

## Hooking Up on the Internet

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### introduction

The meaning of dating changes with geography, from one society to another, and with time, from one historical period to another. In some societies, dating is forbidden. Among traditional people in India and Arab countries, for example, to date would be an explicit violation of norms, a repudiation of the background assumptions that underlie morality. For a woman to see a man alone, unless he is her husband or a close relative, is taboo. Breaking this taboo brings swift and severe censure upon the transgressor. If something sexual took place—or even the suspicion that it did—the sanction can be death, with the father, brothers, or uncles carrying out the punishment.

In early United States, also a traditional society, dating as we know it was not practiced. Among the middle class, a young man “courted” a young woman in whom he became interested. He had to make his “intentions,” as they were called, known to the girl’s parents—and his “intentions” had better be good. Good meant marriage. To seek the girl’s and parents’ approval for marriage, the suitor, as he was called, would begin formal courtship. He would visit the parents’ house, bringing flowers or candy, and sit stiffly in the parlor, the formal living room reserved for visitors. The parents would check out his manners and especially his potential for supporting their daughter. Only after the parents had approved of the young man was the couple allowed to sit in the parlor alone, and that for only limited periods of time with adults hovering in the background.

As society industrialized and traditional relationships changed, so did the custom of courting. The automobile gave young people freedom unknown to previous generations, freedom from the watchful eyes of parents, freedom to be alone in places where they weren’t known, and, ultimately, freedom to have sex. We can trace the beginning of the “sexual revolution” to the invention of the automobile, not the invention of the birth control pill. The pill merely speeded things up.

Dating customs, then, like most social behavior, respond to technology, changing as technology bends society. Just as the automobile ushered in fundamental changes in courtship, followed by the pill, so the Internet is having its impact. In this selection, Helene Lawson and Kira Leck examine some of these preliminary changes. You can be certain that the current influence of the Internet on dating is only the beginning of extensive change to come.

### Thinking Critically

As you read this selection, ask yourself:

1. How would your life be different if you had been born and reared in one of the traditional societies described in the introduction to this article?
  2. Have you done any Internet dating? Would you? Why or why not?
  3. Do you think that meeting people online is risky? If so, how can you protect yourself?
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The present research focused on the dynamics of Internet dating, a method of courting used by individuals who meet on the Internet and continue online correspondence in hopes of forming a supportive romantic relationship. It sought to determine why people choose to date online, what aspects of face-to-face relations are reproduced, and the rationales and strategies Internet daters use to negotiate and manage problems of risk accompanying the technology.

### ■ ■ ■ A BRIEF HISTORY OF DATING PRACTICES

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Although the practices of courting vary from culture to culture and change over time, technologies of communication have historically shaped courtship, making it freer and expanding possibilities. The timeless love letter notwithstanding, courtship interaction in the United States has been limited to supervised situations or contained within the bounds of engagement for marriage. This was especially true during the puritan, colonial, and Victorian eras (Hunt, 1959). Historians believe that freer dating practices, such as meeting privately and face-to-face for romantic interactions at scheduled times and places, emerged among middle-class teenagers in the 1920s. These practices developed alongside new technologies such as telephones, automobiles, and drive-in theaters, which allowed teenagers to become more independent from their parents. . . .

In the 1990s, the Internet became a major vehicle for social encounters. Through the Internet, people can interact over greater distances in a shorter period and at less expense than in the past. Theorists have debated the positive and negative effects this technology has on social interactions. Initially, theorists such as Zuboff (1991) believed “the Internet reduced face-to-face interaction” and created an “uncomfort-

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able isolation" (pp. 479–482) for people at work. Conversely, Raney (2000) argued that online communication expands social networks. According to Raney, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found supporting evidence for this view in a study in which "more than half of Internet users reported that e-mail was strengthening their family ties. And Internet users reported far more offline social contact than non-users" (p. G7). . . . Today Internet video and sound communications are commonplace, and photographs, video, and sound clips can all be altered or fabricated entirely. These new technologies allow Internet daters enormous latitude to prepare their presentations of self.

## ■ ■ ■ USING THE INTERNET FOR DATING

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The Internet is a new social institution that has the ability to connect people who have never met face to face and is thus likely to transform the dating process. Beginning with newsgroups such as Usenet and various bulletin boards that operated under the now-obsolete Gopher system, the Internet facilitated the formation of communities. . . .

