



The globalized online dating culture: Reframing the dating process through online dating

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Abstract

The use of online dating websites and applications is becoming an increasingly accepted way to meet a potential partner. Dating is known to be an ambiguous and contradictory process, highly vulnerable to influences from cultural settings. In this paper I argue upon the capabilities online dating may have in reframing the dating process and in generating changes in the social structure of our society. These changes would result in the adherence of a globalized dating culture as online dating applications increase in popularity world-wide. This paper also reviews literature on behaviour in online dating environment, underling the advantageous characteristic that computer-mediated communication is known to have. Moreover, a retrospective with regard to popular concepts that explain relationships in the digital era is made.

Keywords

Online dating, culture, globalization, digital society, modern relationships, computer-mediated communication, online behaviour

The current literature review seeks to understand what has been said about online dating so far by exploring studies, theories and concepts relevant in describing the phenomenon. It also explores the gaps in the literature and offers leads for what could be taken in account in what concerns future research.

The review is structured in multiple parts: the first part – *the rise of online dating* – explores the studies on demographics and explanations regarding the mass acceptance of online dating and seeks to describe a world in which such dating strategies are not only

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optional, but needed; the second part – *the online dating culture* – describes how online dating can be viewed as responsible in the creation and modification of the traditional dating techniques, offering a culture of its own; the third part – *typologies and behaviours in the online dating setting* – investigates previous research on behaviour in the online dating environment and seeks to establish typologies of daters; the fourth part – *relationships in the digital era* – explores concepts that depict modern relationships in terms of negative consequences of globalization and digitalization; and finally, the fifth part – *mass-media and the presentation of online dating* – points to the explanations given by the media in relation to online dating and strengthens the idea that such knowledge is useful for the internet users that try to make sense of the changes occurring in their love lives.

The rise of online dating

Of the most visible elements that reorganize the modern world, the technological development remains of great importance when analyzing change in social structures and institutions. The rise of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have reshaped the public and the private spheres (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008), deconstructing and reconstructing the traditional into modern. As Castells (2011) observes, an individualized use of electronics and technologies seems to be one of the main characteristics of humans in the digital era. As a consequence, ICTs have increasingly started to support and ease the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008), through social media and online communities.

Among the technologies aimed at forming interpersonal connections, online dating websites and applications apply the function of matching individuals with the purpose of creating romantic relationships.

The key services online dating applications and websites are known to offer are *access*, *communication* and *matching* (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). Online dating offers access to a multitude of potential partners, the possibility to communicate and to exchange technologically enhanced messages, and a helping tool, the matching algorithm, producers seeking to promote an image of individuals more compatible from the start (Finkel *et al.*, 2012).

Brym, Lenton, Hindson, Kaljuste, Smith and Curtis (2001) have conducted a study regarding online dating in Canada and researched the main motives that aid the fast growth of online dating. Their findings expose the existence of an unprecedented population of singles, which is the main target population when it comes to dating businesses. Also, a primed focus in building a career in early youth is another cause that accelerates online dating acceptance, claiming the need of efficient, handy dating strategies and digitally enhanced alternatives. Furthermore, the study includes work mobility as a cause, nowadays individuals being expected to travel and frequently change their work location or employer, and the decrease of workplace romance due to implications that might lead to possible sexual harassment accusations (Brym *et al.*, 2001).

Sautter, Tippett and Morgan (2010) mention three factors that reflect upon the high usage of online dating applications. First off, technological accessibility and the integration of the Internet in people's lives and households remains one of the main factors that eases the online presence. Furthermore, people seeking romantic and sexual partners as a result of the delay of marriage, and also the changes in perception regarding online dating and the release of stigma linked to dating apps and websites are two other factors to consider when it comes to explaining the online dating layout.

By researching the online dating usage in 18 countries, Hogan, Dutton, & Li (2011) indicate that online dating complements traditional dating techniques, "a blend of offline and online networks" (Hogan *et al.*, 2011, p.3). Also, exposure to the world of dating (knowing couples that met online or people that use online dating) might influence people into having a more positive approach towards it (Hogan, Dutton and Li, 2011). It what concerns age, the study shows that individuals over 40 years are much more likely to use online dating to form relationships (see also Stephure, Boon, Mackinnon, & Deveau, 2009), in contradiction to common beliefs that online dating is for the youth (Hogan, Dutton and Li, 2011).

