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# Developing and Maintaining Online Romantic Relationships

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Corrina Lowe

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Walden University  
2017

Abstract

Developing and Maintaining an Online Romantic Relationship

by

Corrina M. Lowe

MA, California Baptist University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

August 2017

## Abstract

The Internet has become the one of the most used ways for individuals of both sexes to meet potential mates. The purpose of the grounded theory study was to gain an understanding of the stages of development of an online romantic relationship and the motivations that impact the progression and the maintenance of relationships through asking individuals who have experienced the phenomenon about their experiences. Social penetration model, social learning theory, and the stimulus- role-value theory guided the study. Four samples of convenience were used to obtain the 20 participants, including the Walden University participant pool, 2 local universities, Match.com and Facebook. Through reviewed literature, the researcher designed the survey and interview questions. The first area explored was how online romantic relationships developed including consideration of motives, perceptions, mate selection, language, and self-expression. The other area explored how online romantic relationships were maintained, including an exploration about gender differences, differences between face-to-face and Internet relationships, and difficulties encountered. Data was placed into the NIVIVO computer software and was analyzed by the researcher. Three themes were discovered from the data including finding potential partners, communication, and maintenance. This study benefits the scientific community in providing information to further develop theories in the literature about how the internet has impacted romantic relationships. It also benefits both the individuals who use the internet to find partners and individuals who want to create new Internet dating tools that are better designed for the needs of the users. This could potentially improve the quality of life for those who are seeking life partners.

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## Dedication

This research project is dedicated to my wonderful husband as he was the inspiration for the topic. My husband and I met online 15 years ago and had a long distant relationship between two countries until the year 2007, which was when we got married. I am truly blessed to have met such a wonderful man, who has pushed me to achieve my goal of obtaining my PhD.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Background**

The creation of the computer matrix known as the Internet began during the 1960s (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). In the beginning, the Internet was primarily used by American defense facilities and to connect academic institutions with one another (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). It was understood early the Internet was a valuable component for the national security of the United States of America (Merkle & Richardson, 2000); however, it was unknown at the time it would develop into an international social network.

The presence of the Internet has created many changes in our society. Today, the Internet provides a place where business is conducted through Web sites that advertise and sell products; it also provides the ability to conduct business meetings, and as a way to keep in contact with the latest news about companies (Gilbert, Murphy, & McNally, 2010). The Internet also provides information about any topic imaginable through online dictionaries, encyclopedias, and online information sources (Gilbert, et al., 2010). Additionally it provides a place for an individual to learn about current world events through news Web sites, such as Cable News Network (CNN, 2010). Finally, the Internet has become a place to develop and maintain different types of social connections (Gilbert, et al., 2010).

According to Pauley and Emmers-Sommer (2007), computer-mediated communication (CMC) has redefined how individuals engage in relationships with people who are both local and distant through the use of email, blogs, instant messengers,

chat rooms, and playing games. Emails provide a way to communicate electronically on the computer, through sending private messages from one Internet user to another (Stebbins, 2007). Blogs are on-line journals where people can post chronological diary entries about their personal experiences and hobbies (Bower, 2006). Instant messaging (IM) is a form of real-time direct text-based communication between two or more people (Stebbins, 2007). Chat rooms are online discussion forums open to individuals interested in sharing information on a particular topic (Bower, 2006). Playing online games allows two or more people to play a game while interacting with one another over the Internet (PC Magazine Encyclopedia, (2010).

Other ways individuals engage in relationships online through CMC include live voice chat through programs such as Skype (Skype, 2010); and social networking Web sites such as Facebook (Facebook, 2010), Myspace (Myspace, 2010), and Twitter (Twitter, 2010). Voice chat programs such as Skype (Skype, 2010) provide a newer way of communicating for Internet users by providing a real time telephone type experience (PC Magazine Encyclopedia, 2010). Social networking sites such as Facebook (Facebook, 2010) and Myspace (Myspace, 2010) provide a virtual community for people to either chat with known individuals or to increase their circle of acquaintances through an invitation process. Family, friends, and strangers generally send a virtual request to join and to be a part of a specific person's community and the person has the ability to choose whether or not accept the request. If the invitation is accepted, the author of the particular virtual community can limit what types of information can be accessed within the community.

Members of social media Web sites create their own online profiles providing biographical data, pictures, and any other information they choose to post. They communicate with each other by making their thoughts public in a blog like format or via email, IM, voice, or videoconference to selected other members of the group while insuring others cannot access this information. A photo sharing capability may also be provided (PC Magazine Encyclopedia, 2010).

Twitter (Twitter, 2010) is an instant messaging system that allows a person to send brief text messages to a specific list of people. This form of social networking is designed as a way to keep friends and colleagues informed throughout the day. In addition, it has become widely used by commercial companies and political entities to keep customers, constituents, and fans up to date about any changes and to elicit feedback. Twitter messages (tweets) can be sent and received by cellphone text messaging, the twitter website, or third-party twitter applications. Tweets that are received can also be forwarded to additional people (PC magazine encyclopedia, 2010).

There are at least 3.2 billion users of the Internet worldwide, with more users coming online every day (BBC News, 2015). These users have access to more than 700 million computers and 200 million Web sites. Of the people using the Internet, 61% have used a program that allows them to connect and engage with other people (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). These authors find two-thirds of users additionally maintained a personal relationship with someone they corresponded with online. They also find some individuals satisfactorily maintained online, romantic relationships without any offline contact (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). An online romantic relationship is defined as

an intimate interpersonal relationship between individuals who have met online. In many cases, these individuals know each other only through that type of medium (Wildermuth & Vogle-Bauer, 2007).

The number of individuals participating in online romantic relationships has been steadily increasing. According to US News (2013) the revenues of online dating websites were 1.2 billion dollars in 2012. This is considered to be the number one expenditure for Internet users (Wildermuth, 2004). Additionally, the Internet has become the fourth highest way people are meeting potential mates, being only slightly behind family or friend introductions, school or work affiliations, and meeting through other activities of interest (Wildermuth, 2004). Match.com estimates 5000 registered clients report monthly they are currently in a successful dating relationship that they have formed through the use of the website (Wildermuth, 2004).

Walther (1995) indicates online interpersonal communication has assisted in the development of romantic relationships through helping to provide greater intimacy between the two individuals than can be found in traditional face-to-face relationships. Additionally, he postulated this modality allows the relationship to move at a faster pace. Walther further suggested the closeness between the two people is developed because of the sender's ability to carefully present his or her self to the other individual. Each person has the ability to edit messages as much as needed before sending them. The receiver is likely to form positive and ideal attributions about the sender based on the information presented. The level and intensity of self-disclosure with one another is enhanced because

the receiver only gets edited information from the sender (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006; Walther, 1995).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Despite what is already known about online romantic relationships, there is still much more that is unknown. We do not know whether online romantic relationships develop in a similar fashion as is found in a face-to-face context. In order to fully have an understanding of the stages of development of an online romantic relationship and the motivations that impact the progression and the maintenance of the relationship, the researcher sought to ask the individuals who had experienced the phenomenon about their experiences. Just as in a relationship developed in the previously standard mode every person had a unique experience moving through the development and maintenance process within the relationship. However there were some commonalities within the experience. It was assumed this would also be true in the online context. Thus, by interviewing different people who had experienced the phenomenon, the researcher learned about the individual stories and commonalities were identified. The purpose was to gain a further understanding of how this particular type of relationship was developed and maintained.

### **Nature of study**

The participants were asked to define the stages of development in an online relationship in which they had participated. They were encouraged to think about the development process particularly addressing the types and quality of communication they had engaged in through the different online media. They were also asked to describe what

types of motivations they experienced that impacted the progression and maintenance of the relationship. It was expected identifiable stages of development in an online relationships could be identified. It was further expected the types of communication interactions indicate the status of relationship development; thereby, impacting the motivations for progression and maintenance of the relationship.

### **Research Questions**

The issue studied was to determine whether online relationships develop through stages and what motivations impact the progression, development, and maintenance of these relationships. The research questions in the present study addressed the developmental process of an online romantic relationship and what motivations were experienced and expressed during the process of developing and maintaining an online romantic relationship. The first question aimed to identify the aspects that promote and influence the developmental process of an online romantic relationship. The second question aimed to understand what types of motivations and how those motivations are experienced at different points within the relationship development process.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Several theories have identified various aspects found to impact the development of a romantic relationship with in a traditional face-to-face context. These aspects include communication (Krain, 1975), emotional expression (Aune, Aune, & Buller, 2001), and motivations (Pauley & Emmers-Sommers, 2007). Krain (1975) suggests the development of a relationship is based on three forms of communication, which are referred to as positive, neutral, and negative. During initial contact the communication is neutral.



According to this model, every conversation has the potential to either build or destroy the relationship. The concepts of communicative entropy and communicative negentropy are suggested by Hawes (1970). Krain (1975), using the concepts of Hawes (1970), attempted to identify how each negative and positive conversation impacts the balance found in the interpersonal communication of the relationship.

Entropy is a type of communication process involving conditions that weaken or destroy the relational system. These conditions can vary from minor impediments to severe disruptions, and can include situations such as a failure to negotiate or solve a problem within the relationship. Negentropy is a type of communication process that occurs when the conditions add positively to the relationship (Krain, 1975). These conditions would include situations such as successfully negotiating or problem solving within the relationship. The last type of communication process is neutral. This type of process deals with conditions that involve simple or routine topics of conversation. These ideas address the balance of the communication within the relationship. Krain (1975) indicated if there was too much entropy the individuals would decide to end the relationship; however, if there is more negentropy the relationship would be continued.

According to emotional expression theorists Aune, Aune, and Buller (2001), during the early stages of the development of a relationship the partners are immersed in unreflective positive feelings toward one another. The individual is primarily focused on putting their best foot forward and presenting a positive image. Negative feelings might occur if the expression of emotions during this stage is too intense. In the middle stages of the development of a relationship, when closeness is increasing and there is a mutual

sense of commitment, emotional expression and experiences becomes more intense. The two individuals are better acquainted with one another. Finally, emotional expression becomes less intense again in the latter stages of relationship development as the uncertainty of the relationship has been greatly decreased and commitment has been firmly established (Aune, et al., 2001).

The motivations of the individual can also influence relationship development in that they provide the incentives for a person to pursue a potential mate (Pauley & Emmers-Sommers, 2007). Motivations that can push a relationship further in development can include the enjoyment of being with the specific partner, stimulating conversation, and or the desire for sexual conquest. The motivations of an individual are also dependent on a specific perspective based on their past experiences in relationships, their culture, and their family of origin. If the individual is not motivated to continue interactions with their partner, it is likely the relationship will not develop further (Pauley & Emmers-Sommers, 2007). If the developmental process for online relationships differs from those theorized as being associated with traditional romantic relationship, it is necessary to learn what is more usual for this type of relationship.

The previous research available exploring online romantic relationship development were focused on attempting to understand how online dating is different from traditional dating (Ramirez, Bryant, Fleureit, & Cole, 2015). Research also focused on how specific groups of individuals utilize internet dating. Some of the groups focused on included aging adults (Wada, Mortenson, & Hurd, 2016), biracial individuals (McGrath, Tsunokai, Shultz, Kavanagh, & Tarrence, 2016), and the lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community (Gadi, 2016). Theories developed about online relationships have been applied to the context of the online environment; there currently is no theory that specifically addresses the development of romantic relationships within an online context. Previous research has assumed there are enough similarities in the contexts to be able to apply these theories to both situations (Anderson & Emmer-Sommer, 2006; Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

The underlying theories that provide a basis for the current study include social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), stimulus-value-role theory (Murstien, 1970), and social penetration model (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) states, contrary to what is proposed in traditional learning theory, not all types of learning can be achieved through direct reinforcement. Additionally, it states individuals can learn new information through watching others; a process called observational learning (Bandura, 1977). Bandura identifies three basic models of observational learning. The first involves an actual individual who is demonstrating the behavior (Bandura, 1977). The second is a verbal instruction model of a behavior; this involves descriptions and explanations (Bandura, 1977). Finally, the last is a symbolic model; this involves reactions to real or fictional characters displaying the behavior in books, films, television programs, and or online media (Bandura, 1977).

Based on both the number of people who have access to the Internet and the number of individuals who have used a computer program to meet and engage with other individuals, it is likely that more people in current society have personal first-hand knowledge about someone who has utilized the Internet as a way to meet a potential mate

and has had some success in the process. Bandura (1969) states people are more likely to watch and learn a new behavior from someone they know and trust. Bandura (1969) provides an understanding of how an actual person modeling a demonstration of the behavior of internet dating can influence the likelihood that the person watching will also engage in the behavior.

Murstein's (1970) stimulus-value-role model states that a couple goes through specific stages during the course of the development of a relationship. The author of this theory talks about all situations in which two people can begin a potential romantic encounter as either open or closed fields. Closed fields are settings in which two people are forced to interact with each other (Murstein, 1970). However, they are not able to pursue a relationship even though there may be an attraction. These settings include predetermined relationships, such as teacher- student relationships. Open fields are settings in which two individuals do not know each other or only have a nodding acquaintance (Murstein, 1970). These situations allow the individuals to be free to begin or abstain from a relationship. Given that two people meet in an open field, the individuals would go through the following three stages. In the first stage, a couple is drawn to each other based on stimuli such as physical attraction or common interests (Murstein, 1970). In the second stage, once an initial connection is established the couple develops a deeper level of communication and understanding through examining their values to see if they are similar and or compatible (Murstein, 1970). Finally, in the last stage a couple discusses the roles each of them will have within the relationship (Murstein, 1970). Murstein's model is appropriate for understanding the topic under

review as all three of the stages in the model could be created and implemented in an online environment (Taylor, Fiore, & Mendelsohn, 2011).

Another theory used as a basis for this study was the social penetration model offered by Taylor and Altman (1975). Taylor and Altman proposed two stages for the communication process in a romantic relationship. The first stage involved the intimacy of conversation. Once a connection is established between two people, the couple begins to explore more intimate conversations with one another. The intimate conversations the couple engages in will lead to the development of a deeper connection. The deeper connection the couple has, the more intimate conversations are likely to occur in the future. The second and last stage involves the length of conversations (Taylor & Altman, 1975). As the relationship develops, the longer conversations tend to last. The theory suggests when strangers initially come into contact, their exchanges of information are generally superficial in nature, the level of intimacy in the conversation is minimal, and the length of the exchange is typically short (Taylor & Altman, 1975). Over time, and as the two individuals experience more of these conversations, it is suggested the level of intimacy involved and the duration of the conversations tend to increase (Taylor & Altman, 1975).

Homans (1961) developed a concept of distributive justice that was incorporated into the social penetration theory proposed by Taylor and Altman (1975). This theory attempts to describe why there is the pattern of less to more progression of social interpersonal behaviors. The theory of distributive justice suggests there needs to be an equality in the amount of effort in the behaviors shown from both partners which in turn

leads to equality in the amount of rewards each individual derives from the relationship (Taylor & Altman, 1975). For example, if one person increases a specific type of interpersonal behavior, then the other person is likely to perceive more rewards from the relationship. This leaves the relationship unbalanced; in order to recreate equality, the second person must reciprocate with the same amount of increase in the same behavior toward the first person (Taylor & Altman, 1975). Since both of the stages of the theory are communication based and that previous research about romantic relationships has utilized theory by Altman and Taylor; this is an appropriate theory to use in the current study.

The final theory used as a basis for this study is grounded theory. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research methods such as grounded theory are ways to explore an issue or question in which the context, culture, or perspective of the individual have been overlooked. A grounded theory study further develops a way to create an integrated set of concepts that provide a complete theoretical explanation of the topic under review (Creswell, 2007). This type of study operates primarily from two principles. The first relates to the idea of change (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenon under review is not considered to be static but instead as continually changing in response to evolving conditions. Therefore the method builds the concept of change into the process of understanding the topic. The second principle pertains to choices based on personal perceptions (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory seeks to not only uncover relevant conditions in the phenomenon, but also how the individuals respond to the changing

conditions and the consequences of their actions based on their perceptions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

A qualitative study, particularly using grounded theory should allow the development of a greater understanding of how an online romantic relationship is developed and maintained through interviewing specific individuals who have actually experienced the phenomenon. Grounded theory according to Creswell (2003) has the objective to move beyond obtaining just a description of the phenomenon into the possibility of generating a theory. Grounded theory is well-suited to answer questions aimed at understanding how individuals create meaning from their own personal experiences. The open-ended question format of a qualitative method allows the individual the ability to speak openly about a specific experience they have encountered in their life. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define grounded theory as a nonmathematical process of interpretation designed for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships found within the raw data and organizing them into a theoretical explanatory scheme. In qualitative research, the primary modes of collecting data are interviewing, observation, audio tape and video recording, generating personal histories and accessing records and other documentary material (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). All of these data collecting methods are nonmathematically based, so the question for qualitative researchers has been how these types of data are to be analyzed and interpreted.

Most of the previous research about online romantic relationships has been done from a quantitative perspective (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). Studies about how

shyness and socialability impact CMC (Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2006), exploring perceptions about online relationships (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007), and CMC relationship development explored from a cross cultural basis (Yum & Hara, 2006) are some of the aspects of relationships that have been studied using qualitative methodology. While this type of study has assisted in understanding different aspects of the topic, we still do not understand the phenomenon in its entirety.

### **Procedures**

The current study obtained participants from four samples of convenience. The first was the Walden University participant pool. The second were the two universities in Clark County in the state of Washington. The two universities were Clark Community College and Washington State University. The third one was the online dating site Match.com. The final one was Facebook. A notice for participation was placed on the Walden University participant pool portal, at the two local universities in the county, on Match.com, and on my husband's personal Facebook page. The notice at Washington State University was placed on the community boards on the campus, while the notice for Clark community college was placed in the career services tab of their website under the employers tab. A shortened version of the notice was placed as an ad banner was placed on Match.com. Finally, the same notice placed at the universities was placed on my husband's personal Facebook page. The notice provided a brief description of the study, the two criteria that needed to be met for participation, and a way to contact the researcher. The researcher verified that each person meets criteria for the study through email. A range of 20 to 35 participants were asked to complete a survey and a follow up



interview. The survey was given to each of the participants through e-mail and they were asked questions pertaining to demographics and aspects of their online romantic relationships. After the survey was returned to the researcher, the participants were asked to complete a follow up telephone interview that asked open ended questions related to the original responses on the survey. The data obtained from both the surveys and interviews was open coded at the time they are received from the participants. The coding and the analysis of the data was completed through a computer program called NVIVO (QSR International, 2014).

