, some research (e.g., Cooper & Sportolari, 1997) and responses from the interviewees suggest that these norms may not operate online.

Cathryn, a 15-year-old girl, stated,

I like to play but not really be there. I met this boy and we talked about school and movies, but we didn’t meet. We live in different states. I don’t know much about him really. He’s just fun to talk to. I tease him a lot. Sometimes my friends pretend they are older or even guys instead of girls.

This online interaction is free from commitment.

Five of the respondents, both men and women, talked about freedom from commitment and stereotypic sex roles. Anna said,

We agreed that there would be no expectations and if we didn’t like each other, we’d have a few laughs, go to a baseball game or two, have a few beers, who cares. Since I like to travel, I also felt if the guy was a jerk, I had a credit card and would go to a different hotel and stay in San Diego and have a nice vacation.

Susie, a 44-year-old divorced woman, liked not having to be concerned with marriage:

He has talked about marriage. But whenever he says anything, I say I didn’t hear the question. I don’t tell him yes and I don’t tell him no. There was always a plan for me to come out [to the West Coast] during vacation time. So I did that. And it was just great. We just, like I said, it’s like we had known each other forever. I mean we are best friends. And he took me to meet his mom and family. And I got to meet his kids. But no marriage for me—not now anyway.

Ross, a 40-year-old, divorced father who had custody of his 10-year-old son, said,

There is such a difference between actually talking to somebody and putting things in print. You can make yourself sound like I could be Joe Big Stud or whatever on the Internet. Then when we met, we'd see if we got along.

Greg, a 21-year-old, never married student, said,

Every few weeks we'd say "Hey, how's it going?" I told her from day one we'd never know each other's real names, where we lived, or anything about it. She didn't know how old I was or if I was married or single or anything. But we loved talking, and we talked about meeting.

Although many respondents initially wanted freedom from commitment, they liked spending a lot of time online getting to know each other. Often after a period of months, they decided to meet face to face. Some changed their minds about having no commitment and increased their involvement, whereas others concluded that they had too little in common to justify continuing the relationship. Thus, as with traditional dating, online daters seemed to want to get to know their partners better before committing.

Online Dating as an Adventure

Anyone who has ever experienced a blind date knows it is a gamble. According to Balint (cited in Goffman, 1967), the mere possibility of having a "new sexual partner is a thrill" (p. 197). People have a deep-seated need to experience adventure and excitement (Simmel, 1911). This need was reflected in our respondents' desires to seek dates online for the thrill. One interviewee communicated with five people at a time on the Internet because it was "more exciting." Robert, a 19-year-old, never married student, explained, "For people like me who had never even been to Buffalo, going to meet someone from out of the area was a way out of here."

Greta, the 43-year-old, married woman, described her online partner:

He e-mailed me a picture of himself, and he was gorgeous! He would send me flowers, you know, over the Internet, and really sweet letters that said a lot of nice things. He said that I was beautiful and that he wanted to meet me in person. Then we exchanged phone numbers, and he'd call me, or I'd call him when my husband wasn't home. Then I could hear his voice and not just see his face and what he was writing me. He bought me a bracelet for my birthday.

Martha, a 25-year-old, never married woman, said,

When I went out there [Los Angeles], we went swimming on Memorial Day. So I got a really good taste of the ocean then, and it was fun. And they had jetties out there, and we spent hours and hours on those jetties, and that's fun. And I went back out in August, and he was teaching me to body board. And I've never done that, and it was fun. I mean it's what you do in California.

Online dating allowed some of these individuals to travel to meet their partners. For Greta, who was married, online dating gave her an opportunity to perform behaviors that would have been detrimental to her marriage if she had engaged in them with a real-life boyfriend.

Online Dating as Romantic Fantasy

Internet dating may be construed as a type of romantic fantasy in which individuals construct ideal partners based on their online interactions, which can be very exciting.

Playing a social role on the Internet begins with an online version of constructing a social front. Constructing social fronts is of course not unique to the Internet, but their form is defined by the medium. An Internet social front includes one's avowed gender and age, usually as listed in a profile filed with whatever Web institution hosts the social interaction. It may include a Web page containing edited pictures, prose, and in some cases animation and music to project the desired self. These pieces of sign equipment (Goffman, 1959) are supposed to convey something readily recognizable to the respondent. The fronts created by some individuals often appeal to common stereotypes that may reflect the ideals of the individual or group.