According to Smith and Duggan (2013), researchers at Pew Research Center, "one in every ten American adults has used an online dating site or a mobile dating app" (Smith and Duggan, 2013, p.2), with 66% of online dating users experiencing a date with someone they've met online, and 23% achieving marriage or long-lasting commitments through online dating. The study strengthens the fact that attitudes toward online dating are becoming more favourable and, interestingly enough, it captures one of the effects online dating has on the quality and longevity of a relationship as perceived by internet users: <<32% of internet users agree with the statement that "*online dating keeps people from settling down because they always have options for people to date.*">> (Smith and Duggan, 2013, p.3). The benefits of online dating are taken in account, which are mostly connected to access, and also the negative experiences that individuals have encountered online, significantly more relevant for female users. Moreover, the researchers associate the social networking with a "world of dating and relationships" (Smith and Duggan, 2013, p.6) in which it is highly common to do research on people one used to date or to obtain more information about people of romantic interest.

Online dating culture

Dating is one of those processes that came to be known as an ordinary stage in our contemporary lives, but it wasn't always as such. Modell (1989) associates the beginnings of dating with the "dance craze" (Modell, 1989, p.71) happening in the 1910s and early 1920s. The multiplication of the dancing events in this period created a custom for teenagers to seek dance partners and to establish close contact with unacquainted individuals (Modell, 1989). Furthermore, the increased popularity of motion pictures between 1921 and 1930 has offered further opportunities for unmarried youth to pursue contact with their crushes (Modell, 1989). Movies played also an educative part on "the timing and sequencing of the emotional structure of the life course" (Modell, 1989, p.74)

by offering a selection of romantic movies that envisioned “marriage for love”, “winning another’s love” or “illicit love” scenarios (Modell, 1989, p.74). As a result, dating has quickly developed as an integrated part of the modern individual’s life, becoming an institution precursory to marriage or, in our own times, possibly independent from it.

Patterns and ideal scenarios of dating and marriage differ from culture to culture. The institution of dating involves a pattern which is ambiguous and unstable due to major influences from the cultural productions and different assessments based on individual experiences on the matter. Ansari (2015) talks about the confusion men and women feel nowadays towards the dating process. The multiple correspondence channels, the timing one should respect prior responding to or sending an initial text are parts of the dating process that reflect highly on the success of the relationship (Ansari, 2015). In such way, online dating settings may highly influence users’ behaviour and have an educative part in how the dating process should evolve and in what intentions users should pursue.

Fiore (2004) observes the reciprocal and influential relationship between culture and online dating environments with regard to the meaning of love and relationships. From all the characteristics regarding cultural ideals of love, designers of applications borrow only a few to make visible in their dating applications, aiding in the formation of a new description of how relationships and love should look like (Fiore, 2004).

“The designer of a personals system chooses to emphasize (both visually and algorithmically) some characteristics more than others. [...] As a suddenly popular way to meet partners for dates or relationships, online personals not only reflect but also have the potential to shape how people attract one another, date, and fall in love.” (Fiore, 2004, p.15)

As a consequence, users become part of an environment that designates *a specific way of doing dating*. For example, Tinder, one of the most popular dating applications, offers access to people within close location, with little self-information required. Because of the fast and easy facilities, Tinder has long been perceived as a hook-up app that eases sexual demands and harassment (Thompson, 2018). Other dating applications and websites that use more complex matching algorithms (e.g. match.com, eHarmony, etc.) might be underlining the idea of a compatibility importance between partners. If we were to analyze dating applications and websites as part of a constituent culture or as belonging to multiple, different cultures, we ought to analyze the causal role the culture exerts. *What is the main purpose of the dating app/website and how users respond to the declared purpose?* Swidler (1986) views culture as having “an independent causal role because it shapes the capacities from which such strategies of action are constructed” (Swidler, 1986, p.277). Therefore, I believe that analyzing online dating as a culture could capture important findings and explanations on how the institution of dating is defined in different online environments.

The idea of an online dating influence with direct role in exerting changes is not new. Hergovich and Ortega (2018) describe through a network analysis how online dating websites and applications have encouraged interracial relationships and the ascendance of interracial families. Their findings constitute an important argument in the analysis of

online dating as an accountable influence in the changing structure of society and dating culture as a whole.

On the idea of technological surveillance, the online dating industry has been involved in discussions regarding the use of the data gathered across time. Christian Rudder, former co-founder of OkCupid explains how data, “an enormous set of what people are doing and thinking and saying” (Rudder, 2014, p.12) is highly revelatory in understanding human nature. The documentary “Swiped: Hooking up in the digital era” is also persistent on the idea that big companies are collecting huge amounts of data in order to offer efficient and addictive products for large consumption. Particular is the experiment on pigeons exemplified in the documentary, illustrative for the *gamification* feature in mobile dating applications:

<<In the documentary, Tinder CSO Jonathan Badeen — a.k.a. the guy who invented swiping — told Sales that he was partly inspired by college psychology classes, in which he had studied the work of B.F. Skinner.

In one of Skinner’s experiments, he conditioned hungry pigeons to believe that food, which was actually being delivered at random times, was prompted by random pecking. So, the pigeons began pecking more often in certain ways, in the hopes of getting more food.