### **Limitations**

The first challenge for this study was familiarity. The researcher experienced the phenomenon under review first hand so it was possible the researcher could have experienced certain biases or had preconceived ideas of how an online relationship was developed and maintained based on her own personal experiences. Any preconceived ideas about the topic under review could have skewed the results, and could have impacted how the data was interpreted. The researcher could have jumped to conclusions based on something the participant said. According to Cresswell (2003), in a grounded study, a researcher needs to set aside any theoretical ideas or notions about the topic so a substantive theory about the phenomenon could become apparent through the research process. This was an important challenge to keep in mind throughout the research process, as personal biases could influence how the data is interpreted; thus, compromising the final conclusions of the study. The one thing the researcher could do to limit the potential challenge was just to remain cognizant of personal biases.

Another limitation might be some aspects of the development of online relationships may not come to light without the inclusion of focus groups. Focus groups can provide a way to get additional information from the participants not obtained from individual interviews (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, they provide a way to obtain data on the actual process of the group (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008); however, this is irrelevant for the topic being studied here. The current study would only use interviews as a way to obtain information about the topic under review from the participants. According to Lambert and Loiselle (2008) interviews are the best strategy based on the nature of the data collected in the study such as the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of the participants about online romantic relationships.

The reasons to not use focus groups in a grounded theory study include situations such as seeking consensus, seeking sensitive information that cannot be discussed in a group, seeking statistical information, where the environment is emotionally charged or there could be conflict in the group (Redmond, 2009). Additionally, when the locus of control is with participants and not with the moderator, when the confidentiality of information discussed cannot be ensured, or when other methodologies can produce better quality information (Redmond, 2009). In this instance, individual interviews can produce better information than can be obtained with the use of focus groups. Individual interviews are the most widely-used data collection strategy in qualitative research. This methodology provides researchers with detailed accounts of the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of the participant about the given phenomenon (Redmond, 2009). As the current study is not interested in data pertaining to the group process, the

utilization of individual interviews only seems to be more appropriate (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the current study derived from our being better able to understand how an online romantic relationship is developed and maintained from individuals who have actually been successful at forming this type of relationship. By understanding the process of the development of online relationships, it was hoped a greater understanding about the actual process will be obtained. This study further assisted in understanding how Internet technology has impacted romantic relationship development. The insight gained from the study would allowed us to see where relationship developments could be heading in the future in comparison to how they usually developed in the past. Finally, it was hoped this study would continue to decrease the stigma that can be associated with online romantic relationships about the people who look for mates on the Internet and the types of relationships they are looking for through providing clarification about the topics under review.

### **Summary**

My goal with this study was to identify the developmental and maintenance process of an online relationship through a qualitative perspective. This provided additional information to the literature about this subject that was primarily developed using a quantitative perspective. The theoretical orientation of the study was in grounded theory. Two research questions underlay the study of this phenomenon. The first question asked about the aspects that add to and influence the developmental process of

an online romantic relationship. The study also aimed to understand what types of motivations and how those motivations are experienced at different points within the relationship development process. The limitations associated with the study included possible researcher bias and the possibility of missed information due to the noninclusion of focus groups. The results of this study allow us to gain better insight into the phenomenon in addition to learning how technology has impacted relationship development and maintenance. Previous research about the topic of the development of romantic relationship is further explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Overview

This chapter begins with an overview of the Internet context that can help an individual to find a potential mate. How this context differs from the more traditional venues is reviewed. The type of Internet tools an individual can use to find and develop a relationship is also discussed. Next, what is known about the development of online relationships is reviewed. This includes studies involving peoples' perceptions about online relationships, how Internet technologies have impacted relationship development, the process by which online relationships develop, the impact of switching communication modalities during online relationships, and issues involved in the disclosure of personal information. Next, what is known about the maintenance of online relationships is discussed. Studies reviewed focus upon the satisfaction found in online romantic relationship and the longevity of such relationships, as well as strategies that assist in maintaining relationships. The differences found between face-to-face and online romantic relationships are also discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the negative aspects found to impact online romantic relationships

The following databases were used in searching the literature: Academic Search Premier, Mental Measurements Yearbook, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycINFO, SocINDEX, Psychology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection, and ProQuest Central. The following key words were used: *online romantic relationship*, *online relationships*, *development of online relationships*, *developmental theories of online relationships*, and *maintenance of online relationships*.

## Online Romantic Relationships

### Motives

Kalmus, Realo, and Siibak (2011) explored personality traits and their relationship with motives for Internet use. The study included 1,100 participants ranging in age from 15 to 74 (Kalmus, et al., 2011). The participants were either Russian or Estonian in ethnicity (Kalmus, et al., 2011). The participants were obtained through their previous participation in the third replication of Me, the World, the Media survey (Kalmus, et al., 2011). The authors used three measures. The first was a frequency of Internet use that consisted of three items that was created by Kalmus, et al., (2011). The second was a survey created by Pruulmann- Vengerfeldt, Kalmus, and Runnel (2008). This measure asked about 31 online activities. The core items were taken from the survey created for the UCLA 2001 Me, the World, the Media study (UCLA, 2001); however, additional items were created by Pruulmann- Vengerfeldt et al. (2008). The final measure was a 10-item personality inventory (Gosling , Rentfrow, & William, 2009). The study additionally asked for participant demographic information.

The results of study by Kalmus, et al., (2011) indicated there were two categories of motives of internet use into which the 31 online activities could be divided. The first category was social media and entertainment (SME) related Internet use (Kalmus, et al., (2011). This category consisted of activities including searching for and managing information regarding friends and acquaintances, communicating with friends and acquaintances, searching for entertainment, and participating in blogs or writing comments. The other category was work and information (WI) related Internet use

(Kalmus, et al., 2011). This category consisted of activities including work related communication with clients and colleagues, searching for practical information (weather, timetables), and within organization communication. This result accounted for 37.7% of the variance (Kalmus, et al., 2011).

An additional 9% of the variance was accounted for by the results of pairing the sociodemographic information with the motivations for Internet use indicated that there was a negative correlation between age and the SME motivation to use the Internet (Kalmus, et al., 2011). This means the younger the participant the more they had this type of motivation to use the Internet. Age had a curvilinear relationship with the WI motivation for Internet use (Kalmus, et al., 2011). This means that the youngest and the oldest participants had the least amount of motivation to use the Internet for those types of activities (Kalmus, et al., 2011). Participants between the ages of 30 and 44 had the highest motivation to use the Internets for these types of activities. Women had the higher motivation to use the Internet for WI online activities than did men, although men had a higher motivation to use the Internet for SME activities than did women (Kalmus et al., 2011). Russian speaking participants had a higher motivation to use the Internet for SME activities, while Estonian speaking individuals had a higher motivation to use the Internet for WI activities (Kalmus et al., 2011). WI online activities were both positively correlated with number of years in education and perceived level of income. SME online activities were negatively correlated with number of years in education, but positively correlated with perceived level of income (Kalmus, et al., (2011).

The results for the relationships between personality characteristics and motivations for Internet use indicated people who were higher in Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness used the Internet more for WI online activities (Kalmus, et al. 2011). People who were higher in Openness to Experience and Neuroticism, but lower in Conscientiousness used the Internet more for SME online activities Kalmus, et al. (2011). The results for the predictors of Internet use motives indicated the strongest negative predictor of SME was greater age (Kalmus, et al., 2011). The reported frequency of Internet use in a variety of contexts explained a further 20% of the variance. Additionally, ethnic minority status, lower education, and higher level of civic participation were also predictors of *SME* Internet use, but only accounted for 2% of the variance. WI was best predicted by the reported frequency of Internet use in a variety of context by individuals with higher education, higher level of civic participation, ethnic majority status, and higher perceived income (Kalmus, et al., 2011).

McCown, Fischer, Page, and Homant (2001) explored online relationships in relation to gender. Thirty undergraduates consisting of 17 men and 13 women participated in the study. The participants were each asked to complete a multipart questionnaire that included demographic information, computer use characteristics and personality styles (McCown, et al., 2001). Computer use questions were developed by McCown et al. to assess how frequently and in what manner did the participants use the Internet. The Personality Mosaic Inventory (Kahn, 1990) was utilized in the McCown et al. study to assess basic personality style. There are six styles of personality according to the inventory; these include realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and



conventional (McCown, et al., 2001). Realistic individuals tend to be independent and physically strong and deal with problems in practical ways (McCown, et al., 2001). Investigative individuals tend to be conceptually and theoretically oriented (McCown, et al., 2001). They are curious, intellectual, and introspective. Artistic individuals tend to prefer to interact with their world through artistic expression rather than through other ways (McCown, et al., 2001). Social individuals tend to demonstrate empathy, tact, and insight in their relationships. They have strong verbal skills and use feelings, words, and ideas to work with people (McCown, et al., 2001). Enterprising individuals tend to be energetic, confident, and dominant types. They tend to demonstrate strong organizational skills and enjoy power and status (McCown, et al., 2001). Finally, conventional individuals prefer structure and orderliness (McCown, et al., 2001). They are careful and accurate in their work (McCown, et al., 2001)

The overall results of McCown, et al. indicated the participants met an average of 10.3 people online (men 11.1 and women 9.3) in an unspecified amount of time (McCown, et al., 2001). Use of chat rooms was the most popular way of meeting people, with 50% of reported contacts being through this method. Eighty percent of the relationships formed by the participants were considered to be casual and friendly (men 88.3% and women 69.3%), while 6% formed intimate or romantic relationships (men 11.8% and women 30.8%) (McCown, et al., 2001). Additionally, 40% of participants talked on the telephone to their online partner and 33.3% of participants meet face-to-face with their online partner (McCown, et al., 2001). There was no significant difference between genders with regards to meeting offline. Despite communicating often with their

partners and utilizing several types of communication sources, sixty three percent of the participants stated they had lied in their online communication about either their physical appearance or their age (McCown, et al., 2001).

The results further indicated the most commonly endorsed personality style for individuals who engaged in online relationships was the social style (McCown, et al., 2001). Additionally, none of the participants endorsed the conventional personality style. Finally, 83% of those who talked on the phone with the people they met online also met them in real life (McCown, et al., 2001). None of the participants met face-to-face with the people they met online without talking on the phone with them first. The study had a small sample size consisting of 30 participants.

Wang and Chang (2010) developed a scale to determine what motivates people to have relationships via the Internet. To test the validity of the scale, the authors recruited 36 Internet users who were asked a series of questions about why they engaged in cyber relationships. From the data collected, 56 test items were developed (Wang & Chang, 2010). The measure was then tested after having 500 paper copies distributed randomly at a Taiwanese university. Two hundred forty-eight students responded to the survey. The data collected suggested there were nine cyber relationship motives that fit in three major categories in this sample (Wang & Chang, 2010)

Wang and Chang (2010) found three motivators for an individual to communicate online and develop relationships. The first was adventure, a motivating force that was found to include two different aspects. Its' first aspect is anonymity, a factor which was crucial for both men and women as it allows for privacy and security of identity. When

an individual thought that they were secure from criticism, they were more willing to share intimate details about themselves such as their spiritual beliefs, their sexual orientations and their political ideals. The second aspect was the ability to meet new people as the Internet opened up the opportunity to meet people from all around the world (Wang & Chang, 2010).

The second motivator was a desire to escape to the virtual world; it also has two aspects (Wang & Chang, 2010). The first was escape from the real world. Internet users considered online communication to be a way to escape from real life worries or activities. Thus individuals seemed to be able to relax while using dialogue with others in an online environment. The other aspect was social compensation. Online communication was used to overcome potential problems such as social anxiety in face-to-face situations. It provided a less stressful way for some to connect with others (Wang & Chang, 2010). The final dimension is romance. This also has two aspects. The first was love. Internet users were interested in the possibility of using the online environment to find love. The other aspect was sexual expression. Many Internet users indicated that they used the online environment to pursue the possibility of having sexual relationships (Wang & Chang, 2010).

There were several limitations mentioned in the presented literature about motives. Kalmus, Realo, and Siibak (2011) reported that the scale that was used for measuring personality was not detailed enough to gain a full understanding of the relationship between personality traits and motives for Internet use. The other limitation was that each of the presented studies focused on a select population for the participant

pool and therefore it was unclear how the results of the studies would translate to other populations (Kalmus, Realo, & Siibak, 2011; McCown, Fischer, Page, & Homant, 2001; Wang & Chang, 2010).

Based on the reviewed literature, several statements can be made about motivations to engage in activities on the Internet. Firstly, both men and women engage in communication via the Internet either for work or making personal connections. Work communication and activities were more prevalent in the typical employment age range and not as prevalent in younger or older individuals (Kalmus, et al. 2011). Individuals who were higher in Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness used the Internet more for WI online activities (Kalmus, et al., 2011). Individuals who engaged in Personal communications were the most prevalent in the younger individuals; this type of motivation steadily declined as ages of the individuals increased (Kalmus, et al., 2011). People who were also higher in Openness to Experience and Neuroticism, but lower in Conscientiousness used the Internet more for SME online activities. Secondly, the literature found that relationship formation was a motivation for Internet use. Both men and women were forming casual/ friend and romantic relationships on the Internet. Men were more likely to form casual/ friend relationships, while women were more likely to form romantic relationships (McCown, et al., 2001). Other motivations for using the Internet were adventure and an escape from reality (Wang & Chang, 2010).

### **Perceptions**

Researchers have determined that an individual who has the motive of obtaining romance through the Internet must also have either a neutral or positive general

perception about online relationships (Anderson, 2005). Additionally they believe that the individual must view the online context as both valid and as a reality based way to meet potential partners (Anderson, 2005). An individual that does not have an affinity for computers may have difficulty seeing the potential of using the device for dating purposes (Anderson, 2005). Anderson (2005) explored the perceptions about online romantic relationships. The study focused on individuals who had never used the Internet as a way to have a romantic relationship (Anderson, 2005). Anderson looked at factors including these peoples' amount of Internet use, their Internet affinity, perceived realism and their romantic beliefs (Anderson, 2005). Internet affinity was defined as an individual's natural level of attraction to the Internet (Anderson, 2005). Perceived realism was said to represent an individual's ability to recognize the Internet as a real environment (Anderson, 2005). This quantitative study utilized a sample of 177 college students who had never engaged in an online romantic relationship (Anderson, 2005). The measures used in the study included a television affinity scale, a perceived realism scale, perceptions about online romantic relationships, a romantic belief scale (Sprecher & Metts, 1999), and the amount of Internet use. The television affinity scale measures an attachment to a specific medium (Rubin, 1981). This 5 item scale was adapted to apply to the Internet environment by Anderson (2005). The perceived realism scale measures to what degree the participants feel the Internet represented real life (Rubin, 1981). Perceptions about online romantic relationships were measured by taking the average composite score of a three item assessment of the participants' attitude toward romantic relationships that were formed and developed online (Anderson, 2005). The amount of

Internet use was measured by asking how many hours per day and week each participant spent doing online activities such as web surfing, online gaming, and chatting (Anderson, 2005).

The results indicated that those participants who felt a greater attachment to the Internet also had a more positive view about the possibilities for online romantic relationships (Anderson, 2005). According to the author, this positive relationship had a medium to large effect size and accounted for 16.8% of the variance (Anderson, 2005). The results also indicated that there was a positive relationship between the amount of hours the individual spent online and their perceptions about online romantic relationships (Anderson, 2005). This relationship accounted for 12.25% of the variance. That there would be a positive relationship between the perceived realism of the Internet and individuals' perception about online romantic relationships was not supported at a significant level (Anderson, 2005). By studying individuals who had not previously engaged in online romantic relationships, the author was able to make assumptions about concepts that those individuals who did engage in online relationships might probably hold (Anderson, 2005).

Based on the results from the work by Anderson (2005), participants in research who have met their partners through an online setting are thought to already see the Internet as both valid and reality based (Anderson, 2005). Others raised the question about who would also have a high affinity for the Internet (Anderson, 2005). Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) explored individual perceptions about online romantic relationships. Two hundred and two individuals were recruited from online discussion

forums to participate in the qualitative study (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). The majority of the participants were females from the United States (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). The participants reported that they met their online romantic partners in a variety of ways including common-interest chat rooms and through family or friend introductions (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). A family or friend introduction occurs when a family member or friend introduces the individual to another individual via electronic chat. This introduction was likely to happen at an Internet based video game or in a chat room and/ or through web-based personal advertisements or dating sites (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). All of the participants were asked to respond the following narrative questions “Please tell me the story of your online romantic relationship. How did you meet? How did you develop your relationship? If your relationship is over, how did it end? If it is ongoing, how are you maintaining your relationship? From your perspective, what is online romance like? What do you think are the issues of concern and sources of joy in such relationships?” (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007 p.213)

The results of this study yielded five themes based on the narratives that the participants were asked to write: intense emotional arousal, high levels of caution, strong linguistic connections, high numbers of extramarital affairs, and lack in support from offline family and friends (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Emotional intensity refers to the ability to elicit both positive and negative strong reactions within an online environment. One hundred twenty seven narratives stated that, despite the physical limitations of the online medium, participants reported experiencing both positive and

negative emotions involving their relationships (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). These included love, happiness, fear, anger, and sadness. Participants in the study perceived their relationships to be intimate and acknowledged having strong emotional reactions to both the online interactions and to the relationship in general (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007).

The caution theme refers to the warnings given by participants about online romances. Ninety two of the narratives written by the participants talked about the deception they had received from their online partners while engaging in an online romantic relationship. In addition to the warnings, participants also offered advice (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Many of the narratives suggested techniques that online users could use to protect themselves when engaging in online romances such as completing background checks on the potential partners, and never giving out information such as telephone numbers (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007).

Strong linguistic connections refers to the positive and negative implications of the nonphysical nature of online romances. Eighty eight of the participants indicated that the words of the other person were experienced as being extremely powerful and provided a strong connection to the individual (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). However, participants did report that textual communication was not enough to sustain the relationship. There came a point in which the couple could no longer learn anything more about the other person via text and felt that learning more could only come from seeing one another face-to-face. Additionally, participants noted that transmission of symbol representing physical actions known as emoticons that are supposed to stand for



hugs and kisses did not fulfill the need for actual physical contact (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007).

