Online Dating

How Science Is Changing Our Relationships

By Christopher J. Ryan

Americans do almost everything online from banking to ordering food, so it only makes sense we find love online too. Andrew T. Fiore, a data scientist at Facebook, says, "As more and more of life happens online, it's less and less the case that online is a vacuum — it's real life. "There's a lot going on below the surface in online dating, particularly concerning the effects of big data and science. Online dating services like Match.com and eHarmony use a bounty of numbers in calculations and algorithms to verify match potential. The million dollar question is: Does technology (and science) improve upon the human condition to find and keep "lasting" love? And, are we good at predicting who's a good match for us, with or without the aid of science?

I've taken up online dating in the past few months to see it for myself and to report just in time for Valentine's Day — statistically, one of the busiest weeks in online dating. First, you should know my online dating experience centered around free services, like Plenty of Fish and OKcupid, with limited access to paid services like Match.com and eHarmony. I found this to be particularly true in my experience: In the world of free, we pay for the services in more costly ways than with our wallets, meaning that when we don't pay for services, the users are the product.

Anyone with a device, Internet connection and longing heart has access to online dating services. The online dating population is largely diverse because of this — in what we seek, why we are here, and how we interact. That doesn't even begin to scrape the surface of user individuality like education, age, location, and culture. A symptom of this condition is our expectations and desires, as Internet daters become the idealized version of ourselves and others. According to Catalina L. Toma, assistant professor in the department of communication arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 81 percent of people misrepresent information in their profile. For example, "I want to learn how to scuba dive" becomes "I scuba dive," or we add an extra inch to our height. According to social anthropologists, there's a reason why we lie (social acceptance) but in online dating, lying mires the community in missed connections.

What's more, free online dating services allow users to inspect every element of attraction and point of interest before establishing a personal connection, unlike two people meeting for the first time in a grocery store. With the amount of information provided — granted, all by the user — it's easy to find an exit strategy. Before Internet dating, you couldn't pull up a dossier on a potential match outlining financials, personal interests and other forms of social wealth. There was only the environment and in some cases mutual friends in common — the rest is up to us. These were cherished tidbits of intimate information, previously journeyed together. Online, we pick apart fractions of evidence and find a reason to be asocial. What was once a new discovery to be shared and celebrated together is now created alone and in silence. The result is a community that prizes superficiality, which has very real applications to non-digital communication. I ask, are we losing this edge?

Superficiality governs the way the community behaves and affects the distribution of activity (person-to-person). It's what John Tierney, of the New York Times, calls the "lightning rod effect." What happens is the most attractive profiles get inundated with invitations and messages. Everyone is here, but only the top accounts are recognized. There are great human powers at work here, but why does this happen?

I must address that the medium is just as important to acknowledge. The method of browsing strongly influences the human touches we're making online. There are two very basic principles behind why we sign up to dating sites like OkCupid and Plenty of Fish and how we decide to put our best foot forward: It's ostensibly "easy" and the human heart and all that follows is a curious bunch. The mobile platform, with specific consideration to online dating, has only deepened the superficiality stigmata.

Mobile is quickly becoming the platform of the future, and people are signing up for dating services via mobile phone at congruent rates. This means we are browsing on the go — while we multitask — riding a subway or watching TV. I know this is human nature when it comes to technology (to multitask as a higher form of engagement). Nick Bilton makes this clear in his book, "I Live in the Future & Here's How It Works," and I agree with him. But part of me also thinks that we're not taking this online dating environment "seriously" when doing so. Multitasking in online dating communities is different from multitasking to deliver actionable evidence of progress, such as in business — as an engagement principle. The difference is, multitasking stifles connections in online dating because we're not dedicating attention to the process, to make a genuine connection, which makes the quality of interaction sub par.

Scanning, as a result of the mobile user experience, has become a major character trait of the user experience in the free online dating carousel. Because we gaze (prize photos) and scroll endlessly unsatisfied, to see who else is out there, we fall victim to the choice effect. The choice effect states that in the face of many options, the initial desire to make a decision becomes less satisfying because of the overwhelming abundance of choice. The compound effects of scanning and the way we consume information presents adverse social conditions.

There are two important root forces that enable the online community to thrive: (1) our power of attraction and (2) capitalism or business. Big data is a very lucrative industry and the low entry costs for users cannot be ignored either — our precious information has become the product. Data, collecting data and analysis are means of creating understanding. However, if there's no social understanding, the service quickly loses value. Maybe a manual would be helpful.

You see, with how ubiquitous the Internet is in combination with our curiosity for love and someone's desire to make a buck, online dating has achieved mass-market acceptance. One of the conditions that follows is a learning curve and the Internet dating community is not an exception to the rule. A learning curve simply implies that there's a standard deviation to the average user ability and subsequent functions, such as message rate, acceptance, etc. When the curve is not met with equal parts of participant knowledge and understanding, the system can become dysfunctional. This means that people's relationships are not markedly being improved by the technology known as online dating, which is certainly the mark of a "bad" relationship. If businesses are learning a great deal about you, you should take the effort to understand and learn about the business and tools that you're using. What's more, it's important to be conscious of the way you participate online.

At the individual user level, meeting "the one" on the Internet is quickly and easily romanticized. (This feeling even happened to me.) It's wonderful to feel that instant connection, but how the entire community is affected tends to be neglected. I discovered it's difficult to break away from what you're composing in a message to a potential lover. The message becomes your world, in that moment. We discard the idea that there are other people contacting the same person, the receiver's current real-life conditions, etc. This community leaves the door open for scientific matchmaking to drastically change the way we socialize. Don't let it change us, in ways that we don't want it to. We're not married to bots … Yet.

Have you tried online dating? Tell us about it at www.facebook.com/longislandtrends.