OLD AND NEW METHODS FOR ONLINE RESEARCH: THE CASE OF ONLINE DATING

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The proverbial opening of the 2004 film *Closer* shows us a passionate online chat message exchange between two people. Believing to be courting a young woman Dan Woolf (Jude Law) makes advances with sexual innuendos towards a woman or so he believes. The message exchange is indeed a fake one, in fact, between two heterosexual men, one pretending to be a woman Larry Gray (Clive Owen). This very virtual, gendered and insecure nature of online intimacy makes it a complex phenomenon to analyze. The psychological need for intimacy intertwines with the corporate networked ad machine, which sells gendered images of men and women to each other. Digital Technologies and mediated personal lives overlap with the gendered nature of these digital landscapes.[1]

Today intimacy and networked individualism go hand in hand through online dating sites and social networks such as Facebook. These new spaces function as courting places for millions. Yet these spaces are also flowing sites of information that present new practices and modes of existence for couples. Today online dating is a 100 million US$ industry operating worldwide, answering both general and niche demand for singles. Match.com's own statistics estimate that about 10 percent of all paying users find a partner within a year.[2] Deborah Chambers states 'the fluidity and choice apparently offered by online dating fits in neatly with today's ethos of elective intimacy'.[3]

What is done through online dating is a reflexive and self-engaged impression management. Singles using online dating services are project-managing the outcomes of their mediated romantic encounters. Dysfunctional behavior such as stalking is also encountered in this space. Teenagers and young people are now: 'reconfiguring their notions of privacy and publicity and their concepts of personal and intimate'.[4] Chambers is surprised how conventional intimacy remains the same in new media. She states how the alienating pressures of work life are countered by online dating that allows people to relive romance in the most traditional way.[5]

A Humanities or a Social Science Issue?

The gathering and use of data related to online courtship seem to be within the domain of psychology since the inception of the World Wide Web, as the first articles and books go back to 1997. From the early articles on, the emphasis has always been to find out who uses

1 K. Orton-Johnson and Nick Prior (eds) *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 4.

2 Arvidsson, Adam. "Quality Singles': Internet Dating and the Work of Fantasy', *New Media & Society* 8.4 (2006): 686.

3 Deborah Chamber, *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 139.

4 Deborah Chamber, *Social Media and Personal Relationships*, p. 140.

5 Deborah Chamber, *Social Media and Personal Relationships*, p. 141.

these services and on deceptive self-presentation. The users of online dating services were assumed to be shy people who could not experience face to face interaction, but instead resorted to a behind the computer approach.

The second assumption of the early researchers was that the users who misrepresented themselves through their profile photos and age-weight-height information wanted to have their romance chances higher, so they lied to get an advantage. This deception can take various forms: physical (both as data and information), discursive (false representation of self during online interaction). The personal impact of false representation on an individual can be devastating. The interest of psychologist in the area is understandable in terms of prevention of mental health problems such as depression and breakdown that could lead to suicide. Yet positive impact of online dating in terms of having a dialogue, however virtual, has been appreciated by such researchers. The online dating of widows after the death of their loved ones proves to be a cure for life long misery on the bereaving parties.[6]

Who Dates Online?

The early studies focused on who uses online dating sites. Question of what happened after the online couples met dominated the late 1990s. Qualitative research by Andrea Baker between 1997-99 is a case in point. Baker interviewed 43 couples to find out if they got along after they met online. Baker analyzed email exchange between couples and did a follow up interview with a small subsection of the people. The finding can reflect the current status of online courtship after the arrival of social networks today. The common similarities of online couples (circa 1997) were age (late thirties), marital status (were married), education (at least a bachelor's degree), offline meeting (4-7 months later), distance (lived thousands of miles away), prior online relationships (females none, males had experience). Online nicknames, modes and content of communication, timing, and presentation of the photo have had an impact on the research.[7]

Studies done a decade later to find who goes online for courting have revealed more results. The methods used changed from email analysis to online surveys. A study done on Dutch Internet users aged between 18-60 through online questionnaire reveals that online dating was unrelated to income and educational level. The high activity age of the users shifted. Respondents between 30 and 50 years old were the most active online daters. People low in dating anxiety were found to be more active online daters than people high in dating anxiety.[8] The measures for the study were age, education, income, dating anxiety and frequency of visit of dating sites. The study wanted to debunk the myth that only the shy use online dating; in fact the less shy had more frequency in attending these sites. The average age of

6 Dannagal Goldthwaite Young and Scott E. Caplan, 'Online Dating and Conjugal Bereavement', *Death Studies* 34.7 (2010): 575.

