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Online dating:

The unethical business of selling love

This is going to sound strange, but from an economic standpoint online dating and rape whistles are very similar. The point of a rape whistle is to reduce the amount of rape, but reducing the amount of rape will reduce the amount of rape whistles. It’s an industry which puts itself out of business. Online dating should be the same way because a good online dating service should in theory make its users not need its services anymore. The online dating industry has been around for around and thriving for around twenty-five years (1). In 2016 surveys approximated that there were around fifty-five million single Americans and that of those ninety percent had at least tried online dating (2). The online dating industry has been growing rapidly in the past few years with no signs of stopping (3). The problem that is the online dating industry isn’t purely the deceit of the companies but can also be attributed to the indecisiveness of the user base.

Part of the problem with online dating lies with its user base and the fact that dating conventions have changed over the years. Relative to any time in human history, the past thirty years or so have been the most accepting in terms of sexuality and promiscuity. In the past one hundred years, the average age for marriage has gone up by two years for men and four years for women (4). Compared to last generation, fifteen percent less people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-three are married (5). Now part of these numbers come from the fact that this generation has more people attending college. Despite that, these numbers show that this is a generation of casual encounters which is one of the main reasons for the sudden surge in the popularity of online dating. These dating apps and websites make money through subscriptions, they usually have a free portion or trial of their service that can be enhanced through a monthly subscription.

There’s nothing inherently wrong with casual encounters or online dating services being used for that, the problem is how the companies go about making their money and what kind of users they lure into paying for their services. A good example of this is Tinder, the dating app known for originating the swiping trend in dating apps. This was what initially made Tinder unique and the company knows it, in an interview with *Wired* magazine founder and ex-CEO of Tinder Sean Rad says “You’d ask someone, “Have you heard of this app called Tinder” …” the thing where you swipe?” (6). The point is that Tinder isn’t popular because it’s algorithm matches people better than its competitor’s algorithms. After a few years when they had attracted millions of users and billions of swipes (6) they introduced a premium subscription service to their free app. The subscription did not add benefits it merely allowed users to do all the things they were doing before except they had to pay a monthly fee. Free users accounts became restricted in terms of how many ‘swipes’ they were given. That’s false advertising and Tinder was sued for fraud on the grounds of using bait and switch tactics to essentially force users into paying for a service without giving any previous notice of this change coming (7). Tinder is just one example of how online dating companies unethically suck users into paying for their service.

Another issue with online dating is the algorithms. The algorithms are complicated equations that online dating services use to determine similarities between users. They then use this data to determine which other users will be shown to a specific user. It may also use factors such as how many people have viewed your profile or looked at your pictures or indicated interest in you. As is Tinder has stated “You might not realize it, but… [each user] is assigned an internal rating” (8). Tinder has stated that they believe this internal ranking to be a general measure of “desirability” (8). It’s a vicious cycle because not getting matches will lower a user’s chances of getting matches. The problem is that a lot of the paid services are advertised with the message of getting more matches or at least raising your chances. What they’re doing is more akin to multiplying both side of a fraction by the same number, it looks bigger but it hasn’t changed. Legally this isn’t false advertising because they don’t promise anything they just say it could increase a user’s chances which is going to be true for users that already have a lot of activity. But it won’t help the people who aren’t faring well on these platforms, the ones who are most likely to purchase it.

The biggest part of the problem is that the state of the industry makes solving the problem impossible. For example, why would a sci-fi lover search through millions of users across hundreds of dating platforms when they could just go on Trek passions and be ensured that every user is a sci-fi lover like themselves (9). There are niche dating platforms for anything that be imagined ranging from The League which vets every user to ensure they meet a minimum standard to Bristlr a platform for finding bearded men (9). This is an issue because “the pool of potential daters… [has] been subdivided into stupidly specific zones” (9). There are so many platforms and so many different groups using these platforms they’ll never be able to unite. The problem isn’t the number of disgruntled users it’s the combination of the amount who would be willing to do something about it and the fact that they’ve been segregated into these niche sections. It would only take one app’s tactics to be found illegal before all of them changed but the push for change isn’t there yet.

In many industries, it isn’t the idea that’s bad or unethical it’s the business practices that evolve from turning the idea into a business that make it so bad. A good example of this is medication. The problem in this case is that dating platforms merely provide a service, not a product. They don’t offer guarantees which legally means they don’t have any liability for misuse or dissatisfaction with their product. If a serial killer were to murder people using a dating app, the company would have no legal responsibility for those murders. They might not even be legally required to shut the killers account down. The only way to change these practices is perform a large-scale embargo on these company’s products. With the fragmentation of the user base and the average user satisfaction, it won’t happen anytime soon.

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