

Digital Dating: The Impact of Social Media and Online Dating Sites on the Formation and
Maintenance of Human Romantic Relationships

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SS3A (Hull) Fall 2018

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes information from several academic papers and their findings to determine both the beneficial and detrimental effects of social media, online dating platforms, and digital technology on the way humans living in industrialized nations form and maintain romantic relationships in modern times. This paper will also examine the ways in which the integration of digital technology and social media have changed and will continue to change the very fabric of society. The articles and academic papers that composed this review indicate that these changes in dating patterns will facilitate the creation of happier, longer lasting romantic relationships which will create happier, more productive people and societies.

Keywords: Online Dating, Social Media, Romantic Relationships

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Introduction

Digital technology permeates virtually every facet of modern living in industrialized nations, so it is no surprise that it has become a vital part of many contemporary romantic relationships. Since the early days of personal computers, online dating sites have promised to match users with compatible partners and place them in happy relationships, often using a variety of methods or approaches to determine the perfect match. The proliferation of online dating sites as well as social media sites have added new dimensions to courtship and communication within modern relationships.

The impact of integrating digital technology into romantic relationships cannot be understated. The literature available seems to indicate that social media, online dating sites, and digital technology in general have made it substantially easier than ever for people in industrialized nations to find and maintain more suitable and fulfilling relationships. Furthermore, the changes in relationship patterns can create happier and more diverse societies. This paper will examine the ways through which social media, online dating sites, and digital technology in general have facilitated the forging and maintenance of romantic relationships; the societal impact these changes will and have had; and the challenges and security risks these new dating trends pose.

Trends in Online Dating Patterns

In recent years, more and more Americans have been turning to online dating sites to find both serious relationships and casual hookups. A study conducted by Pew Research group found

that 15 percent of Americans have used online dating sites or mobile dating apps. Usage of these applications and sites is highest among the 18 to 24 age group (27 percent, up from 10 percent in 2013), but also has a surprising number of users from the 55 to 64 age group (12 percent, double that of 2013). Though users of these apps and sites can be found anywhere on the socioeconomic ladder, the more educated and affluent a person is, the more likely they are have used them to enter a serious relationship or know someone who has (Smith, 2016).

The motives for users of these sites and apps vary from committed relationships to mere casual sex, to anything in between. A study conducted by the female health app Clue and the Kinsey Institute found that 36 percent of Americans have used these platforms to find long- and short-term relationships, compared to 20 percent who were looking for one-night stands or casual sex.

The 2016 Pew Research study also found that the public's perception and attitude towards digital dating is mostly positive. 80 percent of respondents with previous online dating experience agreed that "online dating is a good way to meet people" versus 55 percent of those without previous experience. Additionally, 62 percent of respondents with previous experience also agreed that "online dating helps people find a better match for themselves" compared to just half of those with no experience (Smith, 2016).

Literature Review

Opportunities and Improvements

Social media sites can serve as a channel through which partners can seek validation, facilitate communication, and solidify legitimacy. A report by Wilkerson found that "social networking sites can help facilitate and maintain relationships between romantic partners"

(2017). They make it easy, quick, and efficient to see what one's significant other is up to and facilitate communication regardless of distance or location. Individuals are able to tag their partners in funny memes or send them articles and videos that they might find interesting, helping increase the bond between the two. Furthermore, becoming "Facebook official" and sharing pictures together on social media is often an important part of legitimizing modern relationships and share a couple's relationship status with their social circle and the outside world.

Contrary to the popular adage that "opposites attract", a study in the *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* indicates that individuals desire partners that have more things in common with them. The study also found that relationships based on various mutual or similar interests are more likely to be perceived as fulfilling by both partners. Social media allows users to connect to others in similar niches or communities as them while the algorithms behind many online dating sites or apps pair people based on similar likes and interests—thus, romantic relationships formed in the digital sphere are more likely to be fulfilling and long lasting. This is supported by the findings of Cacioppo et al, which found that among married couples, those who met online were more likely to report higher rates of marital satisfaction and lower rates of divorce compared to couples who met in person (2013). Albeit, the difference is somewhat marginal, with couples who met online scoring a 5.64 on a satisfaction survey and having a divorce rate of six percent; this is compared to couples who met in person, which scored a 5.48 on the survey and have a divorce rate of 7.6 percent.