There were differing perspectives about extramarital affairs discussed in the narratives. Fifty-four of the 202 participants reported they were having an affair with someone online because their relationship in the face-to-face world was having problems (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). These individuals stressed that the problems in their real life relationship caused them to look for someone online to have a relationship with. The reverse was felt by the rest of the participants who felt that the affair of the online romantic relationship caused damage in their relationship in real life (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007).

Another theme that was expressed by the participants was the lack of support given to them by offline family and friends. In 50 of the narratives, the participants focused on their perceptions that offline family and friends seemed to think that individuals who were online were either psychos or serial killers (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). The participants additionally reported that their relatives felt that it was impossible to really know someone via the Internet. It was further felt by participants that it was difficult to convince individuals that it was possible to know someone without physically meeting them (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007).

The results of the study suggest that when the participant was engaged in an online romantic relationship, they were likely to experience strong linguistics and high emotional arousal with their partner while communicating in an online context (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). However, these forms of communication did not

seem to meet the entire needs of the relationship. At some point the couple decided to transition the relationship into real life. There was an amount of caution that the participant exhibited when engaging in an online romantic relationship to protect themselves from deceit. Additionally, individuals found their offline family and friends to be less supportive to the concept of online relationships. According to Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007), the sample used in this study was large consisting of 202 participants and the amount of variance explained through significant results was also relatively large.

According to other research findings, the perception of an individual about online relationships is determined by the type of goals they are expecting to achieve from a particular relationship (Sanderson, Keiter, Miles, & Yopyk, 2007). Sanderson, Keiter, Miles, and Yopyk (2007) found that individuals who wanted to form long-term romantic relationships with members of the opposite sex in a face-to-face venue deliberately behaved in ways that signaled their desire for such a relationship; they looked around more often, chatted more, and made more physical contact with those to whom they were talking than those without this goal of forming a relationship (Sanderson, et al., 2007). Those individuals who had the social goal of finding intimacy and long term romantic relationships choose to engage in self-disclosure, trust, and interdependence with another person according to these authors (Sanderson, et al., 2007).

In an online venue, the perceptions about an online romantic relationship could also depend on the type of relationship that the individual is looking for. This was hypothesized by (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). The authors investigated relational goals, self-disclosure, online dating experience, online dating success, and the amount of

time in the relationship in a quantitative study (Gibbs, et al., 2006). The study utilized 349 participants, who were solicited via the website Match.com (Match.com, 2012). Each participant was asked to complete a survey instrument that was based on a combination of established scales. The scales were taken from literature on self-presentation and relationship formation in an online context. Self-disclosure was measured through the General Disclosiveness Scale (Wheeless, 1978). Perceived success was measured through two dimensions previously used by Walther (2001). A Likert type scale was developed for this study to measure Internet experience. The survey covered online dating history and goals, online dating experiences and attitudes, online dating disclosure, perceived online dating success and intimacy, and demographic information (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006).

The results indicated that the participants who placed greater importance on transitioning to a face-to-face context for long term relationships were more honest in their online disclosure than those participants who were not (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). The results also indicated that those participants who placed greater importance on transitioning to a face-to-face context for long term relationships had greater amounts of online self-disclosures than those who did not. Additionally those participants who placed greater importance on transitioning to face-to-face long term relationships had more intentional self-disclosure than did the others (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). These results indicate that individuals who wanted a long term romantic relationship with the person they met online had predetermined intentions of transitioning the relationship into real life prior to meeting their specific partner. They also had more self-disclosure while

communicating with potential mates online. The results further indicated that individuals that had higher levels and intentional self-disclosures within an online romantic relationships felt they had greater strategic success in the relationship (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). However strategic success was not found significantly through honest self-disclosures. This meant the participants did not find the use of honest self-disclosers in communication to be an indication of the success of the relationship (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). The sample population used in this study was large; however it consisted primarily of female participants. All of the significant results had a P value of .05 or .01, which indicated a strong correlation between variables (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006).

Mazur, Burns, and Emmers-Sommer (2000) further looked at the perceptions about online relationships by attempting to understand the effects of communication apprehension and the presence of introversion in individuals who want to engage in this type of relationship. Communication apprehension in face-to-face relationships was defined as a fear associated with communication with another person. In an online context, communication apprehension is defined as the fear of computer use rather than the apprehension about actual or anticipated communication (Mazur, Burns, & Emmers-Sommer, 2000). According to the authors, communication apprehension and introversion in face-to-face interactions often negatively impacts a relationship as both of these behaviors do not increase the interdependence between the two individuals. Interdependence was defined as the communication between the two people that impacts the rewards and costs of being in that relationship.

In order to see if the same held true for the online context, these authors recruited participants via the Internet for a cross-sectional survey. The participants completed the Introversion Scale (McCroskey, 1997), Interdependence Scale (Kelley et al., 1983), and the PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1982). One hundred and forty-two participants ranging in age from 18 to 55 took part in this study. Of that total 67 were male and 75 were female. The results indicated that the individuals who were communicatively apprehensive reported higher levels of perceptual interdependence with those they had relationships within an online setting. Perceptual interdependence is the perceived connectedness between the two individuals (Mazur, Burns, & Emmers-Sommer, 2000). Individuals with high levels with communication apprehension interacted less, dated less frequently, and had fewer intimate relationships in a face-to-face context. However, computer mediated communication seemed to be an easier environment for individuals with communication apprehension. Such individuals seemed to be better able to use the online environment to fulfill their inclusion needs (Mazur, Burns, & Emmers-Sommer, 2000). The results further indicated that there was a negative relationship between introversion and perceptual interdependence in online relationships. Individuals who were introverted also kept to themselves more so than extroverts and did not perceive themselves as interdependent with those they had relationships with online. These results indicate that individuals who have difficulties meeting and interacting with people in a real life setting may be less inhibited in an online environment and have more social connections with people in that context (Mazur, Burns, & Emmers-Sommer, 2000).

There were several limitations mentioned in the presented literature about perceptions. The one limitation in the study conducted by Anderson (2005) was that their population consisted of only Caucasian heterosexual individuals and as such could not be generalized to all individuals who utilize the Internet. Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) reported two limitations for their study. The first was purposive sampling. The sample population was not elicited randomly and might not therefore represent the generalized population. Another limitation was in this study's analysis of self-reported data. The authors considered this to be a limitation as there was no certainty that researcher's interpretation of the participants' self-reported data accurately reflected the perspectives of the participants. There were several limitations discussed by Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino, (2006). The first was response rate. The survey had a lower response rate, but was still on par with other studies in this area. The study had 349 participants and an average amount of participants in other studies was not provided by the authors. The next limitation was the fact that all of the participants came from the United States and were heterosexual females, a fact that probably does not generalize well to the larger population. Finally, the study assessed perceived success by the participants rather than actual success of the relationships. This was considered a limitation because the participants were actively using the online dating site, which made measuring actual success rates impossible (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). There were several limitations identified by Mazur, Burns, and Emmers-Sommers (2000). The first was that socioeconomic factors might have prohibited individuals from being able to participate in

the study. The other was while each of the hypotheses in the study were supported, the significance levels were only low to moderate.

There were several areas to expand the literature knowledge on perceptions. According to Anderson (2005), suggestions for future research involve the inclusion of measures affecting attitudes toward formation and maintenance of online romantic relationships could be added to assess interactions among these and perception of online romantic relationships. Anderson suggested this due to the amount of research pointing to gender differences in computer attitudes (Anderson, 2005). Further research that was recommended by Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) would be to include an analysis of the multiple communication contexts used in an online romantic relationship. The multiple contexts used in an online romantic relationship might include text based, voice communication through the use of a telephone or computer, and voice communication face-to-face. Further research that was recommended by Mazur, Burns, & Emmers-Sommer, (2000) was the use of a longitudinal study to analyze actual success in online romantic relationships.

Based on the reviewed literature, several statements can be made about perceptions of online romantic relationships. The individuals who naturally have an attraction to the Internet had more positive perceptions about online relationships. Additionally, the perception of the individual was based on achieving the relationship goals they are expecting to have. Individuals who engaged in online relationships seem to perceive that they can expect to have a strong linguistic and high emotional arousal with the other person even though they show caution during interactions to protect themselves

from deceit. They also seem to perceive that their offline family and friends will be less supportive of an online relationship.

### **Choosing Potential Mates**

Wu and Chiou (2009) addressed mate selection through understanding the cognitive processes by which one makes a choice in partner. These processes appear to reduce the users' efforts and to make good predictions about the fit of a potential partner. The first cognitive process that was chosen by the authors was that searching through more options may lead users to accelerated processing by reducing the amount of time spent on each alternative profile (Wu & Chiou, 2009). Such self-induced time pressure can lessen users' ability to distinguish between better and worse options. The second cognitive process was that more searching may reduce users' cognitive resources. When cognitive resources are low, individuals may not be able to ignore irrelevant information (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The last cognitive process was that the cognitive load may induce users to compromise by sacrificing some of the traits that were initially important to them (Wu & Chiou, 2009). It is important to understand how an ordered list of profiles from the use of search tools in online-dating Web sites affects the users' searches and choices. More specifically, the temptation to search might reduce the choice quality by reducing the average quality of the consideration set in a way that is not compensated by increased selectivity (Wu & Chiou, 2009).

One hundred twenty eight participants between the ages of 18 and 36 from southern Taiwan participated in the study (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The participants were recruited from the subject pool of an online-gaming addiction survey completed by the



National Science council of Taiwan. Additionally all participants had memberships to online dating Web sites (Wu & Chiou, 2009). All of the participants searched for potential mates on Yahoo Taiwan as it offers a match index based on a 100-point scale to describe compatibility between the participant and the chosen option (Wu & Chiou, 2009). Each participant was asked to enter 16 characteristics into the website that would describe an ideal partner for them. The website then provided 100 possible profiles based on the characteristics selected by the participant (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The participants were assigned into one of three groups. The first group was asked to view a large amount of profiles. The authors decided that a large amount was 90 out of the 100 that were provided by the website (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The second group was asked to view a moderate amount of profiles. The authors decided that a moderate amount was 60 out of the 100 that were provided by the website (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The last group was asked to view a small amount of profiles. The authors decided that a small amount was 30 out of the 100 that were provided by the website (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The profiles were ranked from the closest match which was number 1 on the list. Each participant was given sufficient time to examine the possible matches and make a final selection (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The participants were asked to rate the perceived number of available options they had to choose from (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The variable of time searching was measured as the number of unique profiles that were examined by the participant. This measurement was to determine whether providing more profile options triggered more searching by the participant. True goodness of fit of match of each option was determined by how many of the 16 characteristics they possessed. The least amount of the 16

characteristics of an ideal partner that were inputted into the computer website by each of the participant indicated the worse choice (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The authors called this a preference difference (Wu & Chiou, 2009).

The results indicated that the more possible options that participant was able to examine, the more searching was done (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The group that was able to examine 90 out of the produced 100 profiles had the highest amount of searching ( $M=51.23$ ), 60 profiles was in the middle with the amount of time searching ( $M=36.79$ ), and 30 profiles had the least amount of time searching ( $M=18.47$ ). The profiles were generated by the computer website based on the 16 characteristics that each of the participants input about their ideal partner (Wu & Chiou, 2009). Additionally, the results indicated that the preference difference was greatest when the number of available options was large ( $M=8.84$ ) and smallest when the number of options was small ( $M=4.33$ ). Finally, the preference difference on the chosen option was also greatest when the option numbers was largest ( $M=8.65$ ) and smallest when option numbers was small ( $M=5.35$ ) Preference differences was a term created by the authors to indicate how closely matched the profile was to the participant's original 16 characteristics that they selected about their ideal partner (Wu & Chiou, 2009). The fewer characteristics that the profile had, the greater the preference difference between what the participant was looking for and what was in the profile Male participants' preference difference for the chosen option was greater than that of female participants (Wu & Chiou, 2009).

Yang and Chiou (2010) looked at the decision making process utilized by an individual when selecting individuals to correspond with through online dating Web sites.

It was hypothesized that having a large number of search options triggered excessive searching that led to poorer decision making and reduced selectivity in finding partners for online romantic relationships (Yang & Chiou, 2010). The authors argued that the more time individuals spent searching through dating profiles in order to find a potential match on dating Web sites the more likely they were to make a less than optimal final choice in a potential partner (Yang & Chiou, 2010). The greater amount of searching was thought to reduce the individual's cognitive ability to see irrelevant information and screen out inferior options. The authors classified individuals into two groups based upon their modes of seeking relationships (Yang & Chiou, 2010). A maximizer is an individual who more likely continuously looks for better options even after they have already made their initial choice (Yang & Chiou, 2010). A satisficer is an individual who stops looking at other possibilities or options once they have made their decision (Yang & Chiou, 2010). One hundred and twelve participants consisting of 58 males and 54 females were solicited from an online-friends web site (Yang & Chiou, 2010).

The results of the study suggested that when a person with maximizing tendencies examined a large amount of search options, their cognitive ability was decreased which makes it more difficult to ignore irrelevant information than a person with low maximizing tendencies (Yang & Chiou, 2010). Additionally, they were more likely to be distracted by attributes that are not pertinent to their initial search. The satisficers were less distracted by attributes that were not pertinent to their initial search as they were better able to ignore irrelevant information when given large amounts of search options (Yang & Chiou, 2010). These results indicated that when a person begins a search for

potential mates using a dating website, they typically have an idea of the types of characteristics they find attractive and want in a mate. However, the more searching the person does, the more options in people become apparent (Yang & Chiou, 2010). Those individuals who are maximizers lose focus on the characteristics that were originally important to them, which causes them to choose more poorly than those who are satisficers who despite the amount of searching do not lose focus of original attractive qualities (Yang & Chiou, 2010). The sample population utilized in the study was relatively small and all of the participants were found in Taiwan. All of the significant results had a P value of .05 or .01, which indicated a strong correlation between variables (Yang & Chiou, 2010).

Some of the characteristics that are included on dating Web sites are education level, age, and physical appearance. Skopek, Schulz, and Blossfeld (2011) explored how these characteristics impacted mate selection. According to Skopek et al (2011) an individual's education level has become a pivotal factor that influences partner selection. Men in more recent years have showed an increased preference for equally educated women (Skopek, et al., 2011)

The sample consisted of 12,608 users with an average age of 36. The average man browsed 138 profiles and sent out 12 first contact messages and received 4 reply messages (Skopek, et al., 2011). Women were less active in browsing profiles and sending initial contact messages. However, with almost the same average number of answers, they were evidently more successful in receiving replies to their contact offers (Skopek, et al., 2011). The variables that were used in the study were education, age, and

physical appearance. The participants were asked to provide their level of education. Another variable was age, which was controlled (Skopek, et al., 2011). It was identified that age and the relative age of partners as crucial factors for mate selection, and age homogamy is a particularly significant outcome in marriage markets. The final variable was physical attractiveness, which is regarded as another crucial factor in mate selection research (Skopek, et al., 2011). The authors' calculated the body mass index (BMI) from users' weight and height information and classified users into eight discrete body types (Skopek, et al., 2011).

The data was obtained from a German online dating site. The data covered the users' activities over a randomly chosen time between January and June 2007 (Skopek, et al., 2011). The dataset used in the present analysis contained user profile data and time-related data on e-mail exchanges between profiles. The authors' used these to reconstruct who sent an initial contact e-mail, and whether the contacted user replied to this e-mail (Skopek, et al., 2011). Additionally, the researchers had information about which other users' profiles a given user had been browsing through. Sociodemographic descriptors were used to characterize the users as the information collected from the database was collected anonymously (Skopek, et al., 2011).

The results indicated that when browsing profiles, both male and female initiators contacted other people with a higher probability when these people had similar educational levels (Skopek, et al., 2011). The results additionally reported that both male and female users avoided contacting people with lower educational attainment levels. The results indicated that the similarity in educational level significantly increased the amount

of replies to the sender (Skopek, et al., 2011). Thus, receivers replied to users' first contacts more often when they resembled them in terms of educational level. Age was not significantly correlated with education (Skopek, et al., 2011). However, physical appearance indicated that contacting and replying to somebody who was less physically attractive was less likely than contacting and replying to somebody who was similar. In addition, more attractive users were contacted or replied to with a higher probability than similar ones (Skopek, et al., 2011).

One limitation mentioned in the presented literature about choosing potential mates. Wu and Chiou (2009) mentioned that the current study did not ascertain which of the cognitive processes either prevented or diverted attention to worse options. Yang and Chiou (2010) noted a couple of limitations to their study. The first was that the maximizing characteristic was considered to be a global characteristic for that individual, that would impact their decision making process in all of their decisions. The other limitation was that there might be additional factors that might also trigger more searching and lead to worse choices. One limitation noted by Skopek, Schulz, and Blossfeld (2011) was that the data was not received directly from the participants. The data was obtained by the provider company of a German online dating website.

There were several ways to expand what is known about choosing a potential mate in an online setting. Further research mentioned by Wu and Chiou (2009) would be to identify which of the cognitive processes have the ability to prevent or divert attentions to worse options in options. Other potential research options would include understanding why men seem to be more susceptible to preference differences in chosen option than

women. Yang and Chiou (2010) suggested future research might add the concept of accuracy motivation to see if this makes a difference in decision making. Accuracy motivation is giving the participants some sort of reward in order to motivate them to make more accurate choices. In this study the reward to the participant would motivate them to pay closer attention to their initial chosen characteristics as they completed their searches for potential mates. Further research mentioned by Skopek, Schulz, and Blossfeld (2011) about mate selection would be to understand how initial contacts and replies through online communication based of educational similarities rate as indicators for eventual marriage patterns. Thus, studying individual strategies will expand our understanding of the relationship (Skopek, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2011).

Based on the reviewed literature, several statements can be made about choosing a potential mate in an online context. Individuals will abandon predetermined lists of characteristics that their ideal mate should have the longer they look at profiles on a dating website (Wu & Chiou, 2009, Yang & Chiou, 2010). Both men and women sent initial and reply messages to individuals that were either equal or a higher level of education than they were. Perceived attractiveness also elicited more initial and reply responses in both men and women, however age did not (Skopek, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2011).

