Cyber Courtship: Computer Matchmaking and Trends in Online Romance

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Abstract

The trend of individuals looking online for romantic relationships is well on its way to reaching its tipping point. Online dating is continually gaining in popularity due to the rise of the internet, as well as due to changes within contemporary lifestyles. The difficulty of finding the right partner is encouraging singles to turn away from traditional means of meeting potential mates, and instead opt for the convenience of online modes of dating. As society continues to accelerate its pace, people strive to balance multiple roles and responsibilities and are finding themselves thrust into a position in which they must find non-conventional means of social interaction. This raises questions regarding online dependence, psychological impacts, and traditional modes of dating.

Keywords: Online dating, internet, relationships, tipping point

Within a historical context, technological innovation has frequently served as the impetus that can alter a society's lifestyle. The advent of the Internet, like the telephone and television, appears to have provided this impetus to the extent that Western society has become altered by its presence.

—Eric R. Merkle (1)

The trend of individuals looking online for romantic relationships is well on its way to reaching its tipping point. This moment as described by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, The Tipping Point, is the point at which small developments can have big effects, with change happening at one dramatic moment (2). The Tipping Point presents a different perspective for understanding why change often occurs so quickly and unexpectedly. Changes are examined as social epidemics that can behave in unusual ways with large scale effects. These patterns of dramatic transformation are observed from historical, sociological, and psychological points of reference. When a small number of people start behaving differently, that behavior can ripple outward until a critical mass or tipping point is reached, leading to a major change in society. According to JupiterResearch, "People spend more on online personals than on any other form of online content." (3) It is estimated that 40% of the 100 million singles in the US have dated online (4). Online dating is continually gaining in popularity due to the rise of the internet, as well as due to changes within contemporary lifestyles. The difficulty of finding the right partner is encouraging singles to turn away from traditional means of meeting potential mates, and instead opt for the convenience of online modes of dating.

Some of the catalysts leading individuals to experiment with online venues include busy work schedules, having a majority of friends who are partnered, having children and not being able to go out as much, and moving to a new city. With less time in everyone's schedules, online services are becoming, if not effective, increasingly sophisticated in their methods of matching individuals, using algorithms and metrics such as education, professional background, personal interests, religious outlooks,

hobbies, values, and life goals, to more accurately match subscribers to their ideal partners. These websites use a range of personality tests and psychological assessments to build lists of traits that individuals want in their partners. Some websites, such as Chemistry.com, are even using basic information about the brain and body chemistry, associated with aspects of a person's temperament and personality to identify matches. Science-based dating services such as ScientificMatch.com and GenePartner.com promise lasting relationships based on the basis of genetic information, creating matches based on differences in immune systems (5).

There are several factors that could be attributed to this ever growing trend. Longer work hours, increased mobility, and the dissolution of traditional modes of socialization are leading individuals to look to chat rooms, social networking sites, and professional online dating services in order to find partners. Conventional venues for casually meeting people such as bars and clubs are being abandoned for the less spontaneous, cheaper alternative of online services that allow individuals to sort through several options, weeding out incompatible options through a review of personal information. Online utilities give the ability to search for romantic interests at one's leisure and make initial rejections less personal and debilitating. The volume of options to choose from also theoretically increases the chances of finding a compatible partner as the need for spacial proximity can diminish when individuals are connected across wide geographic distances through their computers. As online dating services become more knowledgeable and skilled in the art of match-making, they are also pairing individuals more effectively as well as finding more efficient methods of filtering out fake and deceitful profiles. This builds even greater confidence in their services.

The rapid penetration of the internet and computer mediated communication into our daily lifestyles has also raised questions about the psychological impact of technology and how it may result in the increased lack of personal sociability, shyness, and communication anxiety in our society. Some scholars have described the Internet as an empowering medium that encourages shy individuals to meet others and build enduring relationships. These individuals tend to perform better via electronic means of communication because of the increased control in how a message can be framed before it is sent (6).

