**Introduction**

I. Alev Degim and James Johnson

*“Matchmaking and introductory intermediaries, particularly for the purpose of facilitating marriage, have been a component of the marriage-courtship market long before the emergence of online dating. In addition, computers have been used for romantic matching, both commercially and in university settings, for over 60 years.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

This book aims to bring together articles across the world on online dating exercises as a social, economical and political phenomenon and define online dating as an important experience that should be considered as a ground for research. As the Internet’s influence on social life and behaviors increase [[2]](#footnote-2),[[3]](#footnote-3). The virtual realm is becoming our daily reality [[4]](#footnote-4),[[5]](#footnote-5). So much so that dating digitally has permeated social networking territories from the very beginning stages. Looking at the changes and similarities between old and new behaviors adopted online and offline, this book aims to find commonalities and discrepancies between cultures and nations on online dating preferences, shedding light on the influences of new media on personal and interpersonal levels. This book aims to highlight the importance of online dating as a site for analysis, as well as establishing the boundaries for such research. The articles show that online dating can be studied both qualitatively and quantitatively, using existing methodologies as venues to understand and adopt this new way of social engagement.

Online dating and online courtship has been a prominent part of the daily experience of most users over the years that followed the proliferation of Internet and Web 2.0.[[6]](#footnote-6). Courtship is not a new phenomenon, dating is a part of the social structure of many cultural systems. The introduction of new technologies has changed the way we interact with others, despite early negative stigmatization; forms of online dating have been integrated into the social structure of various cultural spheres fairly quickly. The anonymity aspect that had been prevalent in the early days of blogs and forums slowly lead the way to a shift from this dualistic representation model of a fake online self to an overlapping of the online and real identities. This shift can visibly be seen in the examples of online dating and courtship websites as in the recent years companies specifically created for this purpose required real information from their users. The way media in general represented online dating, especially TV shows, labeled it as “unsafe” and “sketchy”: an article on Huffington Post sheds light on the dangers of online dating especially for women[[7]](#footnote-7), as the stigma for online dating slowly declines in media. This portrayal of online dating produced a stigma for the users over the years, the TV shows and other media often labeled users as “anti-social”: according to a 2013 report from the Pew Research Center, 21 percent of polled Internet users agree that “People who use online dating sites are desperate.”[[8]](#footnote-8). This type of atmosphere however, is changing rapidly as the Social Networking Sites (that are defined as “... web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.“) [[9]](#footnote-9) are becoming an eminent part of our daily lives, since they provide an online social experience that is not “dangerous”. The increase in theseand other online social experiences[[10]](#footnote-10) began to change the nature of daily interpersonal interactions. This change has allowed the users to seek intimate relationships online more often. “According to a recent estimate based on ComScore Networks’ analysis of Internet users’ browsing behavior, 40 million Americans visited online dating sites in 2003, generating $214 million in revenues, making online dating the most important subscription-based business on the Internet.”[[11]](#footnote-11).

**Defining Online Courtship/Dating:**

*Courtship* typically refers to the stage where two people interact with one another in an effort to get to know each other romantically; this stage typically precedes the traditional engagement and marriage stages. Digital courtship refers to the mixed-mode relationships that begin with online communication with the expectation of an offline romantic encounter. We define Online Courtship, as the romantic relationships founded on online environments - be it on Social Networking Sites (SNS) or forums or on online dating websites, blogs, mobile apps or even the comment section of a post on a Youtube video- that leads to an experience of sharing intimate or romantic thoughts, ideas and emotions via the offered features of the medium that has the potential to lead to an offline interaction.

A typical definition for online dating would only encompass the online dating sites and exclude all other online platforms[[12]](#footnote-12). This type of definition leads to a problem as it is only focusing on the websites tailored for the purpose of online dating and excluding a vast majority of online courtship. The previous definitions fail to acknowledge other online venues and hence limit the boundaries of the field for research. Hence a broader definition is needed along with identifying the boundaries of the specific study to insure a better perspective on online courtship.