### **Self Expression**

Once an individual has perceived the Internet as a realistic venue through which to find a potential mate and is motivated to use it, he or she must decide how to present themselves. Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) theorize that an individual has two

ways of presenting who they are in an online setting. The first is as their true self. The term of true self was informed by Jung's (1953) distinction between the unconscious self and its public mask, the persona (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The true self represents the parts of the individual's personality that they feel that they are unable to share with others in their environment. The second type proposed by the authors is the actual self that contains those qualities that one usually expresses to others in the present (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002).

The true self may be difficult to express in face-to-face or more traditional ways of meeting potential mates due to aspects that have been called gating features (Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007). Gating features include aspects of individuals that are readily apparent such as physical unattractiveness, stuttering, tone of voice, visible shyness or social anxiety. They might also include odd facial expressions, eye aversions, visible handicaps, and/ or deformities. These gating features may prevent individuals from developing relationships with others in traditional dating scenarios (Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007).

In an online setting, the true self may be easier to portray because in this venue disadvantages that hinder interaction with others in person are not seen right away. Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) conducted three experiments looking at self-presentation in an online setting. The first experiment explored whether an individual's true self rather than the actual self would be more active and accessible to them during an interaction with a new acquaintance online (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). Forty six participants consisting of 18 males and 28 females were obtained through an



undergraduate psychology course at a university. The participants were given a computerized reaction time task that consisted of random trait words (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). Each word was presented in the center of the screen until the participant responded as being true of either their true self or actual self. A total of 45 words were presented to the participants, 35 of the words were selected by Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) from the normative likeability ratings scale (Anderson, 1986). Normative Likability Ratings Scale consisted of 555 personality trait words such as bossy and wise that were selected by Anderson, (1968). The other ten words were generated by the participants prior to the experiment. The participants were asked to list up to 10 words that represent characteristics that they actually possess and are able to express in social settings (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The participants were also asked to make a list of characteristic words that they actually possessed but were not easily able to express (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The most commonly used words in both categories were included in the survey. The participants were then asked to either interact with another person either in a face-to-face or in an Internet context for 5 or 15 minutes (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The results of the experiment indicated that the participants were faster to respond to words that represented their true self description traits in an online setting interaction than to words that represented their actual self description (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). This was not the case in the face-to-face context where actual self description traits were faster responded to. This is relevant as it indicates that the participants more easily identified to the self that is presented to others in a social in face-to-face context only, which follows

research that states that the true self maybe more difficult to express in a face-to-face context due to potential gating features (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002).

The second experiment explored the results from experiment 1 further (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The authors hypothesized that it was possible that the results of the experiment were due to the anticipation of the interaction rather than qualities of the interaction itself (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). Thirty six participants consisting of 18 males and 18 females participated in the experiment. The participants were gathered from undergraduate psychology classes at a university. The participants were given a computerized reaction time task that consisted of random trait words (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). Forty five words were presented in the center of the screen until the participant responded as being true of either their true self or actual self (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). Once the word phase was administered the participant was informed that their partner was still working on the first phase and therefore would skip it and move on to the next phase while waiting. After it was completed, the participant was informed of the deception and was asked questions (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The results were the same as in experiment 1 in the word phase; however when there was no interaction between the participants there was no change in the activation level of their true self versus actual self concepts (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). This is important because when there is no interaction between the participant and their online partner, the participant did not have to identify with either self (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002).

The final experiment explored two key ingredients necessary for relationship development. The two ingredients are reciprocal self-disclosure and the ability to present one's desired self and have it be perceived and accepted as valid by others (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The authors hypothesized that an individual should be better able to express their true selves over the Internet and have that self accepted and validated by others in that context when compared to those interacting in a face-to-face context (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The experiment utilized 20 female and 20 male participants who were recruited from the same college campus as the first two experiments (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The participants were asked to meet for a single 40 minute session with a partner of the opposite sex. Half of the pairs met in a face-to-face setting the other half met in an online context. Prior to meeting their partner, each participant was asked to complete the word phase. In the word phase, the participants were asked to make lists of words that represent both their actual and true self (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). They were also asked to list a maximum of five characteristics that they would most like to see in a future romantic partner and five characteristics that they would like to see in that of a close friend (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). After the 40 minute session, they were asked a series of question that rated the likability of the interaction. They were also asked to list a maximum of 10 characteristics they believed the partner to actually have (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002).

The sample population utilized in the study was relatively small. All of the significant results had a P value of .05 or .01, which indicated a strong correlation

between variables (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The lists created by the participants about their actual and true characteristics were compared to what partner said about them, creating an intercoder reliability of 94.4 percent. The results indicated that those who interacted in the online context significantly liked their partner more than those who met in the face-to-face context (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). Additionally the results indicated that the participants who interacted in the online context successfully presented their true selves to their partners to a significantly greater extent than did those in the face-to-face context (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002). The results further indicated that those participants who interacted in the face-to-face context were no more successful in conveying their true selves than their actual selves to their partners (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). The results further indicated that those individuals who participated in the online context had a high correlation between liking their partner and a tendency to project the characteristics of an ideal close friend or romantic partner onto their partner more than those in the face-to-face context.

McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) looked at the formation of online Internet relationships when individuals disclose their true self to their potential partners. They hypothesized that the individual who is better able to disclose their true self to others in an online context would be more likely to form more intimate relationships online and would in turn transition their online relationships into real life relationships with greater ease (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). They hypothesized that online relationships do not form as traditional ones do such as through physical attraction initially, but are

more substantively grounded in mutual expression of true selves and the discovery of common interests (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Their assumption was that expressing one's true self and the discovery of common interests more than physical attractiveness creates relationship stability. McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) conducted an initial study and a follow up to address self expression within an online environment. The study explored how individuals expressed their true selves and how this influenced the development of a relationship (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Twenty Usenet newsgroups were selected for the study. A Usenet is a worldwide discussion system. The newsgroups that were selected were involved with social topics such as astronomy, gothic fashion, and history (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Groups that dealt with personal notices and requests for pen pals were excluded as the authors wanted to explore relationships that formed naturally rather than from those individuals specifically looking for a partner. There were a total of 538 participants consisting of 333 females and 234 males (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). The participants were asked to fill out a 36 item survey. The survey contained items designed to assess the relationship between social anxiety, loneliness, expression of the true self, type of relationship, the depth of the relationship formed, and behavioral actions in an online context (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Six of the items were taken from the Interaction Anxiousness scale (Leary, 1983), 10 were taken from the Levels of development in Online Relationship Scale (Parks & Floyd, 1995), and 5 items were taken from the UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell, 1996). Four questions addressed the respondent's true self and whether they felt they could more easily share central aspects

of their identity with an online relationship. Two questions addressed the intimacy of the relationship and one addressed the participant's comfort level in the pace in which the relationship developed. The last questions addressed specific behaviors found in relationships in an online context (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002).

The results indicated that people were more likely to express true facets of themselves to others in an online setting than in other areas of their lives (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). This self-disclosure allowed for quicker development of a strong and more intimate attachment to the other person. Additionally, participants were likely to bring their Internet friends into their real lives through adding phone calls, exchanging letters and pictures, and finally meeting in real life (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002).

In the follow up study, 354 out the 568 participants responded to an additional survey two years after the original survey (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). The rest of the original participants could not be reached through the email address provided in the original study. The follow up study addressed the stability of the relationships once they had transitioned from the online into real life. The study included the same measures as was included in the original one (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). The results indicated that relationships that were developed online and transitioned to face-to-face when both individuals disclosed their true selves were just as stable as those that began and developed purely in a real world setting (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). These results supported the assumption that relationships formed online gain in being more substantively grounded in mutual expression of true selves and the discovery of common

interests and were therefore more likely to be durable and stable over time. The sample used in study was large and the amount of variance explained through significant results was also relatively large (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002).

There were several limitations mentioned in the presented literature about self expression. The study seemed to be limited because the participants were all university students, which decreases the generalizability to other populations. The other limitation was that the study did not include same sex couples in the study (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). A limitation was that the study did not include same sex couples in the study (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Further research would be to replicate the study using another population in order to determine if these results are indeed generalizable (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002).

After reviewing the literature, some statements about self expression in an online context can be made. The first is that it is easier to express one's true and actual self to others in an online setting than it is to do so in a face-to-face setting. The individuals that participated in online chat liked their partner and were able to project the characteristics of an ideal close friend or romantic partner onto their partner better than people in face-to-face relationships.

### **Theory of Relationship Development**

Ji and Lieber (2008) applied social penetration theory to the online setting and found the stages of the process of relationship development to be reversed from that which customarily appears in traditional settings. Social penetration theory states that during social interactions, a relationship can grow more intimate the more that the

interactions between the two people occur. Fifty men and 50 women between the ages of 20 and 25 years old participated in the quantitative study (Ji & Lieber, 2008). The participants all had college degrees and were actively seeking online romantic relationships. The individuals from Ji and Lieber's (2008) study who used a Chinese dating site to look for romantic relationships tended to open up faster in the beginning rather than more slowly as the theory suggest occurs in face-to-face relationships. The authors used JIAYUAN.com advanced search option for potential mate selection to locate the sampling frame. JIAYUAN is the leading Chinese dating site (JIAYUAN, n.d). The sampling frame was used to determine how often the individual logs on the Internet and identify inactive users (Ji & Lieber, 2008). There were 200 total participants consisting of 100 males and 100 females. Seven variables were used including gender, registration on JIAYUAN, content type (factual information, expectation, and opinions and values), use of poems, type of poems, mode of communication, and frame (Ji & Lieber, 2008). The authors noticed that as the relationship developed online, the rate in which self-disclosure occurred decreased over the course of the relationship. Greater relational benefits occurred when the deeper self disclosure occurred in the initial stages of the relationship rather than happening later in the relationship (Ji & Lieber, 2008). When intimate personal information was provided earlier in the relationship it helped to establish a stronger connection between the two people then if the same information was shared at a later point within the relationship (Ji & Lieber, 2008). According to Ji and Lieber (2008) cyberspace seemed to create an environment that easily promoted the expression of emotional disclosure throughout the development of the relationship due to



its anonymity and the lack of physical proximity it can provide (Ji & Lieber, 2008). Ji and Lieber's (2008) work provided support for Altman and Taylor's (1973) assumption that a constant cost-benefit analysis seems to account for the decision to share personal information and/or develop relationships with strangers. However, in an online environment self-disclosure happens rapidly in the beginning and slowly declines that the relationship develops (Ji & Lieber, 2008). This is contradictory to what Social Penetration Theory suggests would happen (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Social penetration theory states that during social interactions, a relationship grows more intimate the more that the interactions between the two people occur. Altman and Taylor (1973) theorize that self-disclosure, intimacy, and communication are indications of relationship development. As these three factors increase, the relationship progresses. The results of Ji and Lieber's (2008) study were important because they indicated that within online romantic relationships, the development process might pose a possible difference than to what was stated in the Social Penetration theory (Ji & Lieber, 2008).

### **Language**

Generally the first form of language that is used by a couple when communicating online is written text (Ledbetter & Larson, 2008). During the relationship, the couple may also begin to use rich media forms of communication such as voice chat webcams and finally have face-to-face meetings. Voice chat is communication that uses actual verbal speaking between people. Voice chat can be accomplished through computer programs such as Skype (Skype, 2012) or msn messenger (msn, 2012). Voice chat can also be accomplished through communication on the telephone. Web cams involve the use of

video cameras that are attached to the computer that allow the two people speaking to have a visual connection with one another.

Switching modalities of communication can impact the relationship (Ledbetter & Larson, 2008) Ramirez & Zhang (2007) explored the effects of switching communication modalities as relationships that began in an online setting transitioned into a face-to-face context. Communication that is shifted from leaner text only modes to richer multimodal forms had the potential to enhance partner impressions due to the fact that additional social information was being added to the relationship (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). Thus, the underlying assumption is that by using additional rich multimodal forms of communication as additional sources of information, partners can augment information that was originally received via text only communication (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). In text only communication, a person may provide a general description of themselves such as height, weight, eye color, and hair color. This information would be augmented for the person receiving the information if, at a later time they also receive a picture of the person (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007).

Ramirez and Zhang (2007) utilized a total of 864 participants who came from communication and business undergraduate classes at a Midwestern university. There were 395 males and 469 females. The 864 participants were placed into 259 pairs consisting of 173 cross sex pairs and 73 same sex pairs. There were two groups of participants in the study (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). The dyads were placed into either the online or face-to-face group (indicated in the study as FtF). The six conditions of relational development that were explored were intimacy (Relational Communication

Scale, Burgoon & Hale, 1987), Task-Social Orientation (Relational Communication Scale, Burgoon & Hale, 1987), Social Attraction (Social Attraction Subscale McCroskey & McCain), predicted outcome value (Sunnafrank, 1986), uncertainty level (Clatterbuck Evaluation Scale 7, Clatterbuck, 1979), and information seeking (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). The three task conditions in the study involved participants who never switched modalities, those who switched early in the relationship, and those who switched late in the relationship. The total length of time in the study was nine weeks. The no switch task condition lasted the entire 9 weeks, the late switch task condition lasted 6 weeks, and the early switch task condition lasted 3 weeks (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007).

The results of the study indicated that switching communication modalities within relationships were either beneficial or not depending on occurrence and timing of the switch (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). The results indicated that online relationships benefitted from the use of rich media communication including face-to-face meetings only after following brief periods of strictly text based communication (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). However, the relationships were adversely affected by the introduction of rich media communication including face-to-face meetings after following a longer period of strictly text based communication (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). Additionally, the results indicated that the persons in those relationships that remained online and did not switch modalities from text based to rich media communication felt more positive than those who had switched modalities about the overall level of the relational communication and other qualities of their interaction (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). Overall, it seems that the decision to switch communication modalities and the timing of

those switches were important factors for understanding the process of how an online romantic relationship was developed and maintained for these participants (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007).

Additionally, participants in the computer mediated communication-only condition reported significantly higher levels of intimacy and social orientation than those in the other conditions. Persons in the CMC-only and CMC-early switch conditions had significantly greater social attractiveness to their partners than for the other conditions (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). Results further indicated that respondents who participated in CMC-only and FtF- early switch conditions reported having significantly more positive predicted relationship outcomes than did the respondents in the other conditions. The FtF-only and FtF –late switch participants also reported significantly more positive relationship outcomes than did the CMC-late switch (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). Those in the CMC-late switch condition reported significantly greater relationship uncertainty than for did the other conditions (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007).

A study by Cornwell and Lundren (2001) supported the findings of Ramirez and Zhang (2007) that changes of modalities in modes of communication could diminish relationships. The authors explored four elements of a relationship including involvement, communication, space, and misrepresentation (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). In this study, involvement represented to what degree the person was involved in their online relationship (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). Communication represented the specific patterns and what types of modalities were used within the relationship. Misrepresentation represented how honest the individual was to their partner in the

relationship. A total of 36 males and 44 females participated in the study. All of the participants were located through chat rooms (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). Half of the participants were interviewed with questions specifically created for an online romantic relationship and the other half were interviewed using questions specifically created for a face-to-face romantic relationship (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). Seventeen questions were asked of all participants regarding their relationships and four additional questions asked the participants to rate the satisfaction and the degree of commitment they felt toward the relationship. The participants were also asked five questions relating about the issue of misrepresentation of the self to partners (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001).

In this study, participants who engaged in online romantic relationships were more likely to misrepresent themselves than those in a face-to-face relationship. The types of information that are misrepresented were those associated with physical appearance, employment, and education level (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). The study additionally found that individuals who were engaged in online romantic relationships approached the relationship with less seriousness and commitment than did the individuals involved in a face-to-face romantic relationship (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). Several respondents reported during their interviews that online romantic relationships were just for fun and should not be taken seriously. The authors speculated that these responses might have reflected a conception that an online romantic relationship is confined and that there are obstacles to the levels of intimacy possible (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001).

Forty percent of the participants in the cyberspace group in this study stated that they most often communicated with their partners in chat rooms with no respondent reporting that they had face-to-face contact with their online partners (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). Those participants in the face-to-face group indicated that 45 percent of their communication was done face-to-face, with no respondent reporting that there was any additional communication through either chat rooms or direct messaging (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). Fifty five percent of the cyberspace participants reported daily communication with partners, while 75 percent of face-to-face participants reported daily communication. The participants in the face-to-face group felt more involved and committed to their partners than did those in the cyberspace group (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). The results further indicated that 55 percent of the participants in the cyberspace group reported that they had misrepresented themselves to their partner versus 35 percent having so reported in the face-to-face group (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001). These results implied that individuals might feel that they are more able to present themselves in ways that are not entirely accurate in an online environment due to the lack of physical presence of their partner. Additionally, they implied that people who do engage in online relationships might place a different level of value on those relationships than those formed face-to-face (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001).

There were several limitations mentioned in the presented literature about language. Ramirez and Zhang (2007) noted one limitation in their study, which was that the study examined partnerships which were purely temporary alliances to work toward on task-oriented goals. As such the results have limited generalizability to the general

population. Cornwell and Lundren (2001) stated that one of the limitations to their study was that it did not discuss dissolution of online romantic relationships based on the misrepresentation found within the relationships.

Further research that would expand the literature of language found in online relationships would include examining patterns of communication in different types of relationships originating in CMC (Ramirez and Zhang, 2007). Cornwell and Lundren (2001) suggested that future research would include exploring dissolution of online romantic relationships.

There are several statements that can be made about language in online relationships. The first was that online relationships benefit from the use of rich media communication when there was only a brief amount of text based communication, however the relationship was adversely affected when the introduction of rich media communication was added into a relationship that had been using text based communication for a longer period of time. Another statement about language in online relationships was that people misrepresent themselves to potential mates more often than those do in face-to-face.

### **Maintenance**

Anderson and Emmers-Sommers (2006) addressed the issue of satisfaction in an online relationship. They selected six factors that had been shown to positively impact the maintenance of relationships in both face-to-face and online romantic relationships. The six factors relating to relationship satisfaction that were used in the study were trust, communication satisfaction, intimacy, similarity, commitment, and attributional

confidence (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). The factors were chosen based on assumptions by the researchers about the nature of relationships (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). The author's view was that, since many interactions in an online romantic relationship occur prior to the pair actually meeting in real life, an individual must develop a sense of trust in how their partner verbally states that they would act in a given situation. (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). Another factor explored in the study was communication satisfaction. Satisfying communication is thought to occur when one's expectations for the interaction are met and the person feels understood by her or his partner (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). Intimacy as a factor is how an individual has to adapt to the online context by creating alternatives to traditional forms of expressing intimacy such as the use of emoticons when using text communication or blowing a kiss to the other person if the couple is using a form of video chat (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). These are alternative forms of expressing intimacy because physical expression is not available in an online context. According (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). According to Anderson and Emmers-Sommers (2006), similarity is an important aspect in a face-to-face relationship as it allows a person to perceive themselves as similar to their partner and therefore increases a sense of connection. It was further suggested by Anderson & Emmers-Sommers (2006), that highly committed individuals need their relationships, feel more connection with their partners, and have a more extended and long-term perspective regarding their current relationship (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). The last factor explored in the study was attributional confidence. In a traditional relationship, this refers to the degree to



which a person perceives that the information obtained from their partner is adequate enough to explain his or her current thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006).

