

Shopping for Love in the Twenty-First Century.

Online dating is only a little over a decade old, yet the revenue and numbers of users worldwide suggest that digital portals are fast becoming part of everyday life. Already, more than 50 per cent of singles in the US and the UK have used dating websites, to produce more income than any other online content category in the US (Litz, 2007; Sondranek, 2005; Internet Dating Statistics, 2008). Of course dating websites are just the latest relationship mediator in a well documented history, but a key difference from previous mediums is scale: internet dating sites provide enormous choice. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study with online daters about how they manage choice, and contributes to our knowledge about the impact this process is having on attitudes and behaviour in online and offline environments. Before discussing these findings, we will provide a brief overview of the factors driving the growth of internet dating. We will then present our methodology and findings and conclude with possibilities for further research.

Background

There are a number of factors driving the growth of internet dating globally. Firstly, demographic shifts help to explain why there is a potential market for people in developed economies such as Australia. If we look at the population of Australia for example it is clear that the size of households has been declining steadily since the 1950s: from 3.6 in 1954 to 2.6 in 2006 (ABS Household Estimates, 2007). Increased divorce rates, economic status, age at first marriage and longevity; combined with smaller sized families and an aging baby-boomer population also mean that 60% of the population now lives in one or two person households (ABS Marriages, 2005; Social Trends, 2007; ABS Income and Housing, 2003-4). At the same time, the average working week for full-time workers has increased from 40.2 to 41.9 hours between 1985-2005, while the percentage of men working more than 50 hours has increased from 22% to 30% and jumped from 9% to 16% for women (Labour Force, 2006). So, while we are better educated and have more money, we also work longer hours, marry later and have higher rates of divorce and separation than ever before. In short, there is a market for online dating websites because we are more likely to be time poor and single. This is confirmed by Brym and Lenton's 2001 study in Toronto, which found that 52% of singles were not dating and 75% were finding it difficult to very difficult to find a dating partner (11). Litz's survey (2006) of 22,000 users of a "major" online dating service in the Boston and San Diego areas also found that users tended to be more educated and have slightly higher incomes than the general population and other online users who did not go on dating sites. Finally, the Pew study of 3,215 Americans in the United States, found that online daters tended to be younger, employed and more liberal (Madden and Lenhart, 2006).

Of course dating websites parallel the profound shift to computer-mediated communication (CMC). We are already so familiar and at ease with emails, blogs, chat rooms, online photo galleries, personal websites, instant messaging and short-messaging systems (sms) that we have normalised our contact and connections with strangers in cyberspace to the extent that it is now part of our 'real' world. Certainly Australians have a history of rapid technological uptake and the internet is no different. For example, 80

per cent of Australians currently have access to a computer at home, and Nielsen research (2008) reveals that Australian internet use has raced from 8.9 - 13 hours (2005 – 2008), to overtake TV viewing for the first time. Since 92% of online access occurs at home, compared with only 34% at work, and broadband is expected to reach 90% of home internet users by the end of 2008, CMC is clearly being driven by private and personal interests. This is supported by evidence that email is still the most popular field of online activity (98%), and with instant messaging predicted to be the biggest growth area (Nielsen, 2008). Shifting demographics and technological change therefore partly explain the rapid uptake of this newest medium in a long history of mediated dating agencies.

However, because the internet is unlike any other another medium in this history, there are key differences between these digital portals and previous mediated dating agencies. The dating website is a collective participatory medium that allows users to exchange information and develop personal relationships: like other digital technology, it also offers interactivity, sociability, media richness, autonomy, playfulness, reciprocity, privacy and personalization (McQuail, 2005: 143). In other words, CMC is accelerating the blurring of the boundaries between the public and private spheres, and dating websites are no different. They alter these boundaries because they provide global reach and immediacy, offer anonymity and interactivity and encourage multimodal activity. Users are therefore able to be far more actively involved than ever before. As user activity shifts from reception to production, and from searching to interaction, users are at once producers and consumers, able to engage autonomously by presenting themselves to a global audience, to interact one on one or blog to a group. The point is of course that internet dating websites offer users unprecedented flexibility and control over their communication environment, in terms of the time and place, and they offer users the opportunity to engage reciprocally in a range of communicative activities. In other words, this digital relationship portal provides the conditions of possibility for people to search and communicate with a potential partner from the comfort of their own homes, whenever they choose, as often as they choose and for as long as they choose, and with complete anonymity, if they so choose. Notwithstanding these profound changes, the most obvious difference between online dating and all previous mediums is scale. Dating websites offer enormous choice. The corollary of this is of course that they require users to make far more choices and it is this aspect that we focused on in our research.