Despite the various factors previously described that can be correlated to this rising craze, there may be slighter, more significant factors that allowed for the eruption in the popularity of online dating. In The Tipping Point, Gladwell explains that the success of any social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of a number of key people with a particular set of social gifts, which he calls the "Law of the Few" (2). This phenomenon can be easily seen in the development of successful online relationships. When it comes to effective methods of meeting people, individuals tend to look to their own personal network of contacts for examples and advice on the best way to meet potential romantic partners. As an increasing number of couples meet each other online and subsequently get married, their personal testimonies boast the benefits of meeting people online. An increasing number of people know of someone directly or know of someone who has had a successful relationship with someone they met online. In a 2011 survey by advertising giant Euro RSCG Worldwide, half of the respondents indicated that they knew someone who had met a partner online (7). If a friend meets her husband online, she transforms into both a "maven" and "saleswoman" (1) to others around her—a virtual expert on the method's intricacies and its possibility of success. In the past decade, a number of movies with online love stories as the premise, such as "You've Got Mail" and "Must Love Dogs", have helped to erase the negative stereotypes originally tied to meeting people online. These movies have in essence, served as "connectors" (1), reaching a large percentage of the population, and convincing them that they too can try it. These movies additionally allow for the packaging of online romances as fairy tale love stories, appealing to both the emotional and psychological sentiments of individuals. The effect of word-of-mouth, therefore reaches escalating proportions.

Gladwell also describes the "stickiness" factor, a quality that allows a message to be memorable to those who view it (2). As mentioned above, movies are now including online relationships in a positive light in their plots, attaching positive connotations to using online services to find true love. Online dating agencies such as Match.com and eHarmony.com are also increasingly gearing their advertising towards commercials that are specifically designed to cement the connection between the ideas of marriage and love and the outcomes of online encounters. These commercials express common pitfalls that individuals experience while using more established forms of dating alongside depictions of alleged testimonials from lasting couples who met on their sites. They appeal to viewers

who may be dissatisfied with their current situations, tugging on their rawest of feelings.

The influence of the current environment in the increasing use of the internet to meet people is also important and cannot be overlooked. With the development of more sophisticated, inexpensive home computers, along with more access to public resources, a greater number of users are able to take advantage of technology and the Internet. Society continues to accelerate its pace. As people strive to balance multiple roles and responsibilities, they are finding themselves thrust into a position in which they must find non-conventional means of social interaction. In an age where the Internet has countless uses—shopping, taking classes, banking, etc.—using it to find a significant other does not seem all that implausible. The increasing rate of divorce in the US also adds to an escalating number of individuals looking for a second or third chance at companionship. The advent of the recent recession has also made the average individual more conscious of their expenses. Traditional venues for meeting individuals—bars, nightclubs, restaurants, health clubs—are considered luxuries, too expensive to attend with any regularity. Online dating websites are in many cases free or relatively affordable. All of these external environmental conditions help to shape the trend of online romantic relationships and illustrates Gladwell's "power of context", which he describes as the contextual changes that individuals are exquisitely sensitive to, and that are capable of starting an epidemic (2).

In order to more specifically illustrate the rapid rise of the online dating trend, one can look at its use by the Baby Boomer generation. This demographic can be characterized currently with large numbers of single adults and increasing rates of divorce. This may be attributed to having the economic livelihood and the economic feasibility that makes divorce less difficult. Fifty to sixty year olds are Match.com's fastest growing demographic and other dating websites are also stating a dramatic increase in their older clientele (7). Several dating sites, such as SingleSeniorsMeet.com and BabyBoomerPeopleMeet.com, are also being created in order to address this growing market. Baby boomers are described as a workaholic generation, competitive in the work place and work-centric. This generation is being influenced by both its peers and the media to look into more convenient alternatives to finding companions. They are no longer the nightclub and bar set, and therefore find the convenience of searching online

to be appealing. This has led to sites reporting dramatic double digit growth in the fifty and over market (8). As this subset of the population came to a turning point in their own lives, this allowed for their approach to finding companionship to reach its own critical mass.

Noting the environmental factors that have contributed to individuals using online dating services, a question that should be asked is whether the causal deterministic features of the increasing use of technology, cyberspace, and social networking forces users to use the internet as their main form of communication and relationship building. Is the Internet pushing our society into an online dependent dichotomy? With technology allowing for the reduction of traditional face-to-face interactions, does this then allow for the increase in flourishing online relationships? From a relativist point of view, one could argue that how a person finds their partner depends on the specific circumstances and events of their life. That person's individual experiences lead to the nature of how they will meet the person they choose to be with. An individual's free will cannot be removed from the equation. With the various options currently available, one has personal control and the prerogative over how they will go about choosing a partner.

The trend of online romantic relationships is being strengthened from the exchange experienced through friends, movies, and commercials. Our current social environment, the state of marriage, and our evolving methods of interacting with society are also altering how we meet that special someone. In the past, romantic relationships started online had a negative social stigma attached to them when they were viewed as a highly unconventional method of meeting a partner. However, the combination of these little changes—increasing and successful use by individuals, popularity in media, and technological driving forces—compounded with each other, are allowing for this trend to reach its tipping point, with the use of online services entering the mainstream as an acceptable and potentially leading option for finding a partner.

Note

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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