One hundred and fourteen participants who were in an exclusively online-based romantic relationship completed a web-based survey (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). The participants had not met in real life or spoken to their partners on the telephone or via a web-based telephone program. The participants were solicited through advertisements in chat rooms and in men and women newsgroups. The demographically diverse participants were 32 men and 82 women. Their educational levels ranged from high school graduates to holders of doctorate degrees (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). The participants were given several questionnaires in order to assess the different factors that were being explored. The battery of measurements included the measure of Perceived homophily (McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975). Homophily is the tendency of an individual to associate and form relationships with others who are similar (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). Other measures used in the study included an adaptation of the Investment model scale (Rusbult, 1980), MSIS (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982), the Dyadic trust scale (Larzalere & Huston, 1980), a short version of the Attributional Confidence scale (Clatterbuck, 1979), QMI (Norton, 1983), and the Interpersonal communication satisfaction scale (Hecht, 1978). Relationship length was measured by asking the participants to report how many weeks they were involved with their current romantic relationship (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). Length of time ranged from 3 to 53 with an average of 27.17 weeks. Time spent communicating

online was measured by asking participants how many hours of week they spent communicating to their online partners. Communication time ranged from 1 to 40 hours a week with the average of 17.64 (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006).

The levels of intimacy, trust, and communication satisfaction were the only factors out of the six that were explored that significantly predicted relationship satisfaction within an online romantic relationship (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). The results also indicated that the attitude similarity that was perceived between the participants differed significantly between those participants who had an average length relationship versus those in a lengthy one. Perceived intimacy levels differed significantly between those in lengthy relationships versus those in both average and short length online relationships (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). Those in lengthy online relationships also reported a deeper level of trust in their partner than did those participants in average or short length relationships. Finally, those participants who were in either lengthy or short relationships had greater attributional confidence than those who participated in an average length relationship (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2007). When satisfaction in the relationship was achieved by both partners, the individuals then begin to look at the level of success of the relationship (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2007).

Baker (2002) explored what constitutes a successful online romantic relationship. Eight couples were selected to complete a questionnaire and interview, and to provide the researcher with access to their e-mails (Baker, 2002). Both members of the couples needed to complete the questionnaire. The participants entered into the study after

answering an advertisement found in online media such as chat rooms or on the website of the author (Baker, 2002). According to Baker (2002) there were four main areas that could be important in determining success in online relationships. The four areas included the meeting place (common interests), obstacles within the relationship (distance, jobs, other relationships), timing (length of contact, pace of intimacy), and conflict resolution (metacommunication) (Baker, 2002). The meeting place area explored the various common interests that one may have this aspect might indicate the type of site someone would need to enter to find a compatible person. The obstacles area included negotiations or compromises such as possibility of having to change jobs or moving to a new location, juggling finances, or adjusting other real life relationships that an online couple might face during relationship development (Baker, 2002). The area of timing involves the length of time the couple was willing to take to get to know one another in an online setting before moving to a face-to-face venue. This area also focused on how delayed physical contact impacted the relationship (Baker, 2002). Finally, the last area of communication discussed how the couple learned how to communicate when conflict occurs. The results suggested that the couples that stayed together after moving from an online environment to a face-to-face relationship rated higher than those that did not and had a more positive view about their ability as a couple to deal with the four factors (Baker, 2002). When the participants had favorable responses to the four factors indicated, the relationship was viewed to be a success by the members of the couple (Baker, 2002).

There were several limitations mentioned in the presented literature about maintenance. Anderson and Emmers-Sommers (2007) mentioned several limitations with their study. The first was that the study used a nonrandom sample of convenience, which may not allow the results to be generalized to all people involved in online romantic relationships. The other limitation that was mentioned by the authors was that the study used a one shot cross-sectional design. Finally the last limitation was the lack of a FTF comparison group. The one limitation mentioned by Baker (2002) was the small population sample. The study only explored eight couples, as such the results may not generalize.

Future research suggested by Anderson and Emmers-Sommers (2007) included exploring what predictors were important in nonromantic relationship to see if they were the same. Another direction for future research would be to explore how perceptions of relationships formed via online communication affect perceptions once partners have met face-to-face and the extent to which these perceptions predict a successful move from an online to a face-to-face romantic relationship. Future research suggest by Baker (2002) included the addition of longitudinal studies as well as comparisons between courtship and marriage which would allow exploration into the types of factors were uniquely to the online setting.

The review of the literature found that intimacy, trust, and communication indicated relationship satisfaction within online romantic relationships. Additionally, when an online relationship was transitioned into a face-to-face relationship the couple they were better able to maintain the relationship in four areas including meeting place,

obstacles within the relationship, timing, and conflict resolution than those couple who initially met in a face-to-face context.

### **Differences between Face-to-face and Internet Relationships**

According to Merkle and Richardson (2000), areas of differences between online and face-to-face relationships include differences in the areas of relationship formation and dissolution, self-disclosure, relationship infidelity, and conflict management. Merkle and Richardson (2000) indicated that the use of the Internet diminished the need for spatial proximity between people and reduced the salience of physical attractiveness. This allows communication to be the primary means through which two individuals get to know each other during the initial contact and further development process (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). There are fewer barriers associated with breaking up from an online relationship than from a traditional relationship (Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

Self-disclosure has also been shown to be different between the two modalities of relationships (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). In face-to-face communication, honest self-disclosure requires that one let go of anxiety and the apprehension about losing the affection of a potential mate. The process of self-disclosure is slower in traditional relationships as the partners in these relationships have other ways to connect such as physical touch (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). However, in the context of online communication, self-disclosure must happen more rapidly as communication is the primary mean of relationship development. As such, research has indicated that individuals who are in the online relationship tend to learn more about each other within a shorter amount of time (Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

Relationship infidelity is also handled differently between the two modalities of relationships (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). One of the allures of getting involved in an online relationship when the individual is already involved in a face-to-face relationship is that a person can meet potential partners and have emotional contact without risk, exposure, or the fact being known (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). This is different from seeking additional traditional relationships in that the majority of time spent during the development process is spent participating in common activities outside of either person's house. Additionally, when the communication remains in the person's home conflict is easier to handle (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). A person is able to disconnect their communications at any point through turning off their computer. In a face-to-face relationship an infidelity is a significant betrayal which disrupts trust or the expectations on which a relationship is based. In contrast, in an online relationship a real life sexual infidelity is looked upon not as much as a betrayal because both people are aware of the physical separation between them (Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

The term infidelity in an online context may incorporate more than just sexual behavior. It has been defined as including three different types, one that is emotional, another that is sexual, and one in which the emotional and sexual are combined (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). Due to the heightened self-disclosure within an online romantic relationship, emotional infidelity can be considered to be more devastating to the relationship than sexual involvement (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). This is likely to be due to the initial absence of physical presence in the relationship and the need to establish connection with the other person through verbal dialog that involves self disclosure

(Merkle & Richardson, 2000). Therefore choosing to disclose personal romantic information to more than one person can be viewed as being betrayal and hence as infidelity. What constitutes infidelity specifically in an online relationship has not been empirically determined and the authors suggested that future research is needed to explore this area (Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

### **Difficulties in Internet Romantic Relationships**

Only a few years ago, an individual had only what the other person typed about themselves to use in making decisions about whether or not they believed the details provided to them to be accurate. Now, however, many people are adding pictures directly or linking their social networking pages to their dating profiles (Hancock & Toma, 2006). According to Hancock and Toma (2006), both men and women are more likely to look at the profile of an individual who has a provided photo; they indicate that a person with a photo is contacted about seven times more often than a person without a photo.

Hancock and Toma (2006) explored how people perceive placing photos of themselves on online dating sites and how they perceive the photos of others. The study utilized 54 participants who subscribed to one of the many online dating Web sites (Hancock & Toma, 2006). Each of the participants were asked to rate the accuracy of their own profile picture that they had placed on the dating website. The participants also were interviewed about the accuracy of profile pictures of other individuals and the types of manipulations that can be done to a photo (Hancock & Toma, 2006). The results of the study concluded that compared to text-based aspects of online profiles, which involve

frequent but relatively subtle deceptions, profile photographs were more frequently judged inaccurate (Hancock & Toma, 2006).

According to Bolliger (2009), there are three major disadvantages to the online environment; these involve issues related to limited social presence, listening, and physical presence. According to Bolliger (2009) a sense of community is related to positive learning outcomes. Verbal and nonverbal communication elements are needed in order to form close personal relationships that can sustain a community. One factor that can influence a sense of community is social presence. Social presence is defined by Bolliger (2009) as the degree of feeling and perception of one individual based on the reaction of another. Cutler (1995) stated that sharing personal information contributes to a feeling of presence between the two individuals. He further stated that social presence in a social space is more than merely an awareness of another person. CMC as a form of interactive media creates a mutual sense of togetherness that is essential to the feeling that there are other people in the space (Cutler, 1995)

Another factor that can influence a sense of community is active listening. In a traditional face-to-face communication, active listening is portrayed through nonverbal cues such as leaning forward, smiles, nods, eye contact, and voice expressions. Bolliger (2009) states that active listening provides some encouragement on the part of the receiver of the information to let the speaker know that the interaction between the two people is having an impact on the relationship (Bolliger, 2009). In an online communication, active listening is portrayed by asterisk signs around words such as \*nods\*. It may also be portrayed with emoticons such as ☺.



The last is physical presence. One cannot see body language nor recognize the tone of voice that is associated with the language used. Bolliger (2009) suggested that people are somewhat disturbed by communication without the visual cues associated with communication such as the head nods, smiles, glances, and facial expressions (Bolliger, 2009). Tonal expression also helps face-to-face to complete the message that is being conveyed by the person in a face-to-face context (Bolliger, 2009). Differences in tonal intonation can change the message no matter what words were actually spoken. Bolliger (2009) further postulated that only the most successful and complete communication exchanges that include both verbal and nonverbal cues occur when the two individuals are physically present. The lack in physical presence in an online relationship's earliest stages may impair its ability to develop and be maintained (Bolliger, 2009).

There several limitations mentioned by Hancock and Toma (2009). The first was that the focus of the participant was explicitly limited to the physical representation of the dater in the photograph. Profile photographs can include other information relevant to self-presentation, including props and settings that can highlight aspects of the self. A second limitation is the method used to assess accuracy. The comparison photograph for determining accuracy was a photograph taken when the daters took part in the study. While this was a current representation of the daters' appearance in everyday life, online daters might expect their initial dates to involve more managed self-presentation, including more makeup or finer clothing. There were several limitations noted in the study (Bolliger, 2009). The first was the limited sample populations. All of the participants were obtained from one institution and as such the results may not be

generalized. The second was that the discourse from a two semester course was analyzed. Finally, the students who were willing to use visual cues in their communication signed up for the course, as such the results may not be able to be generalized.

The reviewed literature stated that there are several areas that may dissuade people from using the Internet as a way to find romantic relationships. These include the ability to misrepresent oneself to potential partners, the lack of physical presence with their partner for part of the relationship, and differences in communication modalities during the initial stages of the relationship.

### **Transition and Summary**

An overview of the Internet environment (Wildermuth, 2004) was described in the beginning of the chapter. Several aspects that have been found to aid in the initiation, development, and maintenance of an online romantic relationship were then discussed. First there was a discussion of the motivators for individuals wanting to spend time on the Internet (Kalmus, Realo, & Siibak, 2011, McCown, Fischer, Page, & Homant, 2001, & Wang & Chang, 2010). This research concluded that there were three primary motivators for individuals to participate in an online relationship in relationship to gender and personality traits.

Perceptions about online romantic relationships were discussed next. The literature has found that those individuals who had a greater natural attraction to the Internet and had higher amounts of Internet usage had higher perceptions about online romantic relationships (Anderson, 2005). Perceptions about online relationships depend on the goals of the individual. Those who had the goal of obtaining long term

relationships had greater perceptions about online relationships in general (Sanderson, Keiter, Miles, & Yopyk, 2007). Additionally, those that are communicatively apprehensive in real life interactions have higher perceptual interdependence with their online relationship partners (Mazur, Burns, and Emmers-Sommer, 2000). Wildermuth and Vogle-Bauer (2007) found five themes that have been shown to have influenced perception of online romantic relationships including intense emotional arousal, high levels of caution, linguistic connection, higher numbers of extra marital affairs, and lack of support from offline family and friends.

A discussion of a study that looked at how the decision making process is utilized when selecting a mate within an online setting followed. Wang and Chiou (2010) found that individuals who used dating Web sites to find potential mates made worse decisions when faced with a large number of potential options. The longer time the individual spends on the sight the more options they develop resulting in poorer cognitive ability and making poor decisions. Those who searched less through the Web sites are presented with fewer options and were better able to make appropriate decisions based on their criteria.

A discussion of a study that explored the three ways of self-presentation in an online setting followed (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). These were the true self and the actual self. The results of the studies indicated that in an online environment people responded more to the descriptions of their true selves than their actual self. It was also found that many individuals found it easier to express the true selves in an online setting. The expression of true self allows for

a strong bond to be established quickly. Even when the relationship transfers from online to a real life context, those that expressed their true selves online found the transition easier and had a more lasting connection in real life.

Discussion about a study that looked at how an online romantic relationship is developed using a theory that was developed for face-to-face relationships followed (Ji & Lieber, 2008). The results of the reviewed literature found that the rate in which couples self-disclosed personal information decrease over the course of the relationship. Couples reported greater relational benefits when deep personal disclosure is done in the initial stages of the relationship rather than waiting for later. The behavior of sharing personal information in the initial stages of a relationship and declining as the relationships is the reverse of what happens in face-to-face relationships

Finally, the impact of modality switching of communication styles on a relationship were discussed (Cornwell & Lundren, 2001; Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007; Ramirez & Zang, 2007). The research results suggest varied outcomes. Switching from strictly text based communication to real life benefitted more often when the text based communication period was short. It did not seem to benefit the relationship when the text based communication lasted for a longer period in the relationship (Ramirez & Zang, 2007). This seems to indicate it was not the switching of modalities in itself, but when the switching occurred that was not significant. Alternatively, Cornwell and Lundren (2001) found switching modalities at any point to be detrimental to relationships. Their results indicated that people online more often than not misrepresent themselves to potential mates and took online relationships less serious than those they

would have in real life. Due to these factors, the transition from text based communication to real life often worsened the relationship. Thus a switch between modalities was needed for the relationship to develop.

Differences found to exist between face-to-face and online romantic relationships were also discussed (Anderson & Emmer-Sommers, 2007). The results of the reviewed literature indicated that intimacy, trust, and communication indicated the presence of satisfaction in online relationships. Chapter 3 will discuss the methodology for the current study. A qualitative methodology was selected for the study as it offers a different perspective about the participants' experience of online romantic relationships than has been offered in current research. Detailed descriptions of the procedure to be used, how the participants will be recruited, and how the participant's information will be protected will be include.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Background**

The purpose of the study was to develop some understanding about the stages of an online romantic relationship and the motivations that impact the progression and the maintenance of the relationship. I asked the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon about their experiences. In a relationship developed in the previously standard mode, every person has a unique experience moving through the development and maintenance process within the relationship. Nevertheless there are some commonalities within the experience. It was assumed this would also be true in the online context. Thus by interviewing different people who have experienced the phenomenon, I learned about the individual stories and be able to identify some of these commonalities.

My qualitative research design and rationale follows; it focuses on two research questions. First, what was the developmental process of an online romantic relationship is? The second was what motivations are experienced and expressed during the process of developing and maintaining an online romantic relationship? The first question aimed to identify the aspects that promote and influence the developmental process of an online romantic relationship. The second question aimed to understand what types of motivations and how those motivations are experienced at different points within the relationship development process.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The current study was explored from a qualitative perspective. The topic under review lent itself well to this type of methodology as the aim was to understand the

phenomenon as a whole while looking at the specific aspects that are involved (Bergman & Coxon, 2005). A grounded theory approach was selected for this study. Grounded theory aimed to move beyond simply describing the topic by discovering or generating a theory about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The study followed the methodology of Corbin and Strauss (2008). The first stage was open coding. This stage was where I formed categories of information about the topic under review by segmenting information from the reports of the participants. Within each category that was identified, I gave tentative labels to chunks of data to describe what was being seen in responses. The next stage was axial coding, which required me to assemble the data in different ways using a coding paradigm or logic diagram. This allowed me to identify a central category. The coding diagram was the visual process of relating the categories to each other through both inductive and deductive reasoning. It included 4 things. They were the topic under review, the conditions related to the topic, actions or interactions that were directed at managing or handling the topic, and the consequences of those actions. The next stage was selective coding that requires me to write a story line that connects the categories. Finally, the last stage was the visual portrayal of a conditional matrix that shows the social, historical, and many other conditions that are influencing the central category (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Methodology**

The study utilized four populations to obtain participants. The first was the Walden University participant pool. This participant pool was selected as it allowed the researcher to gain access to the 50,000 plus students who attend the university

worldwide. This approach to participant selection allowed for the greatest amount of differences in the types of people who are selected for the study, which allowed the results to be more broadly generalizable to the general population. Since students volunteer to be a part of the Walden's participant pool and also chose which studies to make themselves available for as participants, the process resulted in a sample of convenience. The second source for participants was from a medium sized county within state of Washington. This county is comprised of seven cities. Each of the cities vary in life styles, ethnic diversity, and population size. Participants were obtained within the county through placing ads on notice boards at Clark Community College and Washington State University. Since the county holds the researcher's home city, this population also resulted in a sample of convenience. The third source was Match.com. This is one of the largest online dating sites in the United States. The site serves 5 continents, 25 countries and operates in 8 different languages. The members of this online dating site also vary in life styles, age, and ethnic diversity. The ad ran monthly and was seen by their United States membership population. The final source was Facebook. The same ad used at the universities was placed on my husband's personal Facebook page. Since the people that see this Facebook page were likely to be family, friends, or acquaintances this population was also a sample of convenience.