The simplification of the perception of online partners resulted in many respondents reporting that they built inaccurate pictures in their minds about the type of people they were interacting with before they met them. Although some said these pictures were put together through interactions taking as long as a year, face-to-face meetings were often not as imagined. Anna felt that visits introduced a different reality:

I think that because of the way we met and the way we talked to each other that I had confused the fantasy with reality, so I expected him to be more like what we were pretending than everyday life.

Marie, a 28-year-old, divorced woman, felt the same way:

Well, see the thing is in reality I really didn't know him cause if you're with someone on a vacation kind of basis, not a normal, not under normal circumstances, it's not the same as you know, dating a neighbor, seeing when he's having a bad day. I don't think that we really necessarily represented ourselves 100% [on the Internet]. So it lasted 4 months [when she stayed with him] and then I left. But see, after I got there, he started saying things like "Don't dump me; please marry me" as soon as I got there, and I was very wary of that . . . of comments like that. I wanted to go a little slower. He was desperate to have someone permanently, and that made me nervous.

Joyce, a 40-year-old social worker, said,

There is no real environment. So, people make a fake environment. It's an artificial sense of intimacy. Talk relationships are the drama people are missing in their lives. You can be anything you want to be. It's exciting like a first kiss.

Helen, a 37-year-old, divorced woman, talked about the seemingly limitless possibilities and romantic game playing:

The good part was that I had a lot of fun. When we met, he said to me, "What are you doing this weekend?" I said, "I am renting movies." He said, "Is that all?" I said, "OK, in reality I'm going to be on my yacht in the South of France." And he went, "Oh, sounds like a wonderful fantasy," and so then we just took it from there. We made nicknames for each other, and so when we would run into each other [in a chat room], we would pretend we were traveling somewhere shopping or on another trip or on a yacht, and so we had a fantasy that was, ya know, just made up. We'd be on

our yacht, and we'd dismiss the staff and pop open another bottle of champagne. And he'd look into my beautiful eyes, and I'd feed him a strawberry, and he'd say, "Oh, here's a bauble I got for you from Cartier." It was sort of a joke just made up about a lot of things, and then we decided that we had to meet.

Reid created a fantasy in which his online partners were interested in communicating only with him. He said,

Dating online can be unpleasant. People end up being mean, strange and desperate. Sometimes I find out they are talking to other people online even at the same time they are talking with me because they get mixed up and call me by someone else's name. I guess I thought they were interested in me alone.

One of the biggest problems Internet daters face is that there may be no magic when they finally meet. These encounters challenge the roles previously projected online and can give rise to incidents needing solutions that may not be at hand. Joe, a 56-year-old, never married man, said,

My main thought was she's a nice person but there's not any chemistry and how can I get out of the situation without hurting her and embarrassing myself.

Harry, a 29-year-old, never married man, had a similar experience:

She was a really decent lady, but the sparks just weren't there—you either click or you don't. Like I say, on type we clicked. I mean it was like great, but once we met in person, it was a downfall; it was like, oh well, she was a nice lady, you know. I mean I still write to her now and again, and in fact I will this weekend, just because she is nice to talk to, but we just don't match up in any way. At first, though, I thought, "Wow, this is pretty good; maybe this is what I have been looking for." Once we met in person, "No!" I had already told myself, "Yes!" Everybody always looks better in print, but you still get your hopes up. And uh, it was quite a letdown.

Joyce, the 40-year-old, never married, heavyset woman, said it was risky to meet offline:

I take a great risk when I meet someone face-to-face. Not a physical fear, but rejection. I don't want to be rejected.

In real life, people role-play by taking on certain characteristics in some situations and different characteristics in others (Waskul & Lust, 2004). Online dating allows people to create personas that are less constrained than in real life because dating partners know very little about the person on the other side of the screen. Unfortunately, when online partners meet for the first time, both are usually disappointed because the online personas are never identical to the people who created them.

Trust, Risk, and Lying Online

Trust may not be important in an interaction when compared to that of opening an opportunity for taking a gamble. Goffman (1967) believed, "Chance lies in the attitude of the individual himself—his creative capacity to redefine the world around him into its decisional poten-

tialities” (p. 201). Goffman saw all forms of action as gambling. Similarly, Simmel (1911) argued that when a person is offered a token of trust, the recipient is expected to respond in kind. When people place online personals ads, those who respond may be perceived as offering a gift; the implication is made that “I trust you enough to treat me well.”