“That’s the whole swiping mechanism,” Sales said. “You swipe, you might get a match, you might not. And then you’re just like excited to play the game ... Skinner essentially turned pigeons into gamblers.”>> (Johnson, 2018, web)

Also, the same documentary captures the idea that dating applications might have influenced the dating culture in an unfavourable way, facilitating short, numerous and simultaneous relationships due to the access to hundreds of possible partners given by the dating applications and websites (Swiped: Hooking Up in the Digital Age, 2018).

The data obtained from online dating platforms can be used in an intentional manner in accordance to the addictive part of human nature. Future research is needed in understanding the making of the matching algorithms and purposes engaged in the description of the dating platforms.

Typologies and behaviours in the online dating setting

Various studies have searched to explain the behaviour of users in the online dating environment. The majority of them are concentrated in understanding how self-presentation and impression management is done (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006; Guadagno, Okdie and Kruse, 2012; Ward, 2016), in analyzing the gendered discourse performed in the online dating setting (Fullick, 2013), in capturing the preferences and perceived attractiveness of users (Brand *et al.*, 2012; Hitsch, Hortaçsu and Ariely, 2016) or in understanding the gendered perception on age (Skopek, Schmitz and Blossfeld, 2011) and intentional distortion of personal characteristics in achieving certain goals (Hall *et al.*, 2010).

Studies on user typology in online dating settings concerning characteristics and purposes are still to be made. Johnson and Kulpa (2007) underline that online user

typologies could be useful in exploring “characteristic patterns or types of online behaviour” (Johnson & Kulpa, 2007, p.777) that can be measured and used in understanding how users interact (Johnson and Kulpa, 2007). However, some particular typologies are identified by Giddens (1992) when referring to the *womansier of today* – “a thrill-seeker in a world of open sexual opportunities” (Giddens, 1992, p.84) or to the *codependent person* – “someone who [...] requires another individual, or a set of individuals, to define her (or his) wants” (Giddens, 1992, p.89). Although Giddens (1992) didn’t point out at online dating when describing the proposed typologies, such definitions would be highly useful for future research concerning the online dating setting.

Abramova, Baumann, Krasnova, & Buxmann (2016) have conducted a meta-review in which 69 studies related to gender differences, behaviour, and dating process in the online setting were analyzed. The discussed findings showed that preferences in others differ for men and women. Men are more likely to focus on the physical aspect, whereas women tend to have multiple demands. Also, the meta-review described findings suggesting a focus on the quantity of partners in what concerns men, and a focus on the quality of partners in what concern women. The traditional and stereotypical characterization of male and female are also discussed, men searching to expose traits that place them on the superiority scale, being expected to initiate contact, whereas women focus on creative means to expose their self and use more photos than men, perceiving success as related to appearance.

As online dating takes place in a *computer-mediated communication* environment (CMC), various studies have approached online behaviour in contrast to face-to-face interaction (FtF). CMC’s line of discussion is constituted by an analysis of the technological in regard to the emotional nuances it implies. More specifically, studies have referred to how individuals shape the online environment with relation to the social construction of the online reality (Jones, 1998); to the social presence in CMC environments and the degree in which a person is acknowledged in the digital (Gunawardena, 1995), findings suggesting the need of an autonomous inference of one’s presence in such environments (Gunawardena, 1995) or to a discussion on the CMC forms - impersonal and interpersonal vs. hyperpersonal CMC (Walther, 1996).

Walther (1996) proposes, through the concept of hyperpersonal communication, a complex definition of CMC. The hyperpersonal perspective views computer-mediated communication as conducted by stereotypically positive enhancements that ensure “opportunities for self-presentation, idealization, and reciprocation” (Walther, 1996, p.28). The concept of *hyperpersonal CMC* has been used in order to analyze self-presentation in internet dating by Hancock, Toma, & Ellison (2007) and (Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006) findings suggesting that individuals use technology to their advantage.

Pierce (2009) analyzed the CMC among teens and pointed out that technological intermediaries are regarded as a “safe opportunity for them to interact with others” (Pierce, 2009, p.1370) and notices the necessity that CMC devices imply, as they are viewed as a replacement or substitution of unmediated forms of interaction.

It is to be noticed that the use of computer-mediated communication is different among users, which implies the need of a categorization of users in what concerns their purpose in using dating technology. When analyzing typologies of users, the environment in which such typologies are created should be taken in account as well.

Relationships in the individualized era

The deinstitutionalization of marriage has been discussed and defined as a “weakening of the social norms that define people’s behaviour” (Cherlin and Hopkins, 2004, p.848). As marriage becomes flexible, *dating*, a concept used to define the process in which individuals select a partner for a long-lasting commitment, has changed as well.