Creswell (2007) suggested 20 to 30 participants were sufficient for a grounded theory study. Given this information, the current study aimed at eliciting 20-25 adult (over the age of 18) participants with which to provide both email surveys and follow up phone interviews. All individuals that met criteria set forth by the researcher were



allowed to participate up to a maximum of 35 total participants. In order to gain an understanding of the widest range of experiences there were no limitations with regard to socioeconomic status, education level, and or age.

A notice about the research study was placed in the Walden University participant pool portal, at two local universities in Clark County Washington, Match.com and on Facebook. A notice was placed on the community boards at Washington State University. The notice for Clark College was posted on campus through the student life center. In the notice, a brief description of the study and the Walden University email in which to contact the researcher for participation will be supplied. There was a copy of the notice located in appendix D. An ad banner notice about the research study was placed on the Match.com website on a monthly paid subscription. A copy of this ad was located in appendix C. Finally, the research notice used at the universities was placed on my husband's personal page of Facebook. The criteria for participant selection were as followed. First, they had to have met their mate online. Second, they had to have developed and maintained their relationship in an online context for a minimum of 3 months. The length of time spent online was an important aspect to ensure that all of the potential relationship development and maintenance strategies were utilized during that time period by the couple. Finally, the individual had to be at least 18 years of age and fluent in English.

Initial contact between a potential participant and me occurred when an individual contacted me in responded to the notice I placed either in the Walden's participant pool portal, on one of the local universities, on Match.com or on Facebook. I replied to that

email formally thanking them for interest in the study. In this reply email, I also verified if they have met both criteria for the study. A copy of this response email was found in Appendix G. Using the same email communication chain, the individual replied saying that they have or have not met both criteria for the study. For those individuals that replied no to the verification question, they received a final reply email thanking them for their interest but would not be asked to participate in the study. A copy of this response email is found in Appendix E. For those individuals that responded yes to the verification question, I provided them with response email that also thanked them for their interest but also invited them to participate in the study. A copy of this response e-mail is found in Appendix F. This email also contained three attachments. The first was the informed consent. The second one was the survey which asked them to provide demographic information as well as information about specific aspects of their online romantic relationship. The survey consisted of all yes or no questions. A copy of the survey is found in appendix A. The final attachment was a list of resources. The list of resources was being included to assist participants if they become distressed at any point of participating in the study. A copy of the resource list is found in appendix J.

Once participants returned their surveys and consent forms to me through email, they each received another reply email requesting them to select a date and time for the 30 to 45 minute follow up phone interview. A copy of this response email is found in Appendix H. All of the participants had a follow up phone interview. At the beginning of the phone interview, I again provided a brief description of the study and asked the participant if they have any questions about participation. The participant was also

informed that the phone interview would be recorded. A copy of the interview introduction is found in Appendix I. During the telephone interview, open ended questions were asked pertaining to the questions that each of the participants answered in the email survey. The follow up questions directly pertained to how they answered each survey question. If the participant answered yes to question one they were asked a follow up question related to the yes response. If the participant answered no to question one, the follow up question pertained to that response. Each survey question had a follow up question to both the yes and no response to provide a greater understanding into the participant's experiences. A copy of the follow up telephone interview questions is found in appendix B. At the end of the study, each of the participants received a 1-2 page summary of the results through the e-mail address that was used in previous communication.

### **Role of the Researcher**

According to Chesebro and Borisoff, (2007), the role of the researcher within a qualitative study was defined as the observer, the recorder, and the data analyst; while doing this, the researcher needs to remain neutral and not influence the proceedings. These roles were applied in the current study in the following ways. I observed the clients throughout the study. This included selecting the participants by evaluating the information obtained in the survey, and in the semistructured interview. I recorded the information that is presented in all of the formats in the study. The collected data was analyzed by the researcher. Finally, I attempted to remain objective throughout the process

I have experienced the phenomenon under review first hand; therefore, it was possible I experienced certain biases or had preconceived ideas of how an online relationship is developed and maintained based on my own personal experiences. Any preconceived ideas about the topic under review may have skewed the results, which may have impacted how the data was interpreted. Since the researcher has had first-hand knowledge of the topic, I may have made assumptions that the emotions or thoughts that are perceived by the participant at a particular time within the relationship may be identical to that of my own. I might have jumped to conclusions based on something the participant said. According to Creswell (2007), in a grounded study a researcher needed to set aside any theoretical ideas or notions about the topic so a substantive theory about the phenomenon can become apparent through the research process. This was an important challenge to keep in mind throughout the research process as personal biases could influence how the data is interpreted, thus compromising the final conclusions of the study. The one thing I did to limit the potential challenge was to just remain cognizant of personal biases. This will be done by asking self-questions, reviewing self-memories, and, self-acknowledgment of the differences between the participants and the researcher.

Given I have had personal experience in the phenomenon under review it is possible some of the testimony given by the participants may mirror the experience of the researcher. Due to this potential concern, it was important appropriate boundaries are well established and maintained. I have had extensive training and experience in providing unbiased and nonjudgmental services. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) suggest a way to maintain objectivity during the process was to be honest and open with the

participants and to consistently remind them what the aim of the study was and that the researcher was collecting data. This additionally reminded me that while I may share similarities with the participants, the focus of the interactions is strictly for research purposes and not words and actions between friends.

### **Instrumentation**

The initial demographic and criteria match surveys was developed according to the method outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Along with the survey potential participant candidates signed an informed consent and received a full disclosure statement of the intended study. The appropriate forms were signed by the potential participant candidate when they returned the survey to the researcher for consideration to participate.

Open coding data analysis of the demographic portion of the surveys occurred once criteria match and participant status had been identified. The researcher and participant set a time to talk over the phone to complete the one-to-one semistructured interview. The interview questions pertained to the online relationship development and maintenance process of the participant and their online mate. Interviews were coded daily. Coding of survey and interviews were completed through the use of a computer program called NVIVO (QSR International, 2014). NVIVO is a computer program that offered a platform for analyzing unstructured data. Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software like NVIVO can assist individuals to manage, shape and make sense of unstructured information. The software provided tools for classifying, sorting and

arranging information as well as it analyzes materials, identify themes, gain insight and develop evidence based conclusions (QSR International, 2014).

The survey was provided to each potential participant through email. Each survey that the researcher obtained was given a number. The information provided through the survey was analyzed against preset conditions by the researcher. A copy of the survey was also printed and labeled with the same number and kept in a locked file cabinet. The surveys was reviewed and coded as they are received. Those individuals selected to participate received notification through email and were asked to select a time for the follow up phone interview to take place. The semistructured interview took a period of 30 minutes or less over the phone.

The semistructured interviews were audio taped with permission of the participant. Each participant interview included the number that corresponds to the participant's survey. After the interview the audio tape was transcribed on the computer and labeled with the same participant number as the survey and placed in their file. A copy of the transcribed interview was also be printed and placed with the corresponding survey in the locked file cabinet. During the primary data collection process, the audio tape of the interviews was reviewed and open coded daily. This will assist in the search of general categories that are found in the data (Creswell, 2007).

In the current study the researcher identified the terms and phrases associated with the stages of the development of an online romantic relationship through the use of the Corbin and Strauss (2008) methodology approach. Once all of the surveys were received and the follow up interviews had been completed the researcher began the analysis by

identifying specific terms and phrases used by the participants that are associated with the different stages of the phenomenon. After the terms and phrases had been identified, a comparison of language between the participants were reviewed looking at similarities and differences in behaviors, settings, and other dimensions of cultural life and made inferences about the differences. The similarities and differences were then placed into categories. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008) this is referred to open coding. After the categories had been established, the researcher created a logic diagram as a way to arrange the data in a different way. This assisted the researcher examine how the categories and sub categories related to one another. This process provided descriptions of the data. The researcher integrated the information found in the previous coding types and developed a theoretical framework. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008) this was selective coding that requires the researcher to write a story line that connects the categories and identify a central category.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Creswell (2007) stated the purpose of verification and trustworthiness was to address validity and reliability in qualitative research. The researcher used three strategies to address the validity and reliability in the current study. One way to achieve trustworthiness was to use a large enough sample population that would completely represent the phenomenon under review. A sufficient population sample size decreases the likelihood that the collected data would be skewed due to individual emotional attachment to the problem being studied. A sufficient population sample size also provided credibility to the resulting theoretical model. It was hope the sample population

size in the current would be considered to be complete and trustworthy as it follows the population size suggestion made by Creswell (2007). In the current study, the researcher obtained 20 adult participants.

Another way the researcher verified validity and reliability was through the use of rich thick details. According to Creswell (2007), rich thick details required the researcher describe either the participants or the setting under study in such a way it allowed the reader to be better able to transfer the results to others based on shared characteristics. In the current study rich thick details was used to describe the participants rather than the setting as the interview will be done over the phone. The last way that researcher verified validity and reliability was through triangulation. Triangulation occurred where the researcher makes use of several different methods to provide corroborating evidence to shed light on a theme or perspective. In the current study, data was collected in the forms of both surveys and interviews.

### **Ethical Issues**

The current study abided by ethical standards of research outlined by the APA Code of Ethics (APA, 2010) and was assessed and approved by the Walden University IRB process. The IRB approval number was 11-13-14-0057469. The researcher submitted documents that would identify appropriate access to participants, a description of treatment of human participants, participant recruitment process procedures, data collection procedures, and data description procedures that will be included in the current study. The researcher also provided a descriptive detail of how the collected information



would remain anonymous, storage of confidential material, and any conflicts of interests that may occur over the course of the study.

The consent form included information pertaining to several things including the purpose of the study, participation criteria, researcher's role, and processes and procedures. This allowed potential participants enough information in order to make an informed decision. They were further informed that participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time, what the expected benefits and risks of the research are, how the risks will be avoided or minimize, who are the contacts of the study are, how conflicts of interest will be handled, and how consent and confidentiality will be maintained. A 10 dollar Google Play gift card was offer for participating and contributing to the study. The gift card access numbers was verbally provided to the participant at the end of the telephone interview. If the participant withdraws prior to the telephone interview, the gift card access number was given at the time of withdrawal through email.

The informed consents and confidentiality statements was read and signed by the researcher and the participant. The forms and data were kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home for the duration of the study. The audio tapes of the interviews will also be kept in the locked file cabinet. An additional set of forms and data were kept in a password protected file on the researcher's computer. Additional measures to ensure the confidentiality of the participants was through the disposal of identifiers. Identification numbers instead of names of participants were used throughout the study and beyond and pseudonyms will replace actual names in any narrative pieces in the analysis or results section of the manuscript.

Now that the study has been concluded, the forms were returned to the participant during the debriefing process. The electronic copies were e-mailed back to each participant through the email address they submitted to the researcher for contact. All hard copies were mailed to an address specified by the participant at the end of the study. This will be done to ensure confidentiality of the participants after the study has been completed. It also allowed the participants to be in control of their information and could decide what they want to do with their forms. According to the American Psychological Association guidelines all raw data and other material relevant to this study must be kept by the researcher for five years. Therefore, one copy of all forms and audio transcriptions for all participants has been kept electronically on a thumb drive. This thumb drive has been kept in a locked secure desk drawer in my home (APA, 2010). To protect the thumb drive from my family and other persons that visit my home I have not given any other persons access to the code to the desk drawer and I have also disabled the capability to erase the thumb drive.

### **Summary**

The chapter began with a reminder of the purpose and the research questions of the current study. Information about the qualitative perspective in which the topic would be examined followed. Next there was a discussion about grounded theory and the reasoning for using that type of qualitative research. The chapter followed with a discussion of the Corbin and Strauss (2008) methodology approach and the reasoning for its selection. The roles of the researcher were discussed next. A discussion about the specific methodological procedure and the instrumentation for the current study followed.

Information presented about how reliability and validity concerns were addressed next in the chapter. Finally, ethical considerations were addressed.

## Chapter 4: Results

The issue explored in the conducted study was to determine whether online relationships develop through stages and what motivations impact the progression, development, and maintenance of these relationships. The research questions addressed through the process was to discover what the developmental process of an online romantic relationship was and what motivations were experienced and expressed during the process of developing and maintaining an online romantic relationship. The first question aimed to identify the aspects that promote and influence the developmental process of an online romantic relationship. The second question aims to understand what types of motivations and how those motivations are experienced at different points within the relationship development process.

### **Data Collection**

Four different participant sources were used in the study. These included local universities, the Walden university participant pool, match.com, and Facebook. Written flyers about the study were posted on notice boards at the local university campuses. A copy of this notice can be found on Appendix D. An electronic notice was placed on Match.com (Appendix C), the Walden participant pool portal (Appendix D) and on a personal page of Facebook (Appendix D). All 20 individuals contacted the researcher about the current study from one of the sources and requested an invitation to the study. The researcher verified participation criteria from all of the individuals responding to the various forms of notifications. I replied to each email of interest in the study and asked the individual if they met the three criteria required for participation (Appendix G). If

they replied to my inquiry with a “yes”, the individual was invited to participate in the study (Appendix F). However, if they replied with a “no”, they were given a notification they would not be asked to participate in the study (Appendix E).

Each of the participants was sent a survey through email. Along with the survey, all of the participants received a consent form and a list of resources (Appendix J). These resources were selected to address any potential emotional distresses that may occur from participation in the study. The consent form and the survey were both completed and returned to the researcher by email. Through email, all of the participants then received instructions on how to complete the follow up telephone interview (Appendix H). The researcher contacted each of the participants by phone at a designated time specified by the participant and they were asked the follow up questions to the survey. The researcher informed the participants that the telephone interview was going to be audio recorded.

### **Demographics**

The final number of participants for the study was 20 of whom 14 were female and 6 were male. Both heterosexual and homosexual individuals were represented in the study. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 67. The average annual wages for the participants was between 40- 49k. Nineteen of the participants were living in the United States at the time of participation and one participant was from the Netherlands. Four of the participants came from the Walden participant pool. Four of the participants came from the local universities. One came from Match.com. Eleven personal family members, friends, and acquaintances responded to a notice about my research study on my husband’s Facebook page. The two family members who responded to this

advertisement on his page I know well. The other nine persons who responded to this advertisement on his page were only acquaintances.

### **Data Analysis**

The information collected in the survey was placed in a Microsoft Excel data spreadsheet and uploaded to the NVIVO software to be included in the data analysis. I created an audio file of the follow up telephone interview and then transcribed into electronic text. I then uploaded the interview electronic text into the NVIVO software to be included in the data analysis.

The procedure for data analysis for the current project followed the methodology of Strauss and Corbin (1998). I open coded to the electronic interview response data determine keywords and phrases that were common amongst the participants. The common keywords and phrases were then formed into initial categories about the phenomenon under review. The categories that were identified coincided with the concepts explored within the literature review. These categories were choosing potential mates, motives, perception, self-expression, language, and maintenance. A journal was created through NVIVO during open coding to help formulate thoughts about emerging themes. I used the journal as a way to express my personal thoughts about things like relationships between data responses, questions about terminology used in responses, and discovery of new themes based on the number of similar responses.

Initial commonalities observed in the category of choosing potential mates were that the participants typically discussed the duration of time that they spent looking for potential partners, and the number of online romantic partners they have had. An example

of a participant's response was "I actually have been online looking probably for six years but I've met a lot of people but serious relationships there have only been four. So none of them really just the last four turned out to be actual relationships."

Commonalities observed in the category of motives were the types of relationship they were looking for and reasons for not utilizing real life strategies for finding potential partners. An example of an interview response was "It was more of a convenience because I live an extremely busy life and I didn't have time to go out and I have no interest in the bar scene or club scene." Initial commonalities observed in perception were participant's exploration about the types of people who use the internet as a way to find potential partners, family and friend opinions about them using the internet as well as opinions about others on the internet. An example of an interview response was "A lot of family or friends thought online relationships would never work or a waste of time that sort of thing"

There were similarities in the interview responses about what types of communication sources they used during their relationship in relation to the category of language. An example was "I try as quickly as possible to go to cell phones and skype either texting or calling and then skyping either video or text. I don't want to be trapped on the website." Commonalities found within the category of self-expression revolved around the participant's discussion of how much information to share about oneself and how soon to start self-disclosing. An example of a response was "I'm pretty transparent perhaps too much so but I'd rather get information out soon and if they're temperamental or there isn't a comfort or interest I'd rather make it a part of who I am and quickly and

move on.” Finally the commonalities found within the category of maintenance were around discussion of ways of maintaining an online relationship. An example of a response was “again I don't know if it's very complicated it's just a lot of communication in whatever form whether that's email text phone.”

Once information was initially categorized, the categorized information of individuals was then compared to one another. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) axial coding aims to assemble the initial categories in new ways through identifying subcategories that further develop a theme. Subcategories explore causal conditions, context and intervening conditions, and specific strategies associated with the phenomenon under review. The research journal was continued through this phase as a way to document progress, thoughts, and questions.

Through further examination of the above categories, additional subcategories were identified. The theme of choosing potential mates was further enhanced through identifying additional commonalities including change in approach to finding potential mates, ease of finding potential mates, pictures, validity, and navigation of offline ways to choose and find mates. The theme of perception was further enhanced through the discussion of safety issues. The theme of motives was further explored by discussion of the various types of relationships that the participants were looking for. The theme of language was further explored through the discussion of miscommunication and conflict. The self-expression theme was enhanced through the discussion of honesty and infidelity. Finally, the theme of maintenance was additionally explored through discussion of the ways to maintain an online relationship, transition from online to offline and the



differences between online and offline relationships. In this coding stage demographics such as gender was also looked at as ways to inter-relate the categories and strengthen themes. Table 1 depicts all of the themes and the categories and subcategories found within each theme.

Table 1

Representation of the three themes, seven categories, and fifteen subcategories found within the collected data.

Themes	Categories	Subcategories
Finding Potential Partners	Choosing Potential Mates Motives Perceptions	Different online activities Length of time in online activities Ease of finding potential mates Change in personal approach Pictures of potential mates Doubts Reasons for choosing an online activity Types of relationships Safety concerns
Communication	Language Self Expression	Types of communication sources Miscommunication/ conflict Self-representation Honesty
Maintenance	Ways to maintain an online romantic relationship Barriers to maintenance	Communication Infidelity

The third level of coding was selective coding which involves the integration of the categories in the axial coding model. The result of this process of data collection and analysis is a substantive-level theory relevant to the specific phenomenon under review.