Modern society’s values do not foster the development of trusting behavior. In the United States, capitalism and rational choice promote selfish exploitive interactions (Deutsch, 1986; Hardin, 2001). They also encourage “calculating and self-interested modern persons [who] can not be trusted and do not trust others” (Misztal, 1996, pp. 39-40). Beck (1992) observed that our society focuses on technological risk and termed modern America a “risk society.” He saw the resulting social dynamic as isolating individuals and creating a large number of unattached people. They are vulnerable, and for them, “an intensification of the friendship network remains indispensable” (p. 122). Even though interacting with strangers online introduces many unknowns, a lack of a friendship network drives people to become involved with Internet dating.

The Internet has been described as a “revolutionary social space” (Hardey, 2002, p. 577) in which old rules for social interaction are discarded in favor of new ones that may be better suited to the technology. However, Hardey (2002) found that Internet daters’ interactions are often guided by “rituals and norms that protect the self” (p. 577), which was originally suggested by Goffman (1967). The technology of the Internet may present new challenges to building intimacy and avoiding rejection, but the basic motivations for protecting the self remain. New risks inspire new coping strategies to maintain an environment of trust. Such an environment is necessary to maintain the solidarity of society, according to Simmel (1978). Giddens (1990) emphasized a need to establish trust among individuals and observed that the alternative to trust is inaction, which in itself may be risky because if we do not take the risk of interacting, we will not develop a supportive friendship network. He saw relationships as “ties based upon trust, where trust is not pre-given but worked upon, and where the work involved means a mutual process of self-disclosure” (p. 121).

To establish close relationships within the constraints of the Internet, people use creative methods to identify themselves as cool and trustworthy. Emoticons, abbreviations, unconventional spellings, and specialized grammar are used to weed out people who do not share others’ realities or ways of being (Waskul, 2003).¹ Turkle (1995) observed that through photographs, profiles, and narratives, “people create and cycle through a sometimes surprising range of online identities” (p. 10).

Indicators allow people to weigh the goodness of the total strangers with whom they choose to communicate. Daters respond to cues to ascertain another’s socioeconomic status, attitude, concept of self, and trustworthiness. Early Internet dating negotiations depend on projecting an alluring social face through the medium. The Internet dater faces an ironic dilemma: The dater’s primary task is to meet someone to form a relationship, but that meeting will unmask the dater and destroy any false pretenses. Daters create and invest in a persona while knowing that it may eventually be destroyed.

Online, people commonly misrepresent their appearance, making it more flattering (Clark, 1998). One sample of college students reported lying about their age, weight, and marital status (Knox et al., 2001). They may also misrepresent their gender (Danet, 1998; Knox et al., 2001). Misrepresentation in online social interactions seems so natural that few seem to give much thought to what usually could be dismissed as a makeover of one’s per-

sona. Given the limited amount of information available to respondents about each other in Internet interactions and their transitory nature, deception is common.

Most respondents said they had been lied to more than once, and some reported surprise when this happened. Robin, the 32-year-old, single woman, wanted to trust people:

I was raised to believe and trust in people when they tell you things. So it was very hard for me to believe that someone could play on another person's feelings the way he did with me [a previous Internet relationship had not worked, and Robin believes he had not told her the truth about being truly interested in meeting her and being there for her]. But I have accepted the fact that it happened, and I have moved on with my life and met [also online] someone better. The only advice I have for people who are thinking of Internet dating is just be careful. There is a Web site out there where you can have someone's background checked out to see if they are telling you the truth. In the back of my mind I had a feeling he [her previous online date] was lying, but for some reason I didn't want to face the reality of it.

Ironically, Internet interactions often pose inconsequential risks for the same reasons that their authenticity and veracity are questionable; identities are customarily disguised behind coded usernames, and the distances between the numerous participants are typically great. Much of Internet relating involves sorting through databases. "There is a button you can hit . . . I must have gone through about 10 to 15 different people," remarked Robin. Trust in the people whose Web profiles she accepted or rejected does not seem to have been her first priority. She trusted her search strategy. Instead of trusting others, Robin placed her trust in her system. This system engenders patterns of negotiation.