7 Andrea Baker, 'Two by Two in Cyberspace: Getting Together and Connecting online', *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 3.2 (2000): 239-242.

8 Patti M. Valkenburg and Jochen Peter, 'Who Visits Online Dating Sites? Exploring Some Characteristics of Online Daters', *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 10.6 (2007): 849.

the users was twenty-nine as opposed to the Baker study's 35 and over.[9]

By 2010, the social demographic of Internet dating had changed. Sautter, Tippett and Morgan used a larger sample with quantitative methods. Multivariate logistic regression was used to analyze 3,215 respondents a nationally representative U.S. survey of Internet dating. The results yielded that sociodemographic factors have strong effects on Internet access and single status but weak effects on the use of Internet dating services. The presence of computer literate users in social networks increase the chances of Internet dating. The researchers found that Internet dating is a 'common mate selection strategy among the highly selective subpopulation of single Internet users and may continue to grow through social networks. Material and virtual elements of the digital divide have direct and indirect effects on Internet dating'.[10]

Case studies and qualitative analyses revealed that filtering process is developed by online users when it comes to online dating. Danielle Couch and Pranee Liamputtong used a qualitative approach with 15 people who use online dating took part in in-depth, online chat interviews. The results showed that nearly all participants used more than one dating site to seek partners. They also made use of email, chat and webcam to qualify their potential partners. They utilized a variety of filters and filtering processes before progressing to a face-to-face meeting. 'Participants filtered using the text, photographs, chat, and webcam opportunities available online, and followed progressive personalized steps in communication and engagement in the lead-up to meeting other online daters in person'.[11]

Recent research reveals that online courtship has shifted to social networks such as Facebook among youth. Craig and Wright found that 'attitude similarity and social attraction may be important perceptions that influence self-disclosure, and may eventually lead to predictability and interdependence, both important outcomes in terms of developing=maintaining relationships'.[12] Perceptions of similarity and attraction are found to be influencing two relational maintenance strategies (positivity and openness). They also found out that many Facebook users supplement their Facebook communications with face-to-face interactions. Through these encounters, the online couples take care of any potential misunderstandings.

Deceptive Self-Presentation: A Psychological or A Security Issue?

Misrepresentation has been, and it still is the most studied phenomenon in online dating. Ellison et al explore how users conceptualize misrepresentation (their own and others') in a specific genre of online self-presentation: the online dating profile. Using qualitative data

9 Patti M. Valkenburg and Jochen Peter, *Who Visits Online Dating Sites?*, p. 850.

10 Jessica M. Sautter, Rebecca M. Tippett, and S. Philip Morgan. 'The Social Demography of Internet Dating in the United States', *Social Science Quarterly* 91.2 (2010): 554.

11 Danielle Couch and Pranee Liamputtong, 'Online Dating and Mating: The Use of the Internet to Meet Sexual Partners', *Qualitative Health Research* 18.2 (2008): 268.

12 Elizabeth Craig and Kevin B. Wright, 'Computer-mediated Relational Development and Maintenance on Facebook®', *Communication Research Reports* 29.2 (2012): 119.

collected from 37 online dating participants, the researchers tried to understand self-presentational practices 'specifically how discrepancies between one's online profile and offline presentation are constructed, assessed, and justified'.[13] New York City was chosen as the location having access to a variety of online dating site users. Participants were invited through the *Village Voice* and Craigslist.com advertisements. Users of the most popular online dating sites (Yahoo! Personals, Match.com/MSN Match.com, American Singles, and Webdate) were included in the study. Overall eighty participants took part in the study. The first thirty-seven were interviewed (12 men and 25 women) ranging in age from 18 to 47. The near ethnographic field work yielded interesting results:

> First, participants were presented with a printed copy of their online dating profile and asked to rate the accuracy of each profile element, as well as the general acceptability of lying on that topic. Profile elements included age, height, occupation, and religion. Participants then completed a survey and were interviewed by the third author. Finally, participants were asked to engage in measurement procedures and were thanked, debriefed, and given a $30 incentive.[14]

The end result showed that online daters used their profile as a promise when it came to creating their own online representation: The participants gave themselves 'a flexible sense of identity that drew upon past, present, and future selves. The profile as promise framework enables us to better understand these dynamics and to consider when a misrepresentation is a lie and when it is merely a promise that may soon be fulfilled'.[15]