We explored the phenomenology of Internet dating, which we defined as the pattern of periodic communication between potential partners using the Internet as a medium. We examined the respondents' concerns over the risk of being deceived, their anxieties about physical appearance, and the hazards of romantic involvement.

## ■ ■ ■ METHOD

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### Participants

Because we needed a sample of respondents who could be tracked over time and whose reliability could be verified, we began to investigate the phenomenon of Internet dating by interviewing people who were personally accessible, such as coworkers, acquaintances, and students. Soon the sample expanded because respondents told us about people they knew who dated online, which resulted in a snowball sample. . . . It was composed of 32% students, 24% business and clerical workers, 14% trade workers, and 14% professionals and semiprofessionals. The sample also included unemployed persons, small business owners, and housewives.

Because we were interested in romantic dating relationships that could result in commitment, we did not include people interested only in pornography or online sexual encounters as their primary focus. We defined dating as setting up specific times to mutually disclose personal information with potential romantic partners on an ongoing basis. We did not place any other restrictions on whom we were willing to interview. Consequently, the sample included homosexuals and unhappily married persons. Romance was not necessarily the goal of online dating, but in our sample, three married persons changed partners as a result of Internet interactions.

## Interview Questions

Interviews were open-ended and informal. We asked respondents to (a) describe their experiences with Internet dating, (b) state whether these experiences were positive or negative, (c) state how and why they entered the world of online dating, and (d) state whether they used online dating services or met incidentally through chat rooms, online games, or common interest groups. Respondents were eager to relate their experiences, and many interviews lasted an hour or longer.

Interviews were conducted during lunch in restaurants, at respondents' homes, at the home of the first author, in the university cafeteria, and on walks in various neighborhoods. All respondents had ready access to computers in their homes, dorm rooms, or places of work. We watched while they talked back and forth online. In addition, the first author invited three newly paired couples to her home for dinner. Follow-up data were collected in person, on the phone, by e-mail, and by mail. Interviews were later transcribed and coded by keywords according to concepts that emerged through the dialogue, such as trust, time, risk, and need satisfaction.

We limited the number of respondents to 25 men and 25 women because we wanted to compare gender variables in a balanced sample. The men ranged in age from 18 to 58 with a mean age of 32.6. The women ranged in age from 15 to 48 with a mean age of 33. In all, 17 men and 11 women were single (never married), 7 men and 10 women were divorced, and 1 man and 4 women were married. Two men and one woman were gay. Two women and one man were African American. One man was Indian. Six men and seven women were the parents of young children, and as previously stated, five respondents were married when they began to interact romantically online.

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## RESULTS

### Companionship

Lonely people tend to report being dissatisfied with their relationships and are often cynical, rejecting, bored, and depressed. They also have difficulty making friends, engaging in conversations, getting involved in social activities, and dating (Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980; W. H. Jones, Hobbs, & Hockenbury, 1982). Their tendency to engage in minimal self-disclosure and be unresponsive to conversational partners often results in poor interactions that are unrewarding for both partners, which leads lonely individuals to feel dissatisfied with their relationships (McAdams, 1989). Both relationship dissatisfaction and difficulty with social behavior may lead lonely people to seek online relationships.

Regardless of their marital status, respondents of all ages tended to report being lonely. They all talked about needing more communication, emotional support, and companionship. Fred, a 19-year-old student who had never been married, said, "I hate being alone. You want to know someone out there at least cares."

Greta, a 43-year-old, unhappily married mother of a 9-year-old, worked a night shift. Her husband worked during the day, and they both dated others online through chat rooms. Chat rooms often require only token (username) identification. The face presented is largely cloaked, but marital status is usually not hidden. Rather, it is explained:

I guess the big problem is that my husband works 6 days a week, is gone all day long, and doesn't spend time with me. It is like we are strangers living in the same house. We haven't actually gone out with anyone.

Kelly, a 48-year-old, unhappily married student also blamed her lack of communication with her husband for why she dated online:

I think I qualify for this interview because I date someone online. In our house there is no communication. That is no way to be. It's two people living in the same house like roommates that have totally different lives. We never talk. That is how my life was before I met George [online]. . . .