As we are becoming increasingly connected to the online world, social interactions of any kind also comes into the realm with us. Online studies in general have focused thus far on a variety of different issues and subjects such as online bullying[[13]](#footnote-13), self-efficacy and motivation effects in online environments[[14]](#footnote-14), YouTube studies[[15]](#footnote-15), video spheres[[16]](#footnote-16) and alternative social media institutions[[17]](#footnote-17). The venue for studying online dating is fairly new to the field and previous studies on online dating focus on topics such as self-presentation and deception of online profiles[[18]](#footnote-18),[[19]](#footnote-19),[[20]](#footnote-20), the match-making algorithm and process[[21]](#footnote-21), homophily on online dating sites[[22]](#footnote-22) and profile creation[[23]](#footnote-23). These various studies help define online courtship as a field of research and acknowledge online courtship as an important part of online studies.

The site of study then becomes the defining feature of the specific research. A good and functional definition of online dating sites is provided by Rosen et. al. as follows: “Online dating sites are all similarly structured. Participants provide a photograph and answer an array of questions including geographic location, age, weight or body type, education level, income, and other relevant demographics...”[[24]](#footnote-24). The system is dependent on statistical codes running in the background that provide the “perfect match” for the user by looking at the variables. As the sites rely on technology and the social context, the experience of one user will be rather different than the other (in a scenario where the person who uses these websites is located in a remote place that has few participants, the odds are not in their favor and hence the whole experience would be different from another user); as in the examples in this volume (see Aras, Levin, Wen, DeSeta), it can have different connotations for different cultures and contexts and hence a fixed experience is almost impossible to achieve. In more traditional societies, online courtship can take on the meaning of finding a partner in marriage (China, Turkey and India are a good example for this, see Vikram, Ozgun and Fu) whereas in other cultures it can become a place to seek one-night stands or webcam sex or to seek company to pass time. These different examples show the fluid nature of the experience of online “courtship” or “dating” within the globalizing world, as the local and global definitions amalgamate in virtual environments.

Digital intimacy has become a normative mode of social interaction within other mediums online, such as SNS and mobile applications. Rosen et al. gives examples of studies that have found the increase in such online environments: an early study shows that 75% of online-formed relationships became “proper relationships” [[25]](#footnote-25). As online dating becomes a prominent part of social life, it is even more crucial for social studies to research and analyze this phenomenon.

The way we define Online Courtship helps link different parts of the phenomenon and give a clear picture of a new approach. We establish through the articles in this volume that the multifaceted structure of the online dating environment enables its study with different methodologies. However it is important to define boundaries for research; ethical concerns should be addressed before the study is conducted (which was done in all studies in this volume) and draw the limits for the specific study as the lines between websites and SNS or apps can be blurred at times.

Online dating sites may alleviate some of the spatial constraints experienced when participating in traditional face-to-face courtship, but contemporary scholarship interrogates the constraints of this socio-technological space as an environment of existing beliefs and behaviors that, at times, maintain a hetero-normative hierarchy. Identity construction in online dating environments is impacted by social norms offline. Within the digital dating realm self-presentation and self-disclosure strategies are adapted to gain the attention of potential online daters[[26]](#footnote-26). Singles utilize online dating interfaces with preset attributes, creating their online identity with identity markers provided by the site. Online personal ads are user-generated dossiers aimed to construct online daters’ identity. This scholarship examines online dating sites as social sites where technology sustains and reproduces existing gender roles. Recent online dating research also highlights the limitations of gender construction and the marginalization that occurs within hetero-normative dating spaces[[27]](#footnote-27).