Methodology

Our pilot study began in 2007 at Murdoch University, in Perth Western Australia. The aim was to gather data about the strategies online daters use to filter information and manage the enormous choice provided by dating websites. We conducted four face-to-face focus group interviews lasting approximately two hours each on the Murdoch University campus. We used closed questions to gather demographic data and history of online dating activity and we used semi-structured interviews with open questions to allow users to explain how they actually sort and filter information to make choices. Questions were aimed specifically to find out what participants liked most and least, how they heard about dating websites, who they discussed their activity with, what strategies work for them, safety concerns, unspoken rules or protocols, and how taking control of

the processes involved in actively searching for a partner have affected their attitudes and behavior. Participants were sourced using a snowball sampling of personal contacts, face-to-face recruiting, online posting and a radio interview appeal. Our sample consisted of fifteen Australian residents who lived in Perth aged from 18 to 62. Two thirds were women and one third men. There was an even spread of people in their 30s, 40s and 50s and most were tertiary educated professionals. Twelve identified as heterosexual and three as homosexual. All participants were past or current users of at least one dating websites and were familiar with other sites, but RSVP.com was the most widely used. Half the participants engaged in other online dating activity such as social networking sites, chat rooms and MSN messenger, but none had used speed dating. The focus group interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and the names of participants have been changed in this article to protect their anonymity. Data was analyzed in an iterative process that confirmed and contradicted data from each participant to refine the categories, propositions and conclusions. Data was coded using factual and referential codes to present preliminary findings and refine questions for a larger survey.

Dating Websites

Most participants heard about dating websites from friends, although some were encouraged to try it by family members and a few found sites accidentally as pop-ups on other websites. The websites are well advertised across the media and sites vary considerably, but users are clear about the differences and use sites for specific purposes. For example Pink Sofa targets a small Perth lesbian community and also offers classifieds, threads, surveys, events and coffee meetings. Gaydar and Lavalife are two sites that participants identified as being clearly oriented to sexual liaisons, while RSVP.com was referred to most often and appeals to a market mainly looking for friendship and long-term commitment. Several participants were members of eHarmony, a US based site that operates quite differently because members are required to fill in a psychographic questionnaire and in return receive a small selection of matches. However, all sites appeal to specific markets by using hooks such as a desire for romance, friendship, safety, ease, speed, etc., to entice the public to join their website. For example, eHarmony advertises: “Give yourself the gift of love today”, “Discover compatible singles pre-screened to fit you best”, “Find someone who matches you inside and out. eHarmony takes the guesswork out of dating.” “let us connect you with men that match your unique personality, values, and goals. Lavalife’s homepage appeals to a younger market with a picture of a young couple and a caption “Where Australia’s SEXIEST singles meet”, it also provides an offer to “meet sexy singles” and two offers to SIGN UP FREE. Anyone curious enough to click on the “How it works” tab is shown just how easy it: 1 Create your profile, 2. Search, 3. Make contact.

In contrast, the RSVP homepage has a full page with three colorful, moving areas to attract the eye: an animated banner that advertises RSVP communities, a central frame that transitions to showcase successful couples, and a lower film strip banner that slides to showcase new members aged 20s-40s. As with other sites, it clearly taps into the bandwagon effect by assuring readers that it is the “No 1 online dating site in Australia”, and support this with specific claims: “meet 150,000+ Perth singles”, “120+ new Perth singles daily”. The site also addresses and allays popular security fears to announce that it

is the “most trusted Australian dating site”, and it demonstrates awareness that time is an issue with the RSVip service: “find what you’re looking for faster with RSViP”. It encourages viewers to enter the site three times: twice using links “See all singles in Perth”, “search and browse for free” and once with a box titled “Search profiles” that tempts readers by providing four parameters to refine their search: sex, age, geographic proximity and a keyword.