Regardless of their marital status, . . . individuals seemed to perceive their social lives as incomplete. This may be a reflection of the separation of family and friends because of current societal structure. Thus, it is not surprising that they were highly motivated to become involved in online relationships with people who were willing to talk, listen, and serve a supportive function. . . .

### Comfort After a Life Crisis

. . . [S]everal respondents in the present sample reported seeking comfort after a life crisis, such as the loss of a job, a divorce, or a death in the family. Robin, a 32-year-old, never married woman, said,

I had suffered such a great loss when my grandpa died. We were very close and he raised me. I guess at that particular point in time in my life I needed someone in my life. One night I was searching for someone to talk with. There is a button you can hit to find a random chat partner. I must have gone through about 10 to 15 different people until his name popped up. I read his details that he provided about himself, and I sent him a message. The first night we talked for about 5 to 6 hours straight, nonstop.

Anna, a 39-year-old, divorced woman, also got online because of her recent divorce: "After my divorce, I cried all the time. My friends were tired of listening to me. I wanted a support group so I went into this chat room." . . .

Our society's lack of support structure for individuals who experience life crises may lead them to seek out comfort from online sources. . . . The online setting allows them to select which aspects of themselves to reveal to their online companions, which lessens the probability of unfavorable judgment that may be leveled by real-life friends and family members.

## Control Over Presentation and Environment

The Internet provides a medium for people to present themselves in a way that they think is flattering. Clark (1998) reports that girls describe themselves as “thinner and taller” and otherwise prettier in Internet communications than they actually are. Because contact is mediated, individuals do not have to expose themselves directly on the Internet. In general, “the surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur” (Goffman, 1967, p. 15).

Jean, a 35-year-old, never married woman, said if you were heavy, you could get to know someone who might like you instead of having to attract people with your looks before they wanted to know you:

Many of the women I met from my chat room were way overweight. It's easy to sit at home and talk online, say things, and be appealing. I mean it's safe. It's totally safe if you don't ever plan on ever meeting anyone [face to face]. Later on, you do meet them, maybe they will like you anyway. By that time it's worth the risk. . . .

Reid, a 37-year-old, divorced father with two children, said,

The Internet is a place where people can take risks without consequences. You can experiment with people you wouldn't normally meet or get involved with. You can grocery shop. There are more people to meet. You can play games for a long time. You can look at so many pictures; it's fun like a candy store.

. . . For people who are shy, anxious, and deficient in social skills, use of the Internet may facilitate social interaction because it requires different skills that are necessary for initiating heterosocial interaction in a face-to-face setting. In one study, college students reported using the Internet to meet people because they found it reduced their anxiety about social interaction (Knox, Daniels, Sturdivant, & Zushman, 2001).

Some respondents of both sexes claimed they found it difficult to talk to strangers in social situations such as parties or even in places such as the school cafeteria or a classroom. Rick, a 32-year-old, never married man, said he liked using the Internet because “I'm shy. That is why I went into a chat room. I can say things online that I can't say in person. I am so quiet. But, I can talk on the telephone too.”

Pete, a 22-year-old, never married man, did not trust dating in general, but he liked the Internet better than bars:

Bars are a meat market, and I feel that everybody there is putting on more of a show than actuality. I mean when you meet them [women] in a bar, it's like they are a different person than in real life. And it's the same thing with the Internet, you know, with a lot of women. So many haven't returned messages, or they just leave you hanging, or they pretend to be someone they are not. I'm too shy, too afraid of getting turned down. It's easier, less painful getting turned down on type than it is in person.

Men and women respondents complained that bars were not a good place to get to know prospective partner. Many argued that [they] did not trust the character of bar pickups:

One thing I found with the bar is that most ladies who go there will say yes and say yes to about anybody given the time of night. Some ladies have propositioned me! Let's just say I don't like being in that situation.

Anna also said, "I don't want to go to bars to meet people. This is a lot safer."

Societal expectations for appearance and behavior can result in individuals who do not fit the norm and perceive themselves as deviants who will not be accepted. Furthermore, they may fear negative reprisals from more mainstream members of society and thus may retreat into an online setting where they feel safer and have control.

