



Online Dating: Cautious now for better well-being later

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Abstract

Online dating has been rising for 2 decades. Adults prefer cyberspace to find their potential partners and move away from the traditional methods of seeking romantic relationships. Thus, this chapter aims to create more awareness among the readers on how to be more cautious and mindful while looking for ‘The One’ in the world of the internet. The initial part of the chapter discusses some fundamentals of a general dating environment like seeking companionship, commitment, trust, and connections, followed by providing statistics and the prevalence rate of using online dating applications. It then highlights the significance of forming meaningful connections for the overall well-being of humans. The next part of the chapter describes anxiety reduction, self-disclosure, and relationship satisfaction and how these factors play a role in pursuing meaningful bonds using virtual space. The later part of the chapter educates the readers about the trending scams in the name of finding ‘the one’ in the virtual world and things to look out for. The author has used the existing literature to bring up catfishing/altered self-representation, authentication scams, and personal identity theft scams. The case study approach is then utilized as a piece of evidence to depict the necessity to stay cautious on dating platforms before investing in forming relationships. The later section offers some recommendations for the readers on how to be vigilant before and while embarking on the journey of creating significant bonds in the world of the internet.

Keywords: *online dating, meaningful connections, well-being, catfishing, self-presentation, identity theft*

Introduction

Recent years have observed a growing interest in finding romantic relationships online. Especially after the COVID-19 hit, there has been an increased trend in using online dating apps. The features that make online dating more convenient are the surplus of options, proximity, and immediacy (Timmersman & Courtois, 2018). It also offers the psychological ease of reduced anxiety and more self-disclosure thus contributing to building more relationship satisfaction. But before delving deep into the virtual world of romance it is important to understand the necessities of a relationship and the significance of forming meaningful connections in life.

Fundamentals of General Dating

Commitment: is defined as “the intention to stay with a partner for a long term and have a feeling of psychological attachment to that person” (Rusbult, 1980). An individual analyses their relationship before embarking on the journey of commitment. This analysis may include factors like behavior, wealth, physical appearance, intelligence, etc. of the partner. When these factors match the level of expectation of the individual they achieve a sense of satisfaction. This sense of satisfaction orients them towards committing to a long-term romantic relationship.

Companionship: Humans seek a confidant in every stage of life (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Individuals seek compassion in a relationship since it shows that they are being understood. People with compassion are more empathetic and caring towards their partner during times of distress. It is another factor that contributes to satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and partner support encouraging them to invest in long-term relationships (Ciarrochi et al., 2024).

Trust: The attachment theory strongly advocates that a major attribute of a long-term relationship is trust. Higher levels of trust manifest happiness and love between couples. Biologically, trust is also important from the perspective of evolution for the survival of a being. High trust is also seen to show confidence in a partner to provide a sense of safety and security. Trust between partners can take a relationship a long way (Kleinert et al., 2020).

Significance of meaningful connection

Humans are social animals and look for social contact through every stage of life. A satisfactory level of commitment, companionship, and trust are a few factors that contribute to having high-quality social relationships. Literature has highlighted the importance of having high-quality meaningful intimate relationships in a person's overall well-being. It is seen to contribute to elevated levels of mood, reduced levels of loneliness, higher self-esteem, and lower risk of depression and anxiety (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016).

With the advancements in technology, the channels of building relationships have altered, and researchers have had their doubts about the usage of the Internet to foster romantic relationships (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016). However, it is now clear that forming and maintaining online romantic relationships is in many ways similar to traditional ways of dating. To understand this, it is important to understand the structure of a dating platform.

The structure of online dating is such that it provides a digital platform to showcase oneself. Users input their personal information like location, age, body type, height, educational qualification, income, other demographic information, and profile picture. Some platforms also allow participants to write what is called a 'Bio' about themselves, where users can write paragraphs about themselves describing their interests (Rosen et al., 2008). Conventional dating begins with noticing the physical appearance of a person followed by discussing interests and similarities. There exists a factor of hesitation and anxiety in the process of knowing a person. On the contrary, in the online setup, this barrier of hesitation and anxiety is easier to break as users feel safer on the internet. Additionally, online dating starts with self-disclosure from both sides, and the process of meeting face-to-face is reached once the bond is created. When both are involved in self-disclosure, they can know more about each other and examine the traits of the other person. It opens the door to looking for traits like trustworthiness, commitment, and compassion which form the necessities in relationship building.

Meaningful relationships in virtual space

Anxiety reduction and self-disclosure are two factors that allow searching for a compassionate partner, to develop trust and commitment. These factors facilitate the

exchange of information between two users and can help in filtering the potential partners from the crowd.

Anxiety reduction: The Internet opens avenues for communication with reduced anxiety and fear of judgment. A study conducted by Knox et al. (2001) found that online space provides a platform for reduced anxiety. It enables the users to ask more personal questions and know more about the other person. It is also witnessed that online dating environments are a good space for socially anxious people. Thus, online dating supports them by introducing to them a space with decreased anxiety (Stevens & Morris, 2007).

Self-disclosure: Individuals find it easier to better express themselves on the internet. This phenomenon takes place as the user feels much safer in cyberspace than in face-to-face setups. This argument is also strengthened by studies that noted that people feel more distant and anonymous and thus feel more comfortable sharing personal information. This catalyzes the process of self-disclosure hence users find themselves more connected to a person sitting on the other side of the screen as compared to someone sitting on the next seat (Rosen et al., 2008). McKenna et al. (2002) noted that more self-disclosure or “true self” in the online space helped in establishing intimate relationships more easily.