Frank, a 35-year-old, divorced man, said,

When it comes down to it, men and women can say and do whatever they want. They cannot send a picture and lead people to believe certain things about them, like where the potential relationship can go, and like you don't actually know if you are talking to a woman or a guy. I have lied to people myself.

Mort, an 18-year-old, gay student, said, "Someone told me, and I found Gerry's [his partner] picture online in a dating service looking to meet someone!" Mort and Gerry broke up over this incident.

Most men and women in this study took physical and emotional risks to gain trust and were willing to continue seeking online relationships even after others had lied to them. A few teenagers and adults who did not want committed relationships took fewer risks by taking on unrealistic roles, not being open, and postponing face-to-face meetings. Others developed symbolic trust indicators to lessen the consequential risks of interacting.

Indicators of Trust

Berger and Luckmann (1967) believed people decide to trust based on intuitive impressions that we refer to as "trust indicators." This research uncovered the presence of early and late trust indicators as part of early and late negotiating strategies that serve to minimize harm to the self.

The development of trust in an online dating relationship requires not only the assurance that the other means no physical harm but also that the other will treat the online persona with

ritual deference. A remark such as, “I did not know you were so large; do you use Photoshop?” would be a devastating blow.² This is one of the reasons some Internet daters postpone or evade face-to-face meetings.

Susan, a 30-year-old, divorced woman, was asked by her friend Bette to be a chaperone on a first face-to-face meeting between Bette and a prospective male partner. Bette had represented herself as svelte but was actually heavy. After the meeting, the prospective partner broke off the relationship with Bette and e-mailed Susan. Susan admitted she then went out with the man who had dumped her friend.

Younger respondents were concerned with the hermeneutics of keystrokes and codes. Arlene, a 17-year-old interviewed by the first author, used *LOL* (laughing out loud), *BRB* (be right back), and other abbreviations when chatting. We found younger people used this coded language more frequently than did older individuals. Respondents who were not adept in the use of such codes exposed their lack of grace in social interaction and were weeded out. Participants selected for interactions of usually only a few minutes duration were chosen many times based on one word or the speed of their typing. More mature respondents had different early indicators. Lisa, a 41-year-old, divorced woman, said,

I don't use chat rooms much anymore. They are filled with a vast bastion of people looking for absolutely nothing. They are “players.” They are talking to you while having cybersex with someone else and talking with a third person in another room at the same time. If you get serious, they don't like it. They use romance and dating rooms, sex cams, interest and game rooms, and they chat on the side at the same time.

Her friend Dana agreed that dating rooms are safer:

Dating rooms are safer. You can find a picture. You can look at a profile. If they only ask “ASL” [age, sex, and location], it usually means, “Can we talk about sex?” So you can forget about those people. But, if they show some wit, creativity, and intelligence, like, for example, one guy from Norway talked about the political climate in his profile. I like people who have interesting jobs and make literary allusions. Besides, dating rooms charge \$20 or more a month, and chat rooms or pal talks are basically free. So, people are usually more serious in dating rooms.

Chet, a 28-year-old, divorced man, said chat rooms were for mindless, immature people. He used dating services also:

I look for women who are funny, sarcastic, you know, intellectual, sharp-witted. I can't start a conversation with someone who says she wants to come over and have sex the next day. Or the stereotypic interaction with emphasis on age, hobbies It's mindless, immature.

Janet, an 18-year-old, female student, said she could tell right away if it was going to work:

You talk to them. If they answer with one-word sentences . . . if the [online] conversation is really unbalanced, I look and see how much I have said and how much they have said. If I tell them what my field of study is and they don't understand anything at all about it Most people in chat rooms are uneducated, working class, and just plain dumb. You need to weed them out.

Respondents used indicators contained in e-mailed or posted pictures to help evaluate their potential mates and attempted to determine their age and degree of affluence. Clothing, hairstyle, and projected lifestyle were augured from photographs.

Jessie, a 24-year-old woman, focused on economic status:

I met this man online in a church chat room. He was from South Africa, and he sent me e-mail pictures where he was standing in front of a very expensive car. His clothes were expensive-looking, too, and his house was like a mansion. He said he was a professional businessman with lots of money. He said he wanted to come over here to meet me and my family. He had never been in the States before. I told my mother about him.