Happy romantic relationships, accordingly, also make the people in them both healthier and happier (Greenberg, 2016), but this happiness can permeate as far as three degrees across an

individual's social network, meaning their happiness can reach as far as a friend of a friend of a friend. This wide-reaching happiness has wide-reaching impacts. Not only do happy people tend to live longer, healthier, and more productive lives, they are also more likely to have "a higher desire to vote, perform more volunteer work, and more frequently participate in public activities" (Guven, 2009, p. 180). Furthermore, Guven also found that happy people "also have a higher respect for law and order, hold more association memberships, are more attached to their neighborhood, and extend more help to others" (2009, p. 180).

Social media and digital dating platforms are also changing the makeup of society by introducing new social and cultural groups to each other. Whereas most people used to date within their relatively small social circle composed largely of school friends, coworkers, and family friends, social media and online dating platforms expose use to people from vastly different social groups, thus facilitating the diffusion of culture and race into society. A study conducted by Ortega and Hergovich found that online dating and social media sites have radically revolutionized the way people meet and who they meet, crossing different social networks in previously unprecedented ways. They found that while the rate of interracial marriages has been on the rise even before the advent of the internet, the rate has grown steeper as online dating sites grew in population and membership (2017).

Limitations. Using objective mathematical algorithms to process and match subjective, often irrational humans comes with a few problems. This has spawned the contentious debate as to what's more important in finding love: chemistry or compatibility. In other words, can a cold, calculating computer algorithms ever substitute for the rush of emotions a person gets when they see someone attractive in person? Humans are also very prone to misremembering, stretching the

truth, or outright lying, so it comes as no surprise that they often feign their likes and interests or exaggerate their skills and social status. Though there have been steps taken to refine the process and remove human bias altogether to create a more objective, truthful process, that itself poses other problems we will discuss below.

Challenges

Though social media, online dating sites/apps, and digital technology can facilitate many aspects of romantic relationships, they also spawn some serious concerns. Most of the literature available focuses on the detrimental effects that social media, online dating sites, and digital technologies can have on relationships and on individual's mental health. Wilkerson's report also found that social media can be detrimental to a romantic relationship if there is a pre-existing insecurity or uncertainty in the relationship. Jealousy can arise when individuals see their significant other interacting with other users on the platform and can also "make it easy for a partner to be aware of inconsistencies in the relationship," often creating a point of contention between them (2017). Furthermore, social media sites can become a way through which abusive individuals can surveille their partner.

In terms of users' health, social media and dating sites can be detrimental to both their physical and mental health. A study of Tinder users conducted by Strübel and Petrie found that Tinder users are more likely to report less satisfaction with their physical appearances and self-esteem compared to individuals who do not use it. The hookup culture fostered by many of these dating apps can also have potential long term consequences on the mental health of users, fostering feelings of regrets and low self-esteem and self-worth surrounding constant casual hookups (Weissmann 2015). There's also the matter of STDs/STIs which can be transmitted

unknowingly through casual sex. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that there was over 2 million reported cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis in 2016--more than ever before. Though the link between dating apps and the rise of STD rates is murky, that has not stopped some public health experts like the Rhode Island Department of Health from blaming them for allowing users to partake in “[high risk] casual and often anonymous sexual encounters” (2015).