Offers to browse before joining clearly appeal to our shopping culture sensibilities to window shop and try before we buy, and all participants admitted that they had had a good look at the profiles of a large number of people before they joined. So why did they choose to become members? The most common reasons supports previous research that members are too busy or unable to meet potential partners, but our participants provided varied recommendations. Kylie is a vet in her twenties who works 10 hours a day but has internet access 24/7, so she enjoys the convenience of being able to “check and hook up” while at work. Ingrid, a student in her twenties, also likes that “window shopping” saves her time. Amber, a social work student in her thirties, also likes the convenience in that she doesn’t “have to get dressed,” but she has another take on what she likes about the medium. She is interested in the way in which it changes the dynamic of meeting and dating: “you can be very upfront about what you’re looking for because you don’t walk into a party and say ‘I’m looking for a husband, I think I’d quite like to have children but I haven’t quite decided.’” Diane, Julie and Margaret on the other hand, all professional middle-aged women, are more interested in functionality, although for quite different reasons, because the portals provide them with a database, or catalogue of potential friends or partners. Diane started using it when she was living “in a remote area and it was more a way of meeting people as pen pals,” but Julie said: “I work in a place with thousands of people, but have never met anyone here. If I work in an environment like that, what chance is there,” while Margaret said, “It’s a really great way of meeting lots of people because when you get older you tend to meet less people and are more set in friendship groups.” Kylie is more interested in the medium, because she prefers to manage her self-presentation prior to a face to face meeting. Since she also said that she did not put up a photo of herself until after she had lost weight and “felt better about herself”, Kylie clearly enjoys the multimodal opportunity to present herself in an environment that privileges verbal and linguistic cues. On the other hand, Tony, a retired Dr and practicing artist, enjoyed the smorgasbord of potential partners on offer so much that it made him feel like the “parties when he was twenty years old.”

However, some participants felt there was still a general perception that it was risky behaviour, and most felt there was still some stigma associated with using internet dating sites. Margaret said that she expected “all the people on there would probably be desperate or just won’t be that nice...”, and Elaine said she “initially only told people who would be supportive”: friends who applauded her courage to be proactive. But while participants were aware of their initial prejudice, some responses to their disclosures were condescending and did make them feel “that’s the only way you can meet someone.” Nevertheless, Kylie thought online dating was “more respectable than being drunk at a nightclub” and David was even more pragmatic with his analogy to shopping: “there is a belief out there that if you want a house you go look for a house, if you want a car, you

go look for a car, but if you want a mate the universe drops it in your lap.” It is clear then that these digital portals serve a range of purposes and that the main aim is to meet people. However, since the process of meeting a potential partner is as much about eliminating the profiles of unlikely partners as it is about attracting the attention of potential partners through self-presentation; it is to this process that we now turn.

Public profiles and Filters

Anyone who decides to become a member of a dating site is required to construct two profiles: one to advertise and market themselves and another to outline “their ideal partner”. Members can then send or receive free, site generated ‘kisses’ or ‘smiles’ to indicate their interest with phrases such as “Can I see your photo? I’d like to put a face to your profile” or “I’d like to get to know you, would you be interested?” Further contact usually involves a fee to initiate correspondence using anonymous, or site protected email, instant messaging or mobile contact, although some sites charge monthly fees instead. Each profile is constructed from the same range of fixed parameters and they are usually placed side by side for easy comparison. The criteria include gender, location, last online activity, marital status, physical characteristics, smoking and drinking habits, occupation and level, education, children, pets, ethnicity, religion, political persuasion, personality type, diet and star sign. But because members choose which of the criteria are important to them, some profiles provide scant comment while others offer detailed interests and philosophical views. Partner profiles also vary considerably in terms of the criteria addressed: some are concerned only to stipulate age and weight, others are highly prescribed. Members also have an opportunity to write about themselves and to describe the qualities they seek in a partner. Sites also encourage users to upload photographs and videos that may be either password protected or visible to all, and to identify whether they are looking for friendship, short or long-term relationships.