Other indicators deal with time. Through face-to-face relating, we have come to expect a certain pattern of flow through which a relationship develops. This pattern is reflected through the timing of conversation and self-disclosure. Often on the Internet there is a pressure to disclose much in a short time to establish trust and kinship quickly. Some respondents dislike this pressure. Julian, 25-year-old salesman, observed,

Internet people are more desperate; things move fast in weird ways. People put pictures up for everyone to see, but you don't know their personal mannerisms. Do they smell bad? Have a funny laugh? Do they bite their nails? The beginning is different. It [meeting online] sets you off on a weird path. You get way too intense too soon. There's like a speed to get to know each other. All you have is conversation that becomes exaggerated and magnified. It becomes drama. People attach deep meaning and feeling prematurely. Feelings get hurt. Self-revelation leads to distortion of the picture. One woman I met online said, "I think I am ready for a relationship now." This scared me. I wanted to just maybe have at least one date in person and get to know her better before committing to a relationship.

Although this respondent felt it was not a good practice to discuss personal matters too soon, we observed him doing just that in his second e-mail to a woman he had just recently met online.

To develop intimacy to create a bond with an online partner, Internet daters felt pressed to self-disclose as much information as they could in the shortest possible time, though letting people know one's shortcomings begs rejection. Furthermore, disclosing too much too fast violates social conventions and norms. The woman who told Julian, "I think I am ready for a relationship now," scared her potential partner away.

Part of this pressure to relate in a hurry came from the medium itself. The Internet filters out social cues that would be present in face-to-face communication (e.g., Baym, 1998; Hardey, 2002; Waskul, 2003). The lack of nonverbal and paraverbal cues requires Internet daters to use emoticons and other contrivances, which are not necessarily good substitutes for personal presence, to fill the void. In long-term online relationships, telephone conversations augmented the Internet. The telephone felt warmer and less technological to some respondents and was perceived as a transition toward meeting in person. People must not sound "too good to be true," as Phyllis remarked. Ironically, goodness and trueness were not entirely compatible when the faces of both correspondents were at stake.

Jerry, a 38-year-old, divorced father of two, also expressed reticence about self-disclosure at an early stage but said it was hard to be superficial:

Although I think it is a greater advantage to be open and honest online, it is risky to expose oneself honestly at the start. Control is an issue . . . if I hold back and don't reveal myself as a very sensitive person . . . If I meet online and I am open and honest about my emotional needs, who I am, or situations I don't want to be involved in, it is a turnoff to some women. They think I am wimpy or gay.

Later negotiations were conducted on the telephone and in person, and the trust indicators in these negotiations are familiar to conventional courtship. Goffman's (1959, 1967) frame for social interaction is applicable to describing late negotiations in Internet dating. He argued that social face is customarily seated in face-to-face interactions where the actors can view each other's body language and expression. In daily interactions with strangers, much of our decision to trust depends on how the other presents himself or herself in the theater of social interaction.

Once Internet daters find each other compatible, they move on to the next step of relationship building. This involves spending more time getting to know one another to build trust. Basic interpersonal trust is either contractual trust based on social contracts as in family relationships or trust based on time in relations (Govier, 1992). Most respondents liked the time they spent getting to know each other. They said this time helped develop trust and intimacy. Robin said it seemed safer to get to know people over time:

I guess I chose the Internet over meeting someone in a bar or on a blind date because to me it felt a little safer. In a bar you are meeting someone and you get the impression that they want just a one-night stand and that is it. That is not how I was raised. On the Internet you could talk to this person for as long as you wanted to before you went ahead and met that person.

Josh, a 56-year-old, never married man, also felt he had developed trust during time spent online:

I felt I knew her even though we had not met yet. She was not a stranger. We had spoken over the phone and e-mailed over a period of months. I was not afraid at all. It didn't even enter my mind. I didn't have any reason to believe she would be any different in person than she appeared to be.

When respondents were comfortable with one another online, they wanted to increase their amount of personal contact. Reid said, "Before I meet someone, I call them on the phone. The phone is an in-between space."

Nancy, a 25-year-old, never married woman, spent 6 months talking on the phone:

Once you find someone you enjoy talking with online, you want to get out of that scenario and talk with them by phone. Like first I made my selection in a few minutes, but then we needed to talk by phone before I would consider meeting him in person. This took about 6 months.