With the ease of access to online dating applications and less effort in forming connections, people prefer the virtual environment to search for ‘the one’. The usage of these platforms is on the rise, and it is important to study the global presence.

Prevalence rate and some statistics

Online dating platforms are gaining popularity as more and more people are turning to the internet to find love. It was noted that in 2018 there were 22% of adults between the age of 18-24 years seen using dating platforms actively as compared to 5% in 2013. Since the launch of Tinder in 2012 there have been 340 million downloads of the app and a total of 3 billion swipes were recorded as of March 2020 (Gerlach, 2021). Online dating also generates huge revenue for the key players in the industry which are ‘Bumble’, ‘Hinge’, ‘okcupid’, and ‘Tinder’. Malik (2024) mentioned some prevalent figures recorded in India are:

- a) It is estimated that India will generate a total of \$104.9 Mn in revenue through dating apps in the year 2024.

b) By 2028 it is predicted that there will be 28.8 Mn users of dating apps.

c) There are 3 times more men than women on the dating platform.

However, with the ease of using dating platforms comes a lot of challenges where one needs to be vigilant and cautious in the world of the internet. Although the internet feels like a safe space one must also know that this provides a platform for the fraudsters to present a false sense of self. It is important to draw attention to the trending scams related to online dating.

Trending scams

Here are 5 common scams that everyone must look out for while using online dating apps (n.d., Adt).

Catfishing/altered self-presentation: or pretending to be someone else. This is the kind of person who is too good to be true. They will tell you everything you need to hear and lure you into their love to get your personal or financial information. This can also be a person who has a personal rivalry with you and intends to humiliate or embarrass you after arranging an online or offline meet-up.

Money Scams: These are another set of true lovers found on dating platforms. They try to be nice and friendly and break the barriers of self-disclosure just to make the other person feel valued. Slowly, they start using people for materialistic benefits or make stories about a sick family member or a dog and attempt to make money. Once they receive money they ghost or vanish.

Authentication Scams: This is the set of people who are behind the bank balance of the other person. They will pretend their 2-factor authentication is not working and will request a favor by letting them use your phone number for the authentication. They will then send an OTP or a code and try to access the phone for data and other important information.

Personal identity theft: These are the people who talk to the other person and keep a note of all the personal information shared with them. They later use all the personal data to threaten innocent user, divulge certain confidential information about them, and put their identity at risk. This can lead to intense cases where bank accounts, social security numbers, or even credit card details are leaked or compromised.

Phishing: These are the people who will engage either in a romantic or friendly chat for a while. They will then request the other user to click on a link that will look like the link of a social media platform. Once the button is clicked the device is exposed to malware or virus that can track all the stored data.

Case Study

A case study based on a real-life experience can describe the seriousness of scams taking place around the world.

Case of money scam: A 25-year-old male based out of Delhi met a female on Bumble. After a few chats, they decided to meet at the request of the girl at a place considered safe from the girl's perspective. It was a bar in the Rajouri area of Delhi.

Situation: During the meeting, the female ordered drinks and snacks for both, and the bill was for INR 15,886. During the payment of the bill, the cafe personnel tapped the card 4 times stating that their machine was not working. The victim then went to use the washroom and by the time he returned the bill was not on the table and the female had already escaped the scene.

Later: After reaching home the male tried to contact the female, but her number was not reachable. He also noticed that the Bumble profile was no longer accessible and realized the scam.

Scam: The bars and cafes in Rajouri hire young females to reel in men through dating apps. The woman then requests to meet at a particular bar of her choice where the staff is already aware of the scam. The female then orders food and drinks, and the couple is charged in thousands. On approaching the staff about the scenario, they declined any help and charged the male with the actual bill amount. As soon as the bill is paid the female escapes the scene leaving the guy behind and leaving him confused.

Recommendations to stay vigilant.

In the online world, one must use their proper judgment to while interacting with a stranger. There are certain risks involved while meeting for the first time. It is recommended to look out for the self when playing in this field. One step to take while actively using dating apps is to wait until a comfort zone is created. It is advised to meet a stranger when one is comfortable. It is always okay if one wants to wait longer and

wants more time. Once comfortable, it is suggested to schedule the meeting in a public place, and also download a self-security app on the phone before meeting the person. At any point during the date if one feels uncomfortable it is good to bow out politely. Other recommendations are about staying sober for the duration of the date, planning transportation by self, informing someone about the planned date, and lastly, always using a unique phone number to contact the online date. All these recommendations will help in the long run if things do not go as planned (n.d., Adt).

Conclusion

To summarize, it is a common trend in today's world to seek a romantic relationship online. Humans need secure social relationships to maintain overall well-being. What constitutes a high-quality relationship is the trust, companionship, and commitment between partners. With advancements in technology, people have drifted away from conventional methods of finding love. Online space provides a space for reduced anxiety and higher self-disclosure. Both factors contribute to finding meaningful relationships online. However, with the benefits of the cyber world, there are certain red flags that users need to stay vigilant of. It is always advised to be watchful and make proper judgments when meeting a stranger in an online or offline setup. Lastly, one also needs to be aware of the trending scams to look out for and plan a date cautiously.

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