Throughout the process of creating profiles, all participants scrutinized the profiles of potential partners as well as their “competition”. Some use this as a classic marketing strategy to be a bit different from the others who, as Diane put it, routinely want to “drink red wine, curl up in front of a fire, or walk on the beach ...and (have as their favorite film) *Shawshank Redemption*”; others use the opportunity to appeal to their target audience. For example, some women include the *Shawshank Redemption* because it appeals to men, just as men include what appears to appeal to women. However, when Margaret said that she was interested to find “that a lot of women represented themselves as sex objects” it is not a simple matter to attribute the motivation of women in their 40s and 50s to be ‘sex objects’, if that is indeed their intention, to either strategy. However, this may well be an interesting area for future research.

Creating one profile to attract interest, and another to indicate whether that interest may be welcome, is the first step in the filtering process. Users then have to reduce the size of the “pool” to begin a manageable browse. Elaine draws on the shopping metaphor to explain the process of sifting and sorting the plethora of profiles:

It’s like buying a car. You know you need and want a car, but there are so many. You have to test drive a lot until you find one you like. You have to wade through

the ads of the best cars on the market or junk heaps, to find the right model for you. A great car for me, you would find to be shit.

Members may choose initially to filter the thousands of profiles on offer by using the demographic categories of sex, age and geographic proximity, although RSVP also offers “keywords” and photo as key parameters. Members can also select from the same wide range of search options that they used to create their own profiles and our participants quickly learned to vary combinations for different purposes. As Margaret said: “I think that it’s such a huge thing – RSVP- that different people use it for different reasons and the way that you use it, you’ll find what you’re interested in.” For Amber, smoking was one of her first filters: “I’m an ex-smoker, so for me I can’t; I’m a Nazi about it.” Several participants were allergic to fur and used one of the variables of the category ‘pets’ as an elimination filter. For example, Margaret who said, “...if anyone says I love my cat, then no, it just won’t work...”, while for Amber someone writing, “ ‘I live with my six cats’— (was a) no, for many reasons other than allergies.”

Our participants were dismissive of those who employed a ‘scattergun’ approach to making contact without regard for the desired parameters. They took profiles very seriously and were interested in reading what potential partners had to say about themselves. Stuart for example, was “always looking for someone who has something unique to say, that wasn’t just a combination of everyone else’s, but had put some time into it.” Our research also supports Ellison et al (2006) that online daters become very attuned to reading signals and deconstructing the limited cues available to them. For example, participants in our study used poor spelling as a filter as they looked for people who could write well. Profiles listing only classic films or music were dismissed as clearly not really interested, while postcodes provided cues as to geographic proximity and socio-economic status that could be cross-checked with other information. Participants also read between the lines and showed a keen awareness of key phrases to avoid, such as “recently separated”. Damien for example, translated “just out of a long term relationship” as unwritten code in the gay world for “I just want to sleep with as many people as possible.” Amber also observed what it meant in the heterosexual world: “I’m really crushed, and I need you to fix me, or I’m not ready – I just want sex, no commitment, or I think I want commitment but I’m just going to mess with you, or how would you like to be my rebound.” Amber was also keen to treat the online filter process like a normal encounter—like an offline encounter... You know if someone has just come out of a long term encounter then you know they aren’t going to be ready for another three years. Just sensible things because I think it’s easy when you’re online to forget about the things that would be common sense to you offline.

Like Yurchisin et al (2005), we found that this level of reflection ensured that users also attended to their profile to be seen as credible. For example, Julie updated her profile to reflect a new ‘look’ because she was interested in how she was presenting herself to potential suitors, and because she was also interested in sharing who she was and what was important to her, she regularly updated her favorite movies.