Phyllis, the 20-year-old student, explained that conversation on the phone with a potential partner was a good indicator of reliability:

I think it was talking to him, hearing his voice, hearing how he described himself. I think if people sound too good to be true, then they are. They are making up stuff. When you talk to someone and they sound real, i.e., they are not talking about how much money they make, you know, how

their parents are in Venice and they brought them back a car, you know what I mean? If they are just saying normal things and they talk about their real problems aren't so grand and they sound like normal everyday problems and they sound kind of like you and you can relate to them.

After interacting on the phone, the next step is meeting in person. The transition from technologically mediated communication to physical encounter is the riskiest step in the process because it requires trust. According to Molm, Takahashi, and Peterson (2000), the development of trust is an incremental process of reciprocal interactions based on previously established experience:

Through numerous experiences with specific others who behave in a trustworthy manner under conditions of risk, we may come to expect that others, with whom we have had no direct experience, will also be worthy of our trust. In this way reciprocal exchange relations can contribute to a more generalized sense of trust in others. Establishing such a trusting environment can be a great advantage to society; individuals are free to explore new relations and take advantage of new opportunities. (p. 1425)

Janet, a 25-year-old single mother, said going to men's homes is "kinda dangerous," but she did it anyway because they had talked on the phone for 5 months:

Cause I was 18 like when I started, so, um, the first person I met, in person, it was kinda dangerous because I went to his house. It was stupid; it was really stupid, but he has been one of my best friends now for nearly 7 years. It was really crazy. I would never suggest anyone do that, and I would never do it again, but it just happened that way. I talked to him 2 weeks is all, and then I gave him my phone number, and he started calling me, and I probably talked to him 4 or 5 months on the phone, and then I decided . . . it was spring break and I had free time. I told a couple of my friends at the dorm just so somebody knew where I was. I ended up staying there my entire spring break. I didn't know him when I saw him. I actually watched him check his mail and walk around his car, and I didn't know it was him, and he saw my car with Pennsylvania plates, so he walks over and he says, "Are you coming in?" I was gonna watch him for a while, and I saw him watering his flowers and I actually talked to a couple of his neighbors before he came home.

Discussion

The Internet has opened a new avenue for romantic interaction. In the present study, Internet daters reported being able to reach a larger pool of potential partners and experiencing increased freedom of choice among partners. The Internet also raises new issues of negotiating risk and establishing trust. Respondents said they were willing to take risks to take advantage of the new courting opportunities offered by this new technology. Some risks involved physical danger, and others involved loss of face and possible rejection, though interviewees developed rationales and strategies to deal with these risks to trust that they would have positive experiences.

Dating online modified gendered interactions by allowing women to behave more assertively and men to be more open. It also necessitated the development of new strategies based on keystrokes, codes interpreting online photographs, and reading user profiles to develop trust and confirm compatibility. In Internet interactions, gains and losses are only symbolic, and rejection by an online entity identified only as "suv4" can represent no great material

loss. It is this very abstraction that motivates people to use the Internet for dating to avoid stereotyped gender roles and the pain of rejection.

The interrelating of Internet daters also reflects old patterns and problems common to all forms of courtship. Even if they do not find objectification and harassment online, meeting offline often brings objectification or harassment into a formerly nonjudgmental relationship. There is irony in seeking a way out of loneliness through a medium that ensures the insularity of participants and perpetuates gender stereotyping once participants meet.

Several old problems remain in Internet dating. It is easy for people to lie to each other, and appearance issues and shyness do not completely disappear when dating online. Rejection and its emotional pain are ultimately a part of Internet dating as much as of dating that is entirely face to face from the start. The fundamental issues of trust, self-presentation, and compatibility carry over from conventional courtship into its Internet variant.

The need to obtain companionship motivates people to seek out romantic relationships in a variety of ways, and the Internet is merely the latest technological development used by people to assist their romantic goals. Participants in the current study reported reducing their loneliness, obtaining comfort, and finding fun and excitement. These benefits appeared to outweigh the risks.

Notes

1. Emoticons are small icons bearing emotive faces. These can be inserted into text messages.
2. Adobe Photoshop is a very popular photograph manipulation program that allows users to drastically alter photographs and cinematographic video.

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