Early Internet and gender identity research analyzed men and women experimenting with the gender roles of gaming avatars[[28]](#footnote-28). Online daters have substituted avatars with profile pictures and personal summaries. Internet scholars are examining gender constructions in online spaces, more specifically within online dating environments. Explorative research analyzes self-presentation and self-disclosure strategies that reproduce hetero-normative hierarchies in online spaces. Gender equality continues to be a topic of interests in many spaces across the world. Computer-mediated-communication within the Online dating context is another environment investigated to determine whether or not these are safe spaces for LGBTQ online identities. Literature on online dating has not focused on different parts of the world. Dating practices vary from one cultural context to the next, different cultures view romance through different religious, political, and gendered lenses. This volume contributes to the existing body of study that exists on online dating and expands upon the different dynamics within the World Wide Web by asking questions of different identities and nationalities. Previous research has not answered the following question adequately as of yet: If online dating sites are socio-technological spaces, what happens when the space is geared towards a particular demographic? Who is left out? What are the social implications of these online spaces of desire?

This volume includes different methodologies and approaches to examine online courtship. Murat Akser looks at the history of online dating and identifies how the research field has dealt with this phenomenon. It is through his analysis that we see the various fields of research and the ways they dealt with specific cases. He predicts the future of the research field to move forward with the introduction of social networking sites and other technology.

Gabriele de Seta and Ge Zhang’s “Stranger Stranger or Lonely Lonely? Young Chinese and Dating Apps between the Locational, the Mobile and the Social” is an ethnographic study about a location-based social app – Momo, and the floating population who use it. Rather than ‘a one-night stand mythical device’ as portrayed in media narratives, Momo users’ use of the mobile app emanates the immobility of “strangers” in populated metropolises. Studying apps specifically on online dating is a new approach and is a crucial part of the discussion of the contemporary social context of online dating.

Unlike in the West, courtship and marriage convey more social pressures to Chinese in the dating age. Dating websites and broadcasting media reap millions in this gold mine. Caiyun Wen’s case study of three leading Chinese dating websites; Baihe, Jiayuan and Zhenai brought us to see their “secrets” of profit making with a Chinese touch. Yann L. Chin examined how *wanglian*, or online romance, is conceptualized by Chinese Internet users based on two key constructs: ‘Platonic emotional love’ and ‘play’. Her categorization of online daters as pragmatist fantasists, skeptics and romantic realists is more than a fun of oxymoron’s but an in-depth analysis of the dichotomous and interconnected reality and virtuality and a modern Chinese society where materialistic prosperity and spiritual emptiness co-exist. Sheena Raja and Bryce J. Renninger’s in-depth interviews scrutinized the interplay of people, technology and media brought by globalization and its influence to South Asian diasporas in the New York City metro area in their pursuit of courtship. Computer-mediated communication remediates matchmaking, biodata of online daters and the subjectivity of diasporas. Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi delineated how married, divorced, unmarried, widowed, awaiting divorce, and annulled Indians seek partners at three online matrimonial sites – Shaadi, BharatMatrimony and Jeevansathi. Through this lens, the dynamics between online and offline dating activities, technology and individuals, and tradition and modernity in Indian society is presented to us.

The ubiquitous nature of technology often blurs the lines, in some cases completely rewrite, society’s popular social norms. This holds true in online courtship. The emergence of online courtship has gained attention from media as well as new sociological and behavioral studies examining humans’ participation and practices in mixed mode relationships (relationships that begin online with the expectation of an intimate offline encounter). This section consists of case studies examining the social and legal boundaries that helped shape the business of personal ads, dating sites as doorways, Facebook as an adolescent dating scene, and mapping dating culture within digital communities.