During this coding phase the themes were reexamined and they were consolidated into three metacodes. The meta codes are how to start the online relationship process, communication, and maintenance. Lastly the research findings through the surveys and interviews were reviewed again and then triangulated.

The data analysis process addressed the two research questions of the study. The first research question aimed at identifying the aspects that promote and influence the developmental process of an online romantic relationship. Through the analysis, the similarities in the participant responses indicated several aspects that influenced the developmental process of an online romantic relationship that will be discussed in the results section. The second question aims to understand what types of motivations and how those motivations are experienced at different points within the relationship development process. The data analysis process also discovered similarities that attempt to understand the types of motivations and how those motivations are experienced at different points in the relationship.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility aims to promote confidence in that the researcher has completely and accurately recorded the topic under review. A sufficient population sample size decreases the likelihood that the collected data would be skewed due to individual emotional attachment to the problem being studied. In the current study, the researcher obtained 20 adult participants. This number of participants fell within the range of 20-25 outlined by

Creswell (2007) as enough to achieve enough confidence that I had accurately recorded the topic under review.

### **Transferability**

Transferability aims to understand the extent in which the results of the current study can be transferred to other situations. In the current study rich thick details were used to describe the participants rather than the setting as the interview will be done over the phone. In addition to the information from the phone interview, further demographic information was obtained from each of the participants on the survey. Demographic information included gender, annual financial bracket, and approximate age.

### **Dependability**

Dependability addressed the issue of reliability. The current study used repeated method techniques through surveys and interviews. All of the participants were given the same survey, which contained the same questions. During the phone interviews all of the participants were asked the same questions pertaining to their given responses to the survey. For example, if a “no” response was given to survey question one then all participants that gave that response were given the same follow up question that corresponds with that answer.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability addressed the issue of objectivity by the researcher. The current used a technique called triangulation. Triangulation occurred through the researcher making use of several different methods to provide corroborating evidence to shed light

on a theme or perspective. In the current study, data is being collected in the forms of both surveys and interviews. In addition, I acknowledged my own potential biases by admitting that I had experienced the phenomenon under review personally.

### **Study Results**

The data received from the twenty participants demonstrated the existence of three primary themes about the development and maintenance of online romantic relationships. The three themes are finding potential partners, communication, and maintenance. Each of these themes, with its accompanying categories and subcategories will be discussed and illustrated by examples.

The themes found in data give insight into the two research questions posed in the current study. The first question aimed at understanding the stages of developing and maintaining an online romantic relationship. The first theme provides information into how the participants begins to find potential mates in an online setting, which is typically one of the initial stages of the process of developing and maintain on online relationship. The second theme provides information about the forms of communication that the participants used to further develop and maintain their online relationship. Finally, the last theme provides information specifically about how the participants maintain an online romantic relationship.

#### **Theme 1: Finding potential partners**

This theme was identified by exploring the responses of the participants that reflected on the different parts of the process of meeting and finding potential mates by the participants of the study. The responses provided an understanding of three categories

of factors that influence the process. The three categories are choosing potential mates, motives, and perceptions. Within each category several subcategories existed to further breakdown what the participants experienced in their own personal stories. Table 2 depicts the three categories and the nine subcategories of finding a potential a partner in an online setting.

Table 2

Categories and subcategories that represents the theme of finding potential partners.

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Finding Potential Partners	Choosing potential mates	Different online activities Length of time in online activities Ease of finding potential mates Change in personal approach Pictures of potential mates Doubts
	Motives	Reasons for choosing an online activity Types of relationships
	Perceptions	Safety Concerns

### Category 1: Choosing Potential mates

Each of the participants made statements that described what activities they did on the internet that provided them a location in which they were able to meet potential mates. Some of the participants chose to use the internet as a method by which they would search for potential mates and they did so by placing profiles on dating websites and looking through the profiles of others on these sites. While other participants stated that, for them their intention was not for using the internet to find

potential mates. They did enjoy social activities such as online gaming that put other people in their proximity which also presented opportunity to meet potential partners. One participant stated “it wasn’t like I played the game to find her, it was more like I played the game we got along and one thing lead to another and now we’re a thing”. Both groups stated that they spend long periods of time in their perspective activities and if they logged off, participants stated they returned at least one more time to this activity on the internet. This was true for both male and female participants.

Participants discussed the various lengths of time they spent on the internet engaging in activities. Participants who intently used activities on the internet such as dating websites suggested that their usage started and stopped as they started and ended a relationship. One participant described how they used an internet dating site for several months; when they found a partner they closed their profile. However when the relationship failed several months later, this person started using the online dating site again to potentially find another partner. While those participants who engaged in activities such as gaming suggested that their usage was longer in duration since finding potential partners was a secondary benefit for them.

Participants who intently chose the internet to find dating sites found it relatively easy to find potential mates due to the numbers of people participating in dating websites. One participant stated “um I do think it’s easier to find somebody in an online setting but they may not be in your location”. They also found the benefit of profile summaries that helped them choose individuals that they were interested in and disregard individuals that they felt would not be a good fit for them. You know your end is larger

give a better opportunity to find someone that meets your needs. If it's purely someone you might meet at work someone you might meet at church someone you might be in some social situation the number of people you're going to encounter and have the possibility to encounter in those kinds of situations is pretty small. The number of people who you might have the possibility of even reading their profile that number is much greater online to better screen and sort out who you might want to get to know who might better be a better match for you." One participant stated "maybe the real reason is numbers. Those participants who did not intently choose the internet directly for dating purposes also found it relatively easy to find potential mates also due to the amount of people they came in contact. Additionally, they found it easier to find potential mate online versus their attempts offline as they were surrounded by individuals that shared a similar interest, which was something they could do together. This finding supported Wu and Chiou (2009) who discovered that the more possible options that participant was able to examine, the more searching was done in effort to find a potential mate.

Regardless of how they used the internet, participants stated that after they had more than one online relationship, they felt that their approach to meeting people had changed. Participants changed aspects that they set up as criteria in their profiles such as new limits on age and physical distance before they would interact with a potential partner. One participant responded "well online relationships you learn a lot because it's a new medium kind of to me it was at the time and the stuff you learn you use again inure defining yourself and defining the other person you want to meet especially if possible partner and for me a possible partner for life." Participants also discussed the changes

that they made such as doing more or less self-disclosure at the beginning of the relationship. One female participant stated she presented herself as a strong athlete, but had a potential suitor state that while he enjoyed seeing her athleticism, he wanted to see more of her feminine side. All of the changes that the participants made were done in order to have greater success finding a match in the next partner as well as the way they interacted with potential mates.

Despite the fact that participants of both groups knew that pictures could be falsified, most participants who specifically chose the internet as way to find potential mates required seeing a picture either prior to initial contact or within a few online interactions. This was to ensure physical attraction to the person, but also to simply put a face for who they were speaking to. An example of a response was “I would say within several interactions Within maybe several messages email back and forth if it seems like things are progressing nicely then the request might be made to see a picture” A couple of other participants additionally felt that it showed a level of honesty and level of commitment to the process of finding a mate if they had a picture at the time of initial contact. Those participants who did not intend to use the internet directly as a way to find mate were less focused on pictures as their primary focus was on the activity that they are engaging in. If they did meet someone through their specific activity and started a relationship with someone, the participant stated that they had already felt like they had gotten to know the person through the activity that they were more apt to getting a picture in the timeframe of their partner’s comfort.



Some participants from both groups expressed that they initially had doubts that an online romantic relationship would work. An example of a response was “because it's easy to uh make it seem like you're somebody else when you're really not they are honest people but I don't know.” Other participants had no doubts that the utilization of the internet to find potential mates was real or that the relationships that were formed through the internet could be successful. One participant stated “I know someone who met her husband online this was like back in AOL chat room and now they have 3 kids so I know it works”. The participants stated that they found being able to be anonymous and getting to know a person’s personality before adding in the physical aspects of the relationship added to possibility of success. In addition, some participants knew of a successful online relationship, knowledge that gave further validity to the possibilities of online romantic relationships. However, one participant stated that they had some skepticism about the nuances of using the technology associated with online relationships correctly.

### **Category 2: Motives**

As part of the process of beginning any type of internet use, the participants discussed what motivated them to do it. Part of that process is reasoning behind why the participants chose a particular location to spend their time and to meet potential mates. Participants who intended to use the internet to look for potential mates mentioned that the large amounts of people was a motivator for them to pursue this as an option for them to meet people. Further motivations that were mentioned included not being interested in pursuing people in more traditional settings such as a bar or club.

Participants who did not have specific motivations stated that they really were not looking for anyone or their primary objective was just to engage in an activity such as online video gaming. An example of a participant's response is "I just came across the person because I was playing a game and it kind of started from there so it wasn't like I as hey I'm against doing it. It was never something that I tried to do it kinda just happened". These statements supported the findings of Kalmus et al. (2011) that found that one of the primary ways individuals utilize the internet was to engage in social media and entertainment.

The participants in the study shared different expectations for the types of relationships that they were interested in engaging in. Most participants who chose to use the internet as a way to find potential mates were primarily looking for dating relationships that would turn into long term commitments or their forever person. One participant stated "well my motivation was being sick of being by myself I looked for a partner, one forever". Wang and Chang (2010) also found that Internet users were interested in the possibility of using the online environment to find love. Although, some of the participants stated they were looking for friends and if something progressed into something more that would be good.

### **Category 3: Perceptions**

Perceptions about the location the participants utilized and about the individuals that use that particular location to meet and find potential mates are a part of the relationship process described by the participants in the study. A few participants stated that they experienced ambivalence about the perception about individuals that use

online romantic relationships as well as the relationship itself. An example response from a participant was “if a potential partner is not something I myself think of the right person then I don't bother telling family about it but a possible right partner I would tell family about it and all family members and Friends they almost always supported me because it's my own decision”. Safety issues were the source of the majority of negative perceptions about using the internet as a way to meet and look for potential mates by both the family/ friends of the participants as well as the participants themselves. This was true of the participants who intently used the internet as a way to meet potential mates as well as those participants that did not. Most had heard of horror stories about people being deceived, getting taken advantage of, raped, or murdered by individuals they had met on the internet. An example of a response given by a participant in reference to their family “they were really concerned because of the negative effects that were out there you know you didn't know if you were going to run into a murderer if something bad was going to happen to you and I felt it was not like a slap in the face but it was an Awakening because I go in there was no fear and then they would be like what if this person is crazy or what is this or what if you get hurt and I'm like oh I hadn't thought of that because I was too focused I'm meeting somebody new and see what happens but I'm kind of glad they did that.” This supported Wildermuth and Vogle-Bauer (2007) who found that many of their participants talked about techniques that online users could use to protect themselves when engaging in online romances such as completing background checks on the potential partners, and never giving out information such as telephone numbers. This created an overall state of caution in place and the participants that they practiced safety

measures like meeting in public places, being vague with self-disclosure when first meeting someone, and telling friends/families where they would be and who they would be with. Ultimately though, while there was an acknowledgement of possible safety concerns, most of the participants agreed that these same safety concerns could happen in more traditional settings in which they might be meeting people and finding potential mates.

## **Theme 2: Communication**

This theme was identified by exploring the responses of the participants that reflected on how they communicated with partners. Communication is one of the primary online relationship building blocks. Within communication there are two categories including language which consisted of the types of communication media that was used by the participants in the relationship and how conflict and miscommunication was handled by the participants. The other category was self-expression of the participant which consisted of self-disclosure, honesty, and infidelity. Table 3 depicts the 2 categories and 4 subcategories of communication.

Table 3

This table represents the types of information found in the categories and subcategories that made up the theme of communication

Theme	Category	Subcategories
Communication	Language	Types of communication sources Miscommunication/ conflict
	Self Expression	Self-representation Honesty

### **Category 1: Language**

It was a common consensus from all of the participants that communication was the primary way of developing and maintaining an online relationship. It was also noted that there were many ways in which to communicate to partners. Some locations for communications commonly mentioned in the responses by the participants were dating website or gaming messaging systems, instant chat, email, and voice/ video chat services like skype. Most also mentioned more traditional ways like texting, cell phone calls, and physical meetings. The results of this study supported Ramirez and Zhang (2007) whose work indicated that online relationships benefitted from the use of rich media communication including face-to-face meetings only after following brief periods of strictly text based communication. One participant stated “on the internet I have used different media skype, instant messaging, and email to keep it fun and then when you meet someone it’s just a continuation of that.” The main aspect that was mentioned in the responses of the participants was the idea of needing to feel comfortable and safe with their online partner as a way of knowing what types of communication sources they would use and when. One participant stated that “talking or texting you really get to know the person texting at first even emailing when you first start talking to the person it's just a matter of safety you don't wanna just jump in and meet the person until you get at least a little more comfortable just a few reasons and then

you can start talking to them by phone and things progress and slowly maybe meet the person”.

Miscommunication and conflicts may occur through the use of electronic chat. In general, the participants agreed that miscommunications happen frequently, but varied in how they chose to deal with the situations. Most of the participants agreed that miscommunications and conflict could not just be handled through electronic text chat, but needed to be corrected through the use of telephone talking or, if possible, through in person chatting. An example of a response from a participant was “you can’t it’s very hard to correct it online because sometimes what you’re saying isn’t taken the way you’re trying to get it across and i have found that you have to be able to talk to the person if it’s long distance you have to be able to actually talk to the person that’s in my experience things are taken out of context or the wrong way a lot of the time”. A few participants stated that miscommunication and conflict could be handled through electronic text chat if each of the partners asked many questions about the meaning behind what was typed. Some of the participants viewed conflict within an online relationship as a sign that it’s ending. Some participants added that it depended at what point in the relationship the conflict happened whether it was a sign that the relationship was done. A participant response was “just communicating somewhere with them talking with them or trying to explain it all comes back to you it’s just like real life if you have a misunderstanding in real life you try and come back at it from a different time and try and explain how did they perceive it and why did they think it was that way and just work through it like no I meant it this way”.

## **Category 2: Self-expression**

How a participant presents themselves and the degree of self-disclosure they engage in are important factors in their online relationships. Most participants agreed that it was important to understand how much information needed to be shared about oneself and at what point in the relationship one should do it in. An example of a response was “I waited a while like I kind of kept it superficial you know so it's probably maybe like I want to say it was like maybe a month month-and-a-half just because I wanted to get to know them more before I started just telling them hey I'm this person hears all the intimate details of my life random stranger”. Most of the participants expressed that at first the information they provided was rather vague and then as the relationship progressed they shared more. This even pertained to actual names. Some of the participants stated they used an alter ego name that provided anonymity for safety concerns. An example of a participant response was “I've had to use a fake name or give vague details about my life that may not be necessarily true a lot of it was to protect my anonymity”. Participants once again talked about the need to feel comfortable with their perspective partners in order to share more about themselves. However, some did remark that it was easier to self-disclose because there is distance and anonymity.

Honesty was thought as a highly important concept for any relationship. Many of the participants felt that honesty in this type of context was even more important because of the lack of physical connection. Participants felt that deception in many forms could be

more easily done in an online setting due to anonymity and physical distance. One participant stated “I do think it's easier to do online because you're not in front of that person you have to constantly cuz you can put up whatever you want”. Some of the participant talked about their own deception, such as not being truthful about their age or why they were not online when they had said they would be. Some participants felt that, if they were not totally transparent and honest, it would hinder them in finding the right person to spend forever with. They also discussed some of the deception that was done to them. One participant responded “so I think dishonesty or misrepresentation I think more often than not it was more for the sake of privacy and wanting to get to know someone before fully disclosing and representing as I am so maybe I wouldn't tell exactly what I did for a living or where exactly I live”

### **Theme 3: Maintenance**

This theme was identified by exploring the responses of the participants that reflected on how they maintained their relationships with partners. Maintenance is a part of any relationship and there are different ways to maintain them according to the identified responses of the participants. Maintenance experienced by the participants of the study requires transition at various points as the relationship grows and matures. Additionally are there differences between maintaining an online relationship versus a more traditional relationship as identified by the specific responses of the participants. Finally, the effect of infidelity has on an online romantic relationship. Table 4 depicts the two categories and two subcategories of maintenance.

Table 4:



This table represents the types of information found in the categories and subcategories that made up the theme of maintenance.

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Maintenance	Ways to maintain an online romantic relationship	communication
	Barriers to maintenance	infidelity

### **Category 1: Ways to maintain an online relationship.**

The most common expressed way to maintain an online relationship by the participants was communication. Participants discussed how they would talk through various forms such as phone, email, and instant chat. However, text seems to be the preferred method. “Again I don't know if it's very complicated it's just a lot of communication in whatever form whether that's email text phone” was a response from a participant. Participants commonly stated that maintaining an online relationship had positive aspects as well as some negative ones. Some of the positives aspects that were mentioned by the participants included having the ability to have more perceived personal space and less time requirements. While some of the drawbacks that were discussed were distance between them and a partner and the lack of physical connection. While some participants though there was little to no difference between how they maintained a more traditional relationship.

### **Category 2: Barriers to maintenance**

Participants mentioned infidelity as barrier to successful relationships as it can be in a more traditional setting. Most of the participants experienced infidelity at

some point in one of their relationships. An example of a response given by a participant was “I think the cheating occurred it also started online and I would say this circumstance we're probably unclear expectations of monogamy or assumptions of monogamy that didn't exist if that makes any sense” An example of an online infidelity can either be a continuous erotic relationship specific to one other online user or a series of random erotic chat encounters with multiple online users. A few participants discussed times that they themselves cheated on an online partner with primarily the reason being the distance and the ability to get away with it.

### **Summary**

The current study consisted of a total of 20 participants. All of the participants provided information about online romantic relationship development and maintenance through personal responses given on an email survey and a follow up telephone interview with myself. The data collected from the participants was analyzed using the methodology of Strauss and Corbin (1998) through the Nvivo computer software. The trustworthiness of the data analysis was ensured through the use of a sufficient population sample size, the use of rich thick details, the use of repeated method techniques, and finally the use of a technique called triangulation.