Giddens (1992) envisions through the concept of *confluent love* the “separating and divorcing society” (Giddens, 1992, p.62) in which *pure relationships* are more prevalent. Giddens (1992) defines pure relationships as partnerships in which individuals involved perceive certain satisfactions from each other. When the beneficial exchanges are gone, the relationship ends.

The concept of *commensuration* might point to the same idea Giddens (1992) underlined. Espeland and Stevens (1998) argue upon the habit of conversion of “qualities into quantities” (Espeland and Stevens, 1998, p.316) that modern individuals use in order to understand and compare different aspects of their lives. According to Espeland and Stevens (1998), lovers might be discredited when their qualities are quantified. By comparing the amount of benefits and qualities one may receive from another than their lover, feelings of devaluation towards the lover might occur. In this way, the perceived uniqueness of the loved one is undermined and thought of as a replaceable good. The concept of commensuration could be useful in understanding how online dating users make choices regarding future partners. Is commensuration a part of the process? Do online daters compare and measure their potential partners’ qualities?

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2014) observe the importance Internet has gained in the construction of relationships: “*it’s the Internet that makes lovers*” by providing an accessible virtual space in which one can search among infinite possibilities of potential partners (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2014). The authors talk about the changes that globalization lessened in the personal life of the individuals and recognize the online environment as significant in analyzing modern romantic processes.

Through the concept of *liquid love*, Bauman (2003) explains relationships as unstable and uncertain. One of most prevalent causes is the virtual proximity which has become more important than the real one, as we are always connected. Bauman (2003) recognizes online dating as entertainment, a place in which individuals shop for partners, where exchanges are made “without the fear of ‘real world’ repercussions” (Jeff Gavin in Bauman, 2003, p.65), and where conversations are frequently followed by sudden dialogue termination (Bauman, 2003).

Following the same idea, Heino, Ellison and Gibbs (2010) propose the concept of *relationship shopping* for the process in which users search for “the perfect mate” on the online dating platforms (Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010, p.443). Their findings suggest

negative aspects of relationship shopping, more specifically, the commodification it entails, in which the characteristics of an individual are devaluated because they don't suit initial expectations. Authors define this feeling as a *buyer's remorse* that describes the moment in which online daters discover that the people they've connected with "were not what they appeared to be" (Heino, Ellison and Gibbs, 2010, p.444).

The concepts described above are contouring the border between the traditional and modern. Although traditional feelings toward marriage and relationship still prevail, it is important to acknowledge the changes brought up by the digitalization of the society.

Mass-media and the presentation of online dating

Online dating has also been approached to a great extent in the mass-media and has been integrated in the mass-culture productions initially as „another tool the writers will employ to turn your life into a swirling miasma of entertaining chaos" (Dating Service Disaster, TV Tropes, web), strengthening the perceived negative attitudes towards dating that were more prevalent in the beginning (in the '90s), and lately, becoming a valuable source of knowledge for most internet users that need guidance with their social lives.

In search for sensational and subjects of mass importance, journalists pick some of the most striking titles related to online dating. Their content was observed to be either educative or informational (The Economist, 2018a, web), adopting a positive (The Economist, 2018b, web) or negative (Marateck, 2018, web) approach towards online dating, containing online dating statistics (Brooks, 2018, web), expressing concerns regarding the role dating apps might have in rising STDs (Belluz, 2017, web), or collecting experiences of people that used such apps (The Observer, 2015).

In the digital era, many individuals use the internet to make sense of the world around and mass-media plays an important part in the shape of knowledge they receive. Because the situations some of us might experience nowadays are new, mass-media helps in naming processes and connecting people that share similar happenings. For example, Haynes (2017) wrote an article explaining and naming processes engaged in the modern dating setting: *ghosting* – the act of sudden disappearance of a potential romantic partner; *slow fading* – in which someone becomes less and less available for the other; *cuffing season* – seasons in which people perceive relationships as more favourable; *deep-like* – the art of showing your interest in an exaggerated manner; *breadcrumbing* – receiving little and random attention; *haunting* – characteristic to a stalking ex-lover with the help of social media. All these processes are relevant in understanding and learning the way that dating is done in present times.

How do individuals learn about dating nowadays? Apart from the media articles, books about dating in general and YouTube channels dedicated to education in the art of dating offer a learning support without precedent. Their need on the market points to confusion and also to the need of understanding the different approaches individuals might have on the matter.

Conclusions

The consulted studies have captured the extent to which online dating is used in present times and have revealed the motives that stand before the popularity of such dating strategies. While a considerable number of studies have relied on the analysis of behaviour in the online dating setting, this paper surprises the need of a new approach in consideration to the effects that online dating websites and applications might have on the alteration of the dating culture.

While the sociological perspective is needed in understanding the considerable changes brought by globalization and digitalization and knowledge making, mass-media represents a helpful tool for internet users that seek answers.

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