Toma and Hancock (2010) examined the role of online daters' deception in physical attractiveness in their profiles. Sixty-nine online daters identified the deceptions in their online dating profiles and had their photograph taken in the lab. Independent judges rated the online daters' physical attractiveness. Results showed that the online daters were to change their profile photographs and lie about their physical description (height, weight, age) when they had low self esteem. The relationship between attractiveness and deception did not extend to profile parts unrelated to their physical appearance such as income, occupation, suggesting that their deceptions were limited and strategic.[16]

Uncertainty plays a role in building trust in intimacy. Toma and Hancock's further study investigated whether deceptions in online dating profiles match what daters write about themselves in the text part of the profile. Computerized analyses found that deceptions showed themselves through linguistic cues pertaining to liars' emotions and liars' strategic efforts to manage their self-presentations. The findings add to the research base on deception, media, and self-pres-

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13 Nicole B. Ellison, Jeffrey T. Hancock, and Catalina L. Toma. 'Profile as Promise: A Framework for Conceptualizing Veracity in Online Dating Self-presentations', *New Media & Society* 14.1 (2012): 45.

14 Nicole B. Ellison, Jeffrey T. Hancock, and Catalina L. Toma. 'Profile as Promise', p. 60.

15 Nicole B. Ellison, Jeffrey T. Hancock, and Catalina L. Toma. 'Profile as Promise', p. 60.

16 Catalina L.Toma and Jeffrey T. Hancock. 'Looks and lies: The role of Physical Attractiveness in Online Dating Self-presentation and Deception', *Communication Research* 37.3 (2010): 335.

entation, and also show how writing style influences perceived trustworthiness.[17]

Toma, Hancock and Ellison (2008: 1023) examined self-presentation in online dating profiles using a novel cross-validation technique for establishing accuracy. Eighty online daters rated the accuracy of their online self-presentation. Information about participants' physical attributes was then collected (height, weight, and age) and compared with their online profile, revealing that deviations tended to be ubiquitous but small in magnitude. Men lied more about their height, and women lied more about their weight, with participants farther from the mean lying more. Participants' self-ratings of accuracy were significantly correlated with observed accuracy, suggesting that inaccuracies were intentional rather than self-deceptive. Overall, participants reported being the least accurate about their photographs and the most accurate about their relationship information. This study conflicts with previous studies that

On the other hand, Deandrea et al confirmed that online daters lied about their weight and height not to create social desirability. The study found that 'height/weight misstatements are self-serving but do not serve a social influence strategy to affect others' impressions'. The self-deception literature shows that distorted self-presentations can represent simple ignorance about oneself, a strategic message to deceive others, or a self-directed response to self-affirmation or the avoidance of threats to self-esteem.[18]

Kraeger et al questioned the tendency for spouses to resemble each other across a variety of valued social characteristics, such as income, education, and health. The idea was to check if homogamy played an important role in the creation of intergroup social distance, inequality among families, and the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage.[19] Hall et al examined factors found that seven categories of misrepresentation exist: 'personal assets, relationship goals, personal interests, personal attributes, past relationships, weight, and age'. The study found that men are more likely to misrepresent personal assets, relationship goals, personal interests, and personal attributes, whereas women are more likely to misrepresent weight.[20]

Conclusion

The research literature on online dating has mostly concentrated on two strands of research: on who uses these services and why-how misrepresentation of self happens. The early assumptions of who were the shy people used online dating to their advantage. Yet further studies revealed that more aggressive, and less shy people overly use these services. As

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17 Catalina L. Toma and Jeffrey T. Hancock. 'What Lies Beneath: The Linguistic Traces of Deception in Online Dating Profiles',*Journal of Communication* 62.1 (2012): 78.

18 David C. DeAndrea et al. 'When Do People Misrepresent Themselves to Others? The Effects of Social Desirability, Ground Truth, and Accountability on Deceptive Self-Presentations', *Journal of Communication* 62.3 (2012): 415.

19 Derek A. Kreager et al. '"Where Have All the Good Men Gone?" Gendered Interactions in Online Dating', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 76.2 (2014): 387.

20 Jeffrey A. Hall et al. 'Strategic Misrepresentation in Online Dating: The Effects of Gender, Self-monitoring, and Personality Traits', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 27.1 (2010): 117-118.

for the misrepresentation each study conflicted with another. The physical qualities were thought to be determining misrepresentation. Yet money and status were mist lied about by men. The variety of research methods used such as questionnaire and online surveys seem to be more reliable that computerized aggregate analyses. The future of online dating studies is yet to be determined by a new factor, the use of social networks. Such networks can change the assumptions and the actual uses of these sites in unpredictable ways. The online dating services are big, and the services they provide are on demand. The next decade of online dating research will questions today's assumptions and give way to a better understanding of online romance.

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