Although profiles are taken very seriously, most participants agreed that they wouldn't read a profile that didn't include a photo. This is confirmed by advice on all sites. Damien, a student in his twenties who uses Gaydar, said such profiles were often "a front either because they were not 'out' yet or didn't want anyone to know what they were on there for and I just don't feel I can trust telling any details to someone who doesn't have the guts to put their picture on, for whatever reason." Stuart, a student in his early thirties, was unimpressed by silly photos and the lack of respect shown in providing photos that have obviously been cropped because they still contain an arm around the person. He preferred photographs of

both body and head...a nice close-up, you can tell a lot by looking at face. Big crows feet, that's good because I laugh a lot, but big frown lines, not so good. It gives another indicator of what their personality's going to be like. I think you can read a lot from people's eyes and lips—thin pursed lips, even if smiling, you can tell.

Participants were fascinated by the selection and composition of photos and relied on their own expertise to scrutinize the clothes, backgrounds and activities for clues. David thought there was such an "interesting correlation between face, style and profile" that he had become "very accurate at picking their cars." He also said that "looking at a photo you can tell a lot as to whether an age claim is correct." Stuart saw the photo as "another indicator of congruence with what they're saying—slim body type and you're a liar". This concern also meant that participants analyzed the "competition to see what you're up against," differentiating those seeking to attract as much interest as possible with glamorous studio shots, from those judged to be sincerely trying to reveal something of who they were, and those with hopeless photos that revealed nothing. For Amber the profile was important because it was about being able to "replicate that click that you get with someone and that does come into the initial glance of picture and information combined. I think I am trying to do it like in the same social situation where you go, 'oh what an interesting person' or, 'he has a nice face'".

Honesty

All participants volunteered that the most important point about writing a profile is "to be yourself". Yet all participants were aware that most profiles contain lies, particularly about age and weight, and all but Martin had told at least one lie about themselves. Certainly, the tension between honest self-presentation and making a favourable impression on others is well documented (Goffman, 1959; Handcock, 2007; Ellison et al. 2006). Litz (2006) found that online daters claim to be thinner, taller and more attractive than average: women were 6lbs lighter, men 1.3" taller than average, and 72% of women and 68% of men claimed that they were above average to very good looking. Recent research (Hancock et al., 2007; Gibbs et al., 2006; Ellison et al. 2006) confirm that deception is commonplace, but that men and women consistently lie about key attributes (weight, height and age) that they consider most attractive to potential partners. In other words, online daters do take advantage of the profile parameters to enhance their self-presentation but, because they also anticipate a face-to-face meeting, this tendency is tempered by the knowledge that profiles can be downloaded and stored. Discrepancies

are therefore intentional and strategic rather than self-delusional and the magnitude is usually minor and not readily apparent (Hancock, 2007; Ellison et al., 2006). Martin for example, was surprised that one woman he met had said she was 45 but was actually 52. He said he “couldn’t tell and it wouldn’t really have mattered.” However, Fiona understood that this was a strategic lie because she also lied about her age: “if you’re over 40, you drop off the search, you are invisible.” Of course the few extremes explain why people recall and remark on the prevalence of deception. For example, Elaine and Jane both met married men who pretended that they were separated.

On the other hand, experienced participants also report developing skills to circumvent constraints to their advantage. One popular strategy is to either browse or view particular names without logging on, in a deliberate act to conceal their behavior. This online “lurking” serves a number of functions. It allows furtive window shopping for people in the early stages of courtship, who may still be looking or meeting others. It also allows participants in the initial stages of courtship to monitor their potential partner’s activity, in terms of whether their profile is still ‘visible’, and if so, whether they have logged on again, and when. Finally, it allows for the surveillance of current or ex-partners partners, as well as if and when potential partners may be ‘available’ again. Another strategy is to deliberately not address some parameters, to ensure that particular filters are not activated in the culling process. This is often used to circumvent the constraints inherent in parameters that often privilege objective criteria that may not really matter in a face-to-face meeting. Julie for example said that if she had known that her current partner from RSVP lived an hour’s drive away, he would have been eliminated in the first round of filtering.

