

Chapter 5.9

E-Dating: The Five Phases on Online Dating

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ABSTRACT

Online dating continues to grow in popularity as a way for individuals to locate a potential romantic partner. Researchers have examined how people present themselves on these sites, which presentations are more likely to lead to success, the effectiveness of the matchmaking tools that some companies employ, the stigma attached to using these sites and the types of people who are drawn to online dating. However, there is an absence of scholarly work on how these relationships progress compared to traditional models of courtship. This chapter sets out a model for the phases of online dating and compares this model with Givens' (1979) work on a traditional model of courtship. It is argued here the phases of online dating are very different to other courtship models. These differences pose new challenges and create new benefits to those who elect to find a partner via one of these sites.

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WHERE CAN ONE FIND A ROMANTIC PARTNER ON THE NET?

Before moving on to consider online dating sites, it is important to understand that these sites emerged because it became obvious that there was a need and a market for such sites. As is well-known, the Internet was not originally set up as a social space, but rather as a space to transfer data. However, not long after (even in its most primitive textual form), friendships and romances began to blossom. People were meeting each other in all sorts of places, MUDs and MOOs (multi-users dungeons or domains, which are essentially role-playing sites), bulletin boards, chat rooms, newsgroups and gaming sites.

Bulletin board systems (BBs) were possibly the first place where romances initiated on the Internet. DeVoss (2007) has succinctly described how these relationships initiated in these sites and quite rightly points out that one could not escape gender roles in these spaces (even when people swapped

gender). There are many anecdotal stories about how people played with self-narratives in these sites, one of which DeVoss describes is the story of a woman who called herself Princess:

Her registry claimed that she as 5'1", a 'curvaceous' 102 pounds, had deep brown eyes, and waist-length black hair. She flirted online, and male users would virtually flirt to enter her private chat room. As online time passed, the men... wanted to meet her... Over and over again, she resisted their efforts to entice her off the BBS and into physical public space. She wrapped herself in an elaborate story—that she was hiding from a violent ex-husband who was involved in organised crime... she wasn't allowed to give out her real name, phone number, address...

Somehow, however, one of the more aggressive male users... found out where she lived... only to find her the exact opposite of her online identity... They reported her to be phenomenally hefty, incredibly ugly, partially toothless, and surrounded by a gaggle of children. (p. 21-22)

Of course, just as with many face-to-face encounters, not everyone online is looking for a traditional heterosexual relationship. BBs were also a meeting place for people with more deviant sexual tastes. Wysocki (1998) reported her examination of “how and why individuals participate in sexually explicit computer boards; and to see if sex on-line is a way of *replacing* face-to-face relationships or a way of *enhancing* them” (p. 426). She found that participants enjoyed the anonymity the Internet affords. Moreover, given their lack of time in their personal life it allowed them to find individuals with similar sexual interests and to share sexual fantasies within the confines of their own homes. Many of the people she surveyed were in fact happy to keep these sexual relationships online. More recently, Wysocki and Thalken (2007) examined adult Web sites to find that, in

particular, older individuals (a mean age of 40 years), were more likely to use S & M adult Web sites. Most people using the sites included photographs; however, what took these researchers by surprise was that many of the photos included face shots (indicating no attempt to ensure complete anonymity). The mix of people using these sites did so to either engage in online sexual fantasies or to find partners who shared their fantasies and were prepared to enact them off-line.

Romances and friendships have also been known to develop in MUDs and MOOs, chat rooms and newsgroups. For example, in the mid-90s, Parks and Floyd (1996) found that two-thirds (60.7%) of their newsgroup sample had formed a personal relationship with someone they had met for the first time online. Of these, 7.9% stated that this was a romantic relationship. Utz (2000) found that 76.7% of the MUD users she surveyed reported forming a relationship online that developed off-line, of which, 24.5% stated this was a romantic relationship. Whitty and Gavin (2001) found that individuals form real friendships in chat rooms and that some of these participants preferred that these relationships remain online.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ONLINE DATING SITES

Given the numbers of people seeking others online for love and sex, it is little wonder that companies have tried to formalize this process as well as to make money from people who are prepared to seek out romance on the net. Online dating sites continue to abound online and increase in popularity. Yahoo.com claims almost 380 million visitors per month to their online dating site (Pasha, 2005), and FriendFinder.com say they have over 3.5 million active members (Dating Sites Reviews.com, 2006).

During the early days of the Internet, given the restricted technology capabilities and bandwidth, online dating sites looked more like newspaper

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