This volume explores digital courtship across mediums. Harry Cocks provides a historical trajectory of mediated courtship in Western Europe, exploring third party involvement in courtship, which is not a modern phenomenon. Western Europe has a history of third party involvement with courtship ranging from arranged marriages, via parents and kin, and through professional matchmakers. Web 2.0 has turned Internet consumers into producers by allowing users to generate content. The Internet has created a communication culture of mutual and permanent evaluation. Ramón Reichert discusses dating maps as a way to analyze dating cultures as digital communities consisting of user-generated content creating a feedback loop that results in media-specific forms of subjectification. Looking at virtual realms as venues, Facebook is analyzed as an Argentinian nightclub for adolescence, as Basil and Linne examine adolescent impression management strategies when romantically pursuing relationships via Facebook. The Internet has become a social tool for many Internet users. Casmiro examines the influence that gender has on self-presentation practices in Portuguese online dating profiles. This research highlights how gender roles influence self-presentation constructions within the Portuguese dating context. Dating practices reveal that dating sites serve as a door to other regions. Cuba’s Internet access is one of the lowest in Latin America, inhibiting private use of the World Wide Web. Pino uses online dating profiles in conjunction with interviews, analyzing the dating practices of singles seeking singles in Cuba and Cuban singles seeking intimacy outside of Cuba. These researchers open up and extend insight on how digital dating practices utilize different mediums to alleviate spatial boundaries and cultural constraints.

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The Internet has become a social tool for many online users. This chapter examines the influence that gender has on self-presentation practices in Portuguese online dating profiles. Data is analyzed via content analysis and grounded theory. This research highlights how modern gender roles influence self-presentation constructions within the Portuguese dating context.

Web 2.0 has turned Internet consumers into producers by allowing users to generate content. The Internet has created a communication culture of mutual and permanent evaluation. This study discusses dating maps as a way to analyze dating cultures of digital communities. User generated content creates a feedback loop that results in media-specific forms of subjectification.

The tension between the global experience that the Internet provides and the physical restrictions of one's geographical location is an interesting asymmetry when forming online intimate relationships. David Levin invokes the speech theory to examine the Israeli online dating experience that he characterizes as a cultural construct that follows the traditional paths for marriage. The local-global tension becomes apparent with the analysis, as the particular vocabulary and language the users adopt on these sites reveal a diasporic mode of identity construction. Being closely tied with social norms and traditions, societies face a shift in the experiences of identities and national, ethnic selfhood descriptions. Aras Ozgun identifies an interesting example of Webcam channels, where the participants can perform erotic/sexual performances for strangers and how this relates to national identity politics. By introducing the identity formation angle, Ozgun draws unique features of the semi-secular culture of Turkish identity and the male-female gender constructs that play into these relationships. Enver Ozustun identifies a case study of the Turkish marriage programs that became a benchmark for the online dating experience. It is through these channels that the vocabulary of the online dating sites are built upon in Turkey and these programs determined what the individuals are to expect from a relationship.

Defining the self in an online environment is a crucial point in finding a potential romantic partner on the web. Analyzing the relations of users from an inside perspective (with ethical considerations) Megan Lindsay explores the online dating sites by participant observation and auto-ethnography methods. Her experiences reflect the socio-cultural environment of OkCupid and Match.com websites. Attracting an audience, building an image for a specific target audience and expectations from other parties compose the major framework of her analysis.

The industry behind the online dating phenomenon is a large one. The online dating market has become a $2 billion industry [[29]](#footnote-29). Pascal Lardellier explores the political economy of dating sites in France and analyzes the underlying structures that are at play. The commodification of love, now assisted by the computerized technology also takes away from the intimate experience, monetizing the relationship. Also Reichert’s analysis examines the cartographic visualizations and the underlying structures within this system. The changing role of digital intimacy within the market is affecting the way we perceive relationships, especially considering that Google, Facebook and Twitter form the largest shares in the market.

This book attempts to shed light on the online dating phenomenon through various methodologies with an eclectic approach. If we think about the data and analysis of the use of these websites and other platforms employed for online dating purposes, it is easy to see that online courtship will become an increasingly embedded social norm for communities around the world. The philosophical, socio-political and social network analysis (SNA) approaches to the discussion of online courtship will enhance existing knowledge and broaden our understanding of the subject in further studies.

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