Safety and Risk management

Online dating websites provide various levels of gatekeeping and surveillance to protect users (Best and Delmege, forthcoming). Certainly, most participants said that at least one person was initially concerned for their safety. Stuart’s mother warned him to “be careful, you might meet a weirdo”, until he reminded her that he was on there. Fiona, a divorced mother of two in her thirties, said that her mother was initially concerned about the “axe murderer thing”: “I said well who am I going to meet down the pub mum, but now that she has seen that that is the only way that I am going to meet any men, she’s all right with it.” Jane and Kate had a similar experience but Jane said: “my mother has settled down now that my sister is getting married to a guy she met on RSVP a couple of months ago, and I have a friend who met her boyfriend through Lavalife.” The only person to express any concern about safety was Jane and this was because she had agreed to let dates collect her from her house because she didn’t drive. She didn’t actually have a bad experience, but she was afraid that this was risky behavior. Other participants, like Elaine, said they felt more at risk in a pub. This may be attributed to their strategies because everyone except Jane said that the first meeting occurred in a neutral, public place, which suggests that they took precautions to ensure their safety. These findings are in complete contrast to the prevailing idea that safety and security are important issues for online daters.

Nevertheless, Martin was careful to point out that “you have to be selective about what information you give out at first.” Certainly digital communication technology such as the mobile phone and yahoo or hotmail email accounts have revolutionised our ability to make contact, maintain communication and remain anonymous and all agreed that anonymity and being able to choose when to disclose their home address or phone number added to their feelings of safety. Yet most participants were adamant that it was actually no different from “the real world”. Once they had given out their email or phone number, there saw the same risk as going out on any date and so they would not expect a website to be held accountable for anything that happened to them. All agreed that once they chose to move beyond the website’s closed email system that they were to all intents operating in the ‘real world’ and so the risk was no worse. With experience it is clear then that the users and their friends and family view other people online as no different from the rest of society and came to see this method of meeting as normative behavior.

Nevertheless, few participants are aware or concerned that once they provide their surname, just how easy it is to find out a great deal about them if they have work and/or social web profiles. Fiona for example, actually uses this as a strategy to ensure her safety: “I try to find out their last name and stalk them online to find where they work and their landline so you actually know who they are before you go out, or you can Google them to find out they are who they say they are or where they work.” In this study then, participants made it clear that the people using the dating website actually pose no greater threat than the rest of society. Any concerns with online dating clearly belonged only to the friends and families of the users interviewed in this study.

Meeting face-to-face

Before participants meet anyone face-to-face, they have seen each other’s photos, shared site protected emails, MSN messages or phone conversations, exchanged personal emails and messages, and spoken on the phone, in that order. In each case the profile, photo, email and phone act as filters to screen suitable partners for a face-to-face meeting. But while it may now be easier to meet someone from our neighborhood online, than in real life, members do not behave like people who develop online relationships. Firstly, online daters usually only spend time online with someone they intend to meet in the real world, so spatial proximity is a more important factor. Secondly, where the anonymity and reduced audio-visual cues of CMC may encourage greater self-disclosure and relationship formation in new online daters, because it makes them feel safe, long term daters avoid this strategy. This is because building online rapport requires time and emotional investment that may result in users at a FTF meeting feeling more obligated than interested to see someone again. In other words, experience quickly teaches users that although someone might be able to tick all the boxes in the profile and give good email, it “could all fall into a heap” at the first meeting. In short, despite eliminating thousands of profiles and making it through to first email contact, the first face-to-face meeting is still the clincher because it is only at this stage that participants determine whether there is likely to be any physical attraction or chemistry. As a result, between managing self-presentation in a profile to attract the attention of a suitable partner and the fleshmeet, members learn that there is little point in disclosing much more about

themselves. David articulates the view that there are “basically three reality checks after viewing the profile: how they write, how they sound on the phone and face to face.”