### Freedom from Commitment and Stereotypes

Clark (1998) found that Internet dating is particularly appealing to teenage girls because it allows them to be aggressive while remaining sheltered. Clark argued that "Internet dating affords teenage girls in particular the opportunity to experiment with and claim power within heterosexual relationships," but she questioned whether the resulting relationships were any more emancipative than those found in the real-life experiences of teenagers. She suggested that "power afforded through self-construction on the Internet does not translate into changed gender roles and expectations in the social world beyond cyberspace." The teenage girls in Clark's study were "not interested in meeting the boys with whom they conversed as they might undermine (their) attractive and aggressive online persona" (pp. 160–169).

. . . Traditional gender norms that dictate that women wait for men to ask them out and men be assertive leaders are still common today (Mongeau, Hale, Johnson, & Hillis, 1993; Simmel, 1911). However, some research (e.g., Cooper & Sportolan, 1997) and responses from the interviewees suggest that these norms may not operate online.

Cathryn, a 15-year-old girl, stated:

I like to play but not really be there. I met this boy and we talked about school and movies, but we didn't meet. We live in different states. I don't know much about him really. He's just fun to talk to. I tease him a lot. Sometimes my friends pretend they are older or even guys instead of girls.

This online interaction is free from commitment.

Five of the respondents, both men and women, talked about freedom from commitment and stereotypic sex roles. Anna said,

We agreed that there would be no expectations and if we didn't like each other, we'd have a few laughs, go to a baseball game or two, have a few beers, who cares. Since

I like to travel, I also felt if the guy was a jerk, I had a credit card and would go to a different hotel and stay in San Diego and have a nice vacation. . . .

Ross, a 40-year-old, divorced father who had custody of his 10-year-old son, said,

There is such a difference between actually talking to somebody and putting things in print. You can make yourself sound like I could be Joe Big Stud or whatever on the Internet. Then when we met, we'd see if we got along.

Greg, a 21-year-old, never married student, said,

Every few weeks we'd say "Hey, how's it going?" I told her from day one we'd never know each other's real names, where we lived, or anything about it. She didn't know how old I was or if I was married or single or anything. But we loved talking, and we talked about meeting.

Although many respondents initially wanted freedom from commitment, they liked spending a lot of time online getting to know each other. Often after a period of months, they decided to meet face to face. Some changed their minds about having no commitment and increased their involvement, whereas others concluded that they had too little in common to justify continuing the relationship. Thus, as with traditional dating, online daters seemed to want to get to know their partners better before committing. . . .

### Trust, Risk, and Lying Online

Trust may not be important in an interaction when compared to that of opening an opportunity for taking a gamble. Goffman (1967) believed, "Chance lies in the attitude of the individual himself—his creative capacity to redefine the world around him into its decisional potentialities" (p. 201). Goffman saw all forms of action as gambling. Similarly, Simmel (1911) argued that when a person is offered a token of trust, the recipient is expected to respond in kind. When people place online personals ads, those who respond may be perceived as offering a gift; the implication is made that "I trust you enough to treat me well." . . .

The Internet has been described as a "revolutionary social space" (Hardey, 2002, p. 577) in which old rules for social interaction are discarded in favor of new ones that may be better suited to the technology. However, Hardey (2002) found that Internet daters' interactions are often guided by "rituals and norms that protect the self" (p. 577), which was originally suggested by Goffman (1967). The technology of the Internet may present new challenges to building intimacy and avoiding rejection, but the basic motivations for protecting the self remain. New risks inspire new coping strategies to maintain an environment of trust. Such an environment is necessary to maintain the solidarity of society, according to Simmel (1978). Giddens (1990) emphasized a need to establish trust among individuals and observed that

the alternative to trust is inaction, which in itself may be risky because if we do not take the risk of interacting, we will not develop a supportive friendship network. He saw relationships as “ties based upon trust, where trust is not pre-given but worked upon, and where the work involved means a mutual process of self-disclosure” (p. 121).

To establish close relationships within the constraints of the Internet, people use creative methods to identify themselves as cool and trustworthy. Emoticons, abbreviations, unconventional spellings, and specialized grammar are used to weed out people who do not share others’ realities or ways of being (Waskul, 2003). Turkle (1995) observed that through photographs, profiles, and narratives, “people create and cycle through a sometimes surprising range of online identities” (p. 10). . . .