The collection of troves of users’ personal information by these websites and applications also possess daunting security risks. This has the potential of creating a form of social engineering where users are duped into divulging confidential information that can potentially be used for nefarious purposes. Many of the applications and sites themselves are riddled with gaping holes in their security systems, potentially giving hackers access to users’ full names, contact information, exact location, and even “superuser” rights on their cellphones which grants them unrestricted access to every other app on it (“Are Dating Apps Safe?”, 2017). Even after users delete their profiles, that is often not the end of the story with many apps and sites. Their profile, personal information, and even private pictures can often linger around in the company’s servers long after they have deactivated their account (Reitman 2012).

The relative degree of anonymity allotted to users on many of these platforms means that people with bad intentions can easily set up fraudulent chatbots or fake profiles to cajole unsuspecting, lustful, and/or lonely users to cough up private information. The phenomena, often colloquially known as catfishing, has even got a show on MTV, but it is a very serious crime. According to the FBI, nearly 15,000 individual complaints of romance scams were logged by the Bureau in 2016, totalling more than \$230 million worth of damages. The majority of the victims

are older women who are divorced or widowed. Though the FBI does not break down these numbers to explicitly reveal the role online dating sites and social media in these scams, they mention that this increase in romance scams is occurring as more seniors are hopping online and as the internet spreads to developing countries, many of which have little to no safeguards to prevent this type of abuse or punish the perpetrators (“Romance Scams,” 2017).

To counter the spread of bots and fraudulent accounts claiming to be people they are not, some online dating sites have begun integrating biometrics to ensure users are truly who they say they are. There are even a few dating sites out there that match partners based on their genetic makeups for more compatible matches (Dickson 2014). As the integration of biometrics in dating applications and websites becomes the norm in the pursuit of pairing individuals with the ideal partner, this raises the question of what steps will be taken to safeguard this sensitive personal information against misuse. As we have seen time and time again in the past, social media and online dating sites have no qualms about using users’ personal data to the highest bidders and are often vulnerable to mass data breaches that compromise the identities of millions of users. One could only speculate the ways in which nefarious actors would exploit even more sensitive biometric information.

Aside from this, the integration of biometrics into the matchmaking process also raises potential concerns about selective breeding. It is not hard to imagine a *Brave New World*-esque scenario where people of the same “status” are explicitly paired up with others from the same . Thus, though they expose us to potential partners from all walks of life, social media and online dating platforms can also help reinforce classist, sexist, and racist stereotypes. King found that when one examines information gathered by major sites like Tinder and Match.com, one can see

that clear racial preferences emerge (2013). Whether this is a reflection of preexisting societal conditions or whether the platforms themselves foster these sentiments is unclear.

Conclusion

It is clear that social media, online dating platforms, and other forms of digital technology have revolutionized the way we meet and connect with our romantic partners. It has made it substantially easier to find partners that have common tastes and interests as oneself and has also facilitated interactions and communication within a relationship, leading to happier, more fulfilling, and longer lasting romantic relationships. The effects of these happy relationships seep into the couple's social circle and also lead to higher levels of general happiness and productivity in society.

Personally, I believe that social media and technology are not only inescapable parts of modern courtship or romance, but that they are also instrumental in forming long-lasting, mutually fulfilling relationships. They help us find more compatible partners who share more in common with us and they also help facilitate interactions and communication between partners. I myself have met most of my girlfriends through social media and have used these platforms to court them and maintain those relationships in spite of distance or other factors. It has not been 100 percent peachy, however; I am also well aware of how they can foster feelings of insecurity or jealousy.

Though not without its flaws, social media and online dating platforms have markedly improved the romantic matchmaking and maintenance process. The integration of big data and biometrics into dating applications and sites makes the future bright and promising, but it also raises unnerving dystopian implications. They can be methods through which humans find their

ideal partner, through which the happiness and cohesiveness of society can be elevated, but they can also be tools of exploitation, segregation. More research needs to be conducted on the nuanced ways in which social media and online dating interactions are changing human psychology and interaction, especially as it becomes the *de facto* method and more relationships are formed in the digital sphere.

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