Since online dating takes place in an environment of plenty, time is also an important factor because there may be any number of suitors competing and corresponding simultaneously. This issue of time may be surprising but the process of finding and meeting can be very time consuming and emotionally draining: the more experience members had with the entire process from emailing to meeting, the quicker this process became. Fiona brought her correspondence period back from two months to just one or two emails and Julie didn't waste time with long emails anymore either: “just go straight in because there's not enough time: life's too short.”

However, the initial euphoria of finding a smorgasbord of potential partners also takes many users by surprise and some find being the centre of attention, as members pounce in a sudden flurry of interest, overwhelming. Others find feasting at the banquet addictive. Fiona articulates what the other experienced users had learned: “the new guy—don't bother, wait until he's gotten it out of his system”. The initial heady rush experienced by online daters is not unlike other shopping activity. Browsing, reading and making selections can consume many hours. It can be hard work as well as a favourite leisure activity. Like shopping, it can be an entertaining activity, offering escape and the creativity to re-invent the self, or it can consolidate friendship between friends as they window shop together. Our research confirms Kinney's findings (2007) that “shoppers hold out hopes and expectations for emotional reward from everyday shopping” and supports the view that the emotions associated with the act of acquiring may be even more important than the products themselves. Certainly, our research shows that the experience of internet dating has several important effects.

Firstly, participants found that having to write about themselves helped them to think about their values and who they are, while the experience of meeting people helped to clarify what they want. Margaret said that making her think about what she wanted in a man was “the most incredibly valuable thing” for her because “you meet someone on the street, it's about chemistry. On RSVP it's not about chemistry to start with it's about what you want.” She also explains how the act of having to meet new people has increased her self-confidence:

It was really a wonderful thing for me. It really just forced me to get out there, face my fears about meeting people, and just having the courage to show up and meet someone you have never met before. You might have chatted on email but you really don't know them, and having the courage to go through a situation where you can see clearly they are not interested in you, but carrying conversation and saying I can deal with this and I can cope. It gave me a lot of confidence in myself and how I handle myself. I found it quite liberating really.

Fiona agreed:

I've been single for 6.5 years and if I hadn't gone online I would not have had a date, because I haven't had a guy ask me out in person since the divorce. I was online two months after splitting up, and it was a good confidence booster. I got

confidence back because I was 36 and I thought I was over the hill, that no-one would find me attractive. I learned a lot about myself and about men too.

As did Elaine, who said: “It helped me a lot in that there seemed to be this one person who was quiet and reserved, but there was this person who was dying to get out, through being able to meet people that way, I have become more initiating online...”. For Amber, the most valuable lesson was: “knowing it’s ok to get knocked down, that it’s not that devastating.” In other words, the process of safely meeting strangers was very powerful for these women. On the one hand, the fact that there was no prior relationship based either on protracted emails, friends or family, made it easier to walk away if they wished to. Of course, having a huge database of potential suitors to fall back on cannot but add to this confidence but, more than this, the process of presenting and engaging with strangers and of testing their own values, attitudes and beliefs clearly had an impact that increased the confidence of these participants to be able to meet and walk away. However, Jane was the least proactive participant because she recognised that she wasn’t very good at choosing and so vacillated between letting others choose her or feeling fed up and not bothering.

Secondly, as our participants became more self-confident, they reflected on what they thought they wanted or wanted others to know about them, and learned that they had changed. Many also reflected on their initial naïvity. Some participants changed from constructing a profile that would appeal or please or attract to one that reflected where they were in life or what they wanted. Elaine for example said: “I have more confidence to know what I want, what I don’t want, to be more selective because previously I would have thought I would be lucky enough to get a date, to get someone to look at me. Now I think I’ve met man of my dreams.” Fiona also became more at ease with herself:

When I first started I was constantly changing myself for every date, new outfit...the focus isn’t men anymore, they’re there and there are heaps of them...I dated heaps for three years now chose not to— too busy, I don’t feel like I’m missing out now I know if I want a date, I can get one online.

In other words, the smorgasbord experience has helped some participants to become more discerning and discriminating in their choices, which supports similar findings by Frohlick and Migliardi (2008). However, our research also found that for some participants, the process of writing and meeting people gave them a level of awareness, confidence and control that allowed them to become more open minded about what they are looking for in a partner. For example, Amber said: “I thought that looking at people who are divorced or have kids would be a filter, but actually it’s not, so I surprised myself.