The results of the study provided information about the two research questions asked about the development and maintenance of online romantic relationships. The first question aimed to identify the aspects that promote and influence the developmental process of an online romantic relationship. The second question aimed to understand what types of motivations and how those motivations are experienced at different points

within the relationship development process. The analysis of the data found three primary themes in the data. The first theme was finding potential mates. Within this theme there were three categories and nine subcategories. The three categories were choosing potential mates, motives, and perceptions. The nine sub categories were different online activities, length of time in online activities, ease of finding potential mates, change in personal approach, pictures of potential mates, doubts, reasons for choosing an online activity, types of relationships, and, safety concerns. The second theme was communication. Within this theme there were two categories and four subcategories. The two categories were language and self-expression. The sub categories were types of communication, miscommunication/ conflict, self-representation, and honesty. The final theme was maintenance. Within this theme were two categories and two subcategories. The categories were ways to maintain online romantic relationships and barriers. The two subcategories were communication and infidelity.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **A Brief Recap of the Research Study**

The purpose of the study was to further understand online romantic relationships by exploring whether online romantic relationships develop in a similar fashion as has been found in the face-to-face context. The study applied Strauss and Corbin (2009) qualitative methods utilizing both surveys and interviews. Twenty participants from four different sources including local universities, the Walden University participant pool, Match.com, and Facebook provided information to answer the following research questions. The first question attempted to identify the aspects that promote and influence the developmental process of an online romantic relationship. The second question attempted to understand what types of motivations and how those motivations are experienced at different points within the relationship development process.

The data was collected through email and telephone communication with each of the participants. The entire follow up telephone interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy of responses made by the participants. The data was then transcribed by myself and entered into the computer program Nvivo for analysis. Analysis identified similar responses made by different participants in different areas of an online romantic relationship's development and maintenance. The areas included motives, perceptions, choosing potential mates, language, self-expression, and maintenance. In each of those

areas several themes emerged including finding potential partners, communication, and maintenance. The theme of finding potential partners was further categorized as: categories of choosing potential mates, motives, and perceptions and subcategories of different online activities, length of time in online activities, ease of finding potential mates, change in personal approach, pictures of potential mates, doubts, reasons for choosing an online activity, types of relationships, and safety concerns. The theme of communication was further categorized as: language and self-expression and subcategories of types of communication sources, miscommunication/ conflict, self-representation, and honesty. The last theme of maintenance was further categorized as: ways to maintain an online romantic relationship and barriers to maintenance and the subcategories of communication and infidelity.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The participants of the study provided answers to the first research question as the responses from the participants identified a couple of aspects that promoted and influenced the developmental process of their online romantic relationships. Based on the perspectives of the participants, the results identified how they chose a potential online partner, how they utilized communication in relationship progression and barriers to progression of their relationship, and ways they maintain their relationships.

The places the participants looked for potential partners and the length of time that individual looked impacted the likelihood they would encounter a potential romantic partner. This included locations such as online dating Web sites, chatrooms, or

playing online videogames as indicated by the participants in the study. Perceptions and doubts the participants held about online romantic relationships and participation in those types of activities related to the ease in which they found potential partners online. The changes in approach identified and made by each of the participant based on experiences with online individuals also increased the ease of finding potential partners. The use of the Internet in other contexts was specifically mentioned by some of the participants as an indicator that they would have a positive perception of the internet as a way to find potential partners. This was consistent with Wang and Chang (2010) who also found that internet users were interested in the possibility of using the online environment to find love. Motives as to why a participant is in a particular space or engaging in a particular activity also impacts the likelihood of an encounter a potential romantic online partner. A participant utilizing online dating sites like EHarmony indicated that they have a more primary motivation, while those participants engaging in online gaming on games like World of Warcraft finding potential partners is more likely to be secondary.

The individuals in this study identified use of communication in various forms as the primary way they initially learned information about their partners in order to check compatibility as well as deepen the level of their connections. Text chat communication was the first form of communication that the participants mentioned when first encountering a potential partner in an online context. Specific text chat forums that were mentioned by the participants included dating website instant message systems, in game instant message systems, and chat rooms. As the relationship progressed, the participants further identified the use a variety of media sources to communicate with

their partners including e-mail, telephone, text, and in person meetings. It also reflected an understanding made by the participants about how text communication could potentially lead to miscommunication and conflicts, which requires generally required additional types of communication sources such as phone or in person meetings to correct the miscommunication/ conflict. The importance of honesty in the participants to the progression and maintenance of an online romantic relationship was additionally discussed. Self-representation of the participants additionally impacted the progression and maintenance of an online romantic relationship. Participants discussed how when first engaging with someone in an online setting the information that they presented about themselves tended to be more vague in nature but as the relationship progressed, the more detailed information became. This supported Wildermuth and Vogle-Bauer (2007) who found that many of their participants talked about techniques that online users could use to protect themselves when engaging in online romances such as completing background checks on the potential partners, and never giving out information such as telephone numbers.

The participants expressed an understanding of the maintenance of their online romantic relationships with regards to the later aspects of an online romantic relationship once initial compatibility had been established. In the responses of the participants, they mentioned different strategies they used to maintain and progress their online romantic relationship. The strategy that was most mentioned all throughout a relationship was consistent communication in one form or another. Later in the progression of the relationship, participants talked about the importance of meeting in

person and moving their relationship into a real life setting. The participants also reflected an understanding of the barriers to their progression such as conflict/miscommunication and infidelity.

The participants of the study identified a couple of aspects in understanding their motives for engaging in their online romantic relationships. The first aspect for their motivation was the reasons for choosing an online activity. A participant who utilized dating websites such as Match.com intended to utilize the internet to find potential partners, where participants that engaged in activities such as online gaming intended more of activity enjoyment rather than specifically looking for potential partners. This spoke to idea of the participants having a either a primary or secondary motivation for finding potential partners. The other aspect that was mentioned by the participants was the types of relationships that they were willing to be engaged in. Most of the participants were willing to engage in other types of relationships than romantic ones such as plutonic friendships.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The insight gained from the study allowed us to see where relationship developments could be heading in the future in comparison to how they usually developed in the past. The results indicated similarities between the development and maintenance of and online romantic relationships and that those relationships formed in a traditional fashion despite of the differences in contexts and types of activities that the individuals engaged in to find potential partners. The similarities seemed to indicate that



the process of developing and maintaining will likely continue to be the same no matter how the internet continues to impact our social culture.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The results from this study would be best disseminated through an online context on a website. In this forum, the information would be able to be accessed by both individuals who utilized the Internet as a way to find potential partners and those that are simply looking for information on the subject. The information presented would outline ways to potentially improve outcomes of online romantic relationships by sharing the importance of ways to choose potential partners, communication, and maintenance aspects of these types of relationships. It would also include information about the perceptions about both the concept of meeting possible people online partners online and those individuals that do engage in looking for potential partners online. It would additionally discuss potential dangers about online relationships. I do not plan on carrying this action plan out in the near future. However, when I do, I plan to ask a colleague who owns the website Relationship Cafe to be the venue for sharing the information from my study. I chose this website as it provides many different resources on having healthy interpersonal relationships, including information and online video seminars on different topics relating to all types of relationships.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Based on the results of the study, a couple of topics should be further investigated in research. Those topics would further the understanding about the success of an online relationship based on the duration of time the couple initially used internet

based communication sources rather than simply just meeting in an offline setting first. One research question would be: Does the length of time a couple engages in communication utilizing internet communication sources impact the outcome of the relationship. This question would be best explored using qualitative methodology.

Another area for further understanding based on the results of the study would be attempting to understand more fully how an individual changes their approach to find a potential mate based on experiences with online romantic relationships and if the changes made impact how successful they are in finding a potential partner. A study though qualitative methods to conduct interviews understand how change is made and what triggers change in an individual.

As a person who met their spouse online and been through a process of finding a partner online, it was interesting to hear other stories that were similar and different to my own. I expected to find more similar stories to mine, but I tried to remain unbiased when both asking questions of the interviewees and interpretation of the responses obtained. The questions asked on both the survey and in the interviews forced participants to talk about experiences engaging in utilizing the internet as a way to find potential partners. This may have allowed them to see their experiences from a different perception as they retold their stories. All of the stories that contributed to the results of the study allowed an understanding of how similarly online romantic relationships develop and are maintained to that of traditionally formed relationships.

### **Summary**

The current study utilized a total of 20 participants. All of the participants provided information about the development of their online romantic relationship and its maintenance through personal responses given on an email survey and a follow up telephone interview with myself. The data collected from the participants was analyzed using the methodology of Strauss and Corbin (1998) through the Nvivo computer software. The trustworthiness of the data analysis was ensured through the use of a sufficient population sample size, the use of rich thick details, the use of repeated method techniques, and finally the use of a technique called triangulation. The analysis of the data found three primary themes in the data. The first theme was finding potential mates. Within this theme there were three categories and nine subcategories. The second theme was communication. Within this theme there were two categories and four subcategories. The final theme was maintenance. Within this theme there were two categories and two subcategories.

The results indicated similarities between the development and maintenance of and online romantic relationships and that of those relationships formed in a traditional fashion despite of the differences in contexts and types of activities that the individuals engaged in to find potential partners. Based on these results, the social implications of the study seemed to indicate that the process of developing and maintaining will likely continue to be similar no matter how the internet continues to impact our social culture. The results of the study would be best disseminated in an online forum. The Relationship Café website would provide a good venue to place the information as it already offers resources and information about a variety of relationship topics. Two additional studies

based on the results of the study would allow further understanding of online romantic relationships. The first study would look at the potential relationship between the duration of communication online and success of the relationship. The other would explore how an individual makes changes to their approach to finding potential mates based on their past experiences and how those changes impact future success in relationships.

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## Appendix A

### **Personal Information**

#### **Demographics**

What is your age group?

18-27 28-37 38-47 48-57 58-67 68+

How much money your household makes per year?

Under 29k 30k-40k 41k-50k 51k- 60k 61k- 70k 71k- 80k 81k+

What is your gender?

Male Female

#### **Relationship Development and Maintenance**

- 1) Do you have a primary motivation for using the Internet to meet potential partners?
- 2) Did you ever doubt that online romantic relationships were real or that they would work?
- 3) Is this your first online romantic relationship?
- 4) Did real life family or friends ever speak negatively about your online romantic relationship?
- 5) Have you ever had a negative perception about the type of person that would use the Internet as a way to find a potential mate?
- 6) Have you ever lied to a partner in an online context?
- 7) Have you ever been lied to by an online partner?

- 8) Do you find it easier to disclose personal information to partners in an online context?
- 9) Do you have a specific type of person that you look for in an online setting?
- 10) Do you require a picture of the person prior to contacting them?
- 11) Have you had more than one online relationship?
- 12) Do you think that your approach to meeting people in an online context have changed based on your experience with online dating?
- 13) Do you use multiple types of media when engaging in an online relationship?
- 14) Have you transitioned from an online romantic relationship into a real life relationship?
- 15) Have you ever had a long distant online relationship?
- 16) Have you ever cheated or been cheated on in an online romantic relationship?
- 17) Have you ever had a miss communication while using text chat?
- 18) Have you ever dealt with a relational conflict in an online setting?
- 19) Do you think it was easier to maintain a romantic relationship in an online context?
- 20) Is there more than one way to maintain an online romantic relationship?

## Appendix B

**Follow up Interview questions**

1. a. Tell me more about your motivations for looking for potential mates on the Internet?  
b. Why did you not have motivations for looking for potential mates on the Internet?
2. a. Tell me more about why you had doubts about the Internet as a way to find mates?  
b. Why was there never a doubt that online romantic relationships were real or would work?
3. a. If this is your first online relationship, what prompted you to use this context?  
b. How long have you been using the Internet as a way to find mates and how many online romantic relationships have you had?
4. a. If real life family and friends spoke negatively about your online relationship, what did they say and how did you feel about it?  
b. If real life family or friends did not speak negatively, were they supportive of the relationship?
5. a. What negative perceptions did you have about people who used the Internet as a way to find potential mates?  
b. How did you not develop negative perceptions?
6. a. How have you misrepresented yourself to partners and why?  
b. Why was it important to you to maintain honesty in your online relationship?

7.
  - a. How have you been lied to by an online partner and how did you find out about the deception? How did you feel?
  - b. Why do you think your partner chose not to deceive you and do you think that deception could be easier to do online?
8.
  - a. How soon do you start disclosing information about yourself to partners in an online?
  - b. Why is sharing information about yourself difficult for you in an online romantic relationship?
9.
  - a. Do you think it is easier to find the type of person you are looking for in an online setting and why?
  - b. What makes an online setting difficult for you to find the type of person that you are looking for?
10.
  - a. Why do you require a picture prior to initial contact?
  - b. If you do not ask for a picture before contacting a potential mate, how soon after engaging with a person in an online setting do you ask for a picture?
11.
  - a. How many online romantic relationships have you had and why do you keep choosing this form of finding potential mates?
  - b. What do you like about online romantic relationships and what don't you like, given that this is your first such relationship?
12.
  - a. What have you changed in your approach to online romantic relationships and why?

- b. If your approach hasn't changed, why do you feel that your current approach is the best way for you and do you feel successful at this approach?
13. a. Which types of communication sources do you use during an online romantic relationship?
- b. Why did you not to use communication sources in your online romantic relationship?
14. a. How long did you wait before transitioning to real life and how easy was that process for you?
- b. What has prevented you from taking your online romantic relationship into a real life setting
15. a. What is the longest physical distance between you and your online romantic partner and did you travel to meet them in real life?
- b. What prevents you from having a long distance online romantic relationship and what is the longest distance you are willing to have?
16. a. What was the circumstance to your cheating? Was the other relationship on or offline and who which relationship was first?
- b. How were you able to maintain being monogamous in an online relationship?
17. a. How did you correct any miscommunication?
- b. How do you avoid miscommunication in an online romantic relationship?
18. a. How did you resolve the conflict?
- b. How do you avoid conflict in an online romantic relationship?
19. a. Why did you find maintaining and online romantic relationship easy?

- b. Why did you find maintaining an online romantic relationship difficult?
20. a. What are the multiple ways that you maintain an online romantic relationship and why are those the most beneficial?
- b. What is the one way to maintain an online romantic relationship and why?

## Appendix C

**Ad Banner for Match.com**

Research Study

I am looking for individuals to participate in my graduate study about online romantic relationships.

Participant Requirements: 1) 18+ 2) Fluent in English 3) Met partner online and developed and maintained relationship online for a minimum of 3 months.

A 10 dollar Google Play gift card is offered for participation

This information is given to the participant over the internet



## Appendix D

### **Request for Participation**

I am Doctoral student at Walden University. I am looking for individuals to participate in a dissertation research study about online romantic relationships. I am inviting students at several colleges to participate in this study. Participants will be asked to complete an e-mail survey and a follow up telephone interview about personal experiences with developing and maintaining online romantic relationships. Specific topics of inquiry will include the number of online romantic experiences you have had, your feelings about online dating, how you choose potential online partners, show freedom you feel to yourself, whether you chose to move to other settings than the internal, how you define and deal infidelity, how you keep the relationship going, and what differences you experience between online and traditional romantic relationships.

To participate in the study an individual must meet the following criteria.

You must be at least 18 years of age

You must be fluent in the English Language

You must have met a previous or current mate online

The relationships must have been developed and maintained in an online context for at least 3 months. A 10 dollar Google Play gift card is offered for participation in the study. To be considered for participation or any questions about the study please contact the researcher.

This information is given to the individual both on the Walden website and in real life

## Appendix E

**Response E-mail for No Participation**

Thank you for your interest in volunteering in my study. Unfortunately you do not qualify for participation. You indicated that you did not meet all of the requirements which are needed for participation in this study. If you are interested in the findings of this study please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely;

Corrina Lowe

Doctoral Student

Walden University

This response is given to the individual through e-mail

## Appendix F

**Response E-mail for Participation**

What you have written tells me that you are just the kind of person that I wish to have participate in my study. If you still wish to be a part of this study, refer to the attached consent form that provides more information about the study. Following that, please answer the questions on the survey form and return this to me. After you have done this, I will be calling to arrange the follow-up telephone interview. I have also attached a list of resources for you to use if they are needed as a result of your participation in the study.

Sincerely;

Corrina Lowe

Doctoral Student

Walden University

This response is given to the participant through e-mail

## Appendix G

**Requirement Verification**

Thank you for your response to the research notice about online romantic relationships. As a reminder, to participate in the study an individual must meet the following requirements. An individual must be at least 18 years of age and be fluent in the English language. You must have met a previous or current mate online and must have developed and maintained the relationship in an online context for at least 3 months. Please verify that you do in fact meet these requirements for participation by placing a check next to the word yes. If you do not meet all of the criteria please place a check next to the word no and on the line below the box please indicate which requirement you do not meet.

Yes

No

Which criteria:

Sincerely;

Corrina Lowe

Doctoral Student

Walden University

This response is given to the individual through e-mail

## Appendix H

**Arranging Telephone Interview**

Thank you for replying to my e-mail to confirm your agreement to participate in my study through attaching the informed consent form and your answers to the survey. It is time to set up a time to call you for the follow up interview. As a reminder, the interview will take 30-45 minutes of your time and will be audio taped. Please indicate a couple of times and dates that would be convenient for us to speak. Also include the best telephone number to reach you at.

Sincerely;

Corrina Lowe

Doctoral Student

Walden University

This response is given to the participant through e-mail.

## Appendix I

### **Interview Introduction**

Thank you for your participation in my study about online romantic relationship. Before we start the interview, I like to review a few important details. This study aims to understand how an online romantic relationship develops and is maintained. All of the questions in the interview will pertain to your answers on the survey regarding to this topic.

I also want to review your rights as a participant. All of the information that you provide will be kept confidential. You have the right to not answer any question or remove yourself from the study at any point. There is minimal risk believed to be involved with this study, however if you become distressed at any point resources and referrals will be given to you. A 10 dollar google play gift card is offered for participation. The gift card access numbers will be provided at the end of this telephone interview. If you have any questions about you are able to contact myself or Walden University.

I also want to inform you that this interview will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of your responses.

Do you have any questions?

Now, we can start the interview

This information is given to the participant over the telephone

## Appendix J

**Resources for Participants**

1. Hotpeachpages: International Directory of Domestic Violence Agencies  
[www.hotpeachpages.net](http://www.hotpeachpages.net)
2. National Alliance on Mental Illness [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)
3. Clark County Crisis Line (360) 696-9560