Online, people commonly misrepresent their appearance, making it more flattering (Clark, 1998). One sample of college students reported lying about their age, weight, and marital status (Knox et al., 2001). They may also misrepresent their gender (Danet, 1998; Knox et al., 2001). Misrepresentation in online social interactions seems so natural that few seem to give much thought to what usually could be dismissed as a makeover of one’s persona. Given the limited amount of information available to respondents about each other in Internet interactions and their transitory nature, deception is common.

Most respondents said they had been lied to more than once, and some reported surprise when this happened. Robin, the 32-year-old, single woman, wanted to trust people:

I was raised to believe and trust in people when they tell you things. So it was very hard for me to believe that someone could play on another person’s feelings the way he did with me [a previous Internet relationship had not worked, and Robin believes he had not told her the truth about being truly interested in meeting her and being there for her]. But I have accepted the fact that it happened, and I have moved on with my life and met [also online] someone better. The only advice I have for people who are thinking of Internet dating is just be careful. There is a Web site out there where you can have someone’s background checked out to see if they are telling you the truth. In the back of my mind I had a feeling he [her previous online date] was lying, but for some reason I didn’t want to face the reality of it. . . .

Most men and women in this study took physical and emotional risks to gain risks and were willing to continue seeking online relationships even after others had lied to them. A few teenagers and adults who did not want committed relationships took fewer risks by taking on unrealistic roles, not being open, and postponing face-to-face meetings. Others developed symbolic trust indicators to lessen the consequential risks of interacting.

### Indicators of Trust

Berger and Luckmann (1967) believed people decide to trust based on intuitive impressions that we refer to as “trust indicators.” This research uncovered the presence

of early and late trust indicators as part of early and late negotiating strategies that serve to minimize harm to the self.

The development of trust in an online dating relationship requires not only the assurance that the other means no physical harm but also that the other will treat the online persona with ritual deference. A remark such as, "I did not know you were so large; do you use Photoshop?" would be a devastating blow. This is one of the reasons some Internet daters postpone or evade face-to-face meetings. . . .

Younger respondents were concerned with the hermeneutics of keystrokes and codes. Arlene, a 17-year-old interviewed by the first author, used *LOL* (laughing out loud), *BRB* (be right back), and other abbreviations when chatting. We found younger people used this coded language more frequently than did older individuals. Respondents who were not adept in the use of such codes exposed their lack of grace in social interaction and were weeded out. Participants selected for interactions of usually only a few minutes duration were chosen many times based on one word or the speed of their typing. More mature respondents had different early indicators. Lisa, a 41-year-old, divorced woman, said,

I don't use chat rooms much anymore. They are filled with a vast bastion of people looking for absolutely nothing. They are "players." They are talking to you while having cybersex with someone else and talking with a third person in another room at the same time. If you get serious, they don't like it. They use romance and dating rooms, sex cams, interest and game rooms, and they chat on the side at the same time. . . .

Chet, a 28-year-old, divorced man, said chat rooms were for mindless, immature people. He used dating services also:

I look for women who are funny, sarcastic, you know, intellectual, sharp-witted. I can't start a conversation with someone who says she wants to come over and have sex the next day. Or the stereotypic interaction with emphasis on age, hobbies. . . . It's mindless, immature.

Janet, an 18-year-old, female student, said she could tell right away if it was going to work:

You talk to them. If they answer with one-word sentences. . . . if the [online] conversation is really unbalanced, I look and see how much I have said and how much they have said. If I tell them what my field of study is and they don't understand anything at all about it. . . . Most people in chat rooms are uneducated, working class, and just plain dumb. You need to weed them out.

Respondents used indicators contained in e-mailed or posted pictures to help evaluate their potential mates and attempted to determine their age and degree of affluence. Clothing, hairstyle, and projected lifestyle were augured from photographs.

Jessie, a 24-year-old woman, focused on economic status:

I met this man online in a church chat room. He was from South Africa, and he sent me e-mail pictures where he was standing in front of a very expensive car. His clothes were expensive-looking, too, and his house was like a mansion. He said he was a professional businessman with lots of money. He said he wanted to come over here to meet me and my family. He had never been in the States before. I told my mother about him.