Even though everyone agreed that the process of online dating has helped them to become more socially confident, for some the thrill has palled and they have become weary. Fiona for example has changed what she wants:

I don’t know if it’s because of online dating, but my opinion of men has changed a bit, they’re not as good as I thought, ... the whole process is too tiring, I can’t be bothered. I’ve learned what I don’t want because of RSVP, which is why I’m

more hesitant to go on there and I see guys I overlooked a few years ago but would go out with now. I'm not interested in good looking boobheads. I will have to have whole new profile with a different picture ...

Diane is less sure about ever finding what she wants:

I probably size up men more quickly. I think I'm quite judgmental - one little comment he's probably just thrown in and I think, no, can't be bothered. Probably not a good thing. I think I am quite fussy because of previous mistakes, and because I've been on my own a long time. Someone would have to be pretty good at this stage, to make me want to settle, certainly to make me want to live with them. ...but it doesn't stop me looking.

Stuart said that he didn't think that he would go online again because women in his demographic are too fussy: "...I think those people are on there are looking for something they're never ever going to find. They might find someone who fits 9 out of 10 but because one of boxes hasn't been ticked, ... they would still have one eye glancing...". At 35, Amber agreed that her biological clock was ticking and said: "I'm being more serious about relationships... women do worry, start to add it up, couldn't have a baby with someone I haven't known for 3 years, 38 then 39 then meet in a year...that's why women do have that frantic tick box."

Dating websites are the latest in a long line of mediated relationship management mediums, and their technological tools provide new opportunities and constraints. Just as a revolution in shopping behaviour accompanied the arrival of the supermarket, so digital portals are profoundly changing the way users approach their love lives. Like supermarkets, each dating website is organised categorically but offers slightly different merchandise. As shoppers become familiar with the logic and layout of the store or site, so they are able to navigate it more easily to suit their purposes. For example, if they are in a hurry they know which aisles to quickly bypass or venture into. Of course this facilitates a conservative approach to shopping, but if a shopper is not happy with the last product or brand, they might prefer to browse at their leisure for a new product, and if the packaging is attractive and the advertising interesting, they may just perhaps try something completely new or different.

This study has shown that online daters quickly become adroit at shopping for love: they are aware that different stores stock different products, become quickly adept at finding where they are kept, at reading labels and determining which brand to try. Some participants clearly enjoy the experience so much that they find it addictive, others dislike the shopping process or know they aren't very good at making good selections, while some just find it a difficult and tiring process that they would prefer to leave to others. However, what is most striking about our participant's activity is that regardless of their success with finding a partner online, they aren't looking anywhere else.

Conclusion

This study shows that online dating helps to make meeting similar people easier than in real life because digital portals provide access to thousands of people and offer unparalleled opportunities to make informed social connections at any time, from any

place. As our participants became adept with the opportunities provided by multi-modal strategies to screen potential partners, we found that they were able to circumvent or minimise constraints. We also found that security and safety were not a concern, despite popular fears, and that website members try to replicate the offline world in their online environment because their intention is to meet face to face as soon as possible. This was clearly successful insofar as one couple had just married, several were still in long term relationships and everyone had made at least one friend.

However, the way in which this new technology is being used to self-present and filter is profoundly changing the way that participants approach their love lives. On the one hand, our participants rely solely on digital portals to find partners. On the other hand, all found their internet dating experience had a positive effect on their self-image, attitudes and behavior. All reported being more socially confident and said that this flowed over into other areas of life in the offline world. Writing about themselves helped them to think about their values and who they were, while the experience of meeting people helped them to clarify what they wanted from a relationship. Nevertheless, we also found that some online daters showed a weary ambivalence with the process that may provide a useful area for further research. Since the attitudes and behaviours cultivated during the online dating experience live on in offline interactions, that may provide the conditions for new cultures of practice, there is need for a longer study to look at the ways that intimacy is being reshaped by online dating.

7990 words with references

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