Other indicators deal with time. Through face-to-face relating, we have come to expect a certain pattern of flow through which a relationship develops. This pattern is reflected through the timing of conversation and self-disclosure. Often on the Internet there is a pressure to disclose much in a short time to establish trust and kinship quickly. Some respondents dislike this pressure. Julian, 25-year-old salesman, observed,

Internet people are more desperate; things move fast in weird ways. People put pictures up for everyone to see, but you don't know their personal mannerisms. Do they smell bad? Have a funny laugh? Do they bite their nails? The beginning is different. It [meeting online] sets you off on a weird path. You get way too intense too soon. There's like a speed to get to know each other. All you have is conversation that becomes exaggerated and magnified. It becomes drama. People attach deep meaning and feeling prematurely. Feelings get hurt. Self-revelation leads to distortion of the picture. One woman I met online said, "I think I am ready for a relationship now." This scared me. I wanted to just maybe have at least one date in person and get to know her better before committing to a relationship.

Although this respondent felt it was not a good practice to discuss personal matters too soon, we observed him doing just that in his second e-mail to a woman he had just recently met online.

To develop intimacy to create a bond with an online partner, Internet daters felt pressed to self-disclose as much information as they could in the shortest possible time, though letting people know one's shortcomings begs rejection. Furthermore, disclosing too much too fast violates social conventions and norms. The woman who told Julian, "I think I am ready for a relationship now," scared her potential partner away. . . .

Once Internet daters find each other compatible, they move on to the next step of relationship building. This involves spending more time getting to know one another to build trust. Basic interpersonal trust is either contractual trust based on social contracts as in family relationships or trust based on time in relations (Govier, 1992). Most respondents liked the time they spent getting to know each other. They said this time helped develop trust and intimacy. Robin said it seemed safer to get to know people over time:

I guess I chose the Internet over meeting someone in a bar or on a blind date because to me it felt a little safer. In a bar you are meeting someone and you get the impression that they want just a one-night stand and that is it. That is not how I was raised. On the Internet you could talk to this person for as long as you wanted to before you went ahead and met that person.

Josh, a 56-year-old, never married man, also felt he had developed trust during time spent online:

I felt I knew her even though we had not met yet. She was not a stranger. We had spoken over the phone and e-mailed over a period of 11 months. I was not afraid at all. It didn't even enter my mind. I didn't have any reason to believe she would be any different in person than she appeared to be. . . .

## ■ ■ ■ DISCUSSION

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The Internet has opened a new avenue for romantic interaction. In the present study, Internet daters reported being able to reach a larger pool of potential partners and experiencing increased freedom of choice among partners. The Internet also raises new issues of negotiating risk and establishing trust. Respondents said they were willing to take risks to take advantage of the new courting opportunities offered by this new technology. Some risks involved physical danger, and others involved loss of face and possible rejection, though interviewees developed rationales and strategies to deal with these risks to trust that they would have positive experiences.

Dating online modified gendered interactions by allowing women to behave more assertively and men to be more open. It also necessitated the development of new strategies based on keystrokes, codes interpreting online photographs, and reading user profiles to develop trust and confirm compatibility. In Internet interactions, gains and losses are only symbolic, and rejection by an online entity identified only as "suv4" can represent no great material loss. It is this very abstraction that motivates people to use the Internet for dating to avoid stereotyped gender roles and the pain of rejection.

The interrelating of Internet daters also reflects old patterns and problems common to all forms of courtship. Even if they do not find objectification and harassment online, meeting offline often brings objectification or harassment into a formerly nonjudgmental relationship. There is irony in seeking a way out of loneliness through a medium that ensures the insularity of participants and perpetuates gender stereotyping once participants meet.

Several old problems remain in Internet dating. It is easy for people to lie to each other, and appearance issues and shyness do not completely disappear when dating online. Rejection and its emotional pain are ultimately a part of Internet dating as much as of dating that is entirely face to face from the start. The fundamental issues of trust, self-presentation, and compatibility carry over from conventional courtship into its Internet variant.

The need to obtain companionship motivates people to seek out romantic relationships in a variety of ways, and the Internet is merely the latest technological development used by people to assist their romantic goals. Participants in the current study reported reducing their loneliness, obtaining comfort, and finding fun and excitement. These benefits appeared to outweigh the risks.

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