



It's a Whole New Dating World in the 2020s: Exploring Online Dating Today

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Abstract

This conceptual article provides a comprehensive overview of the historical evolution of dating practices from the 19th century to the present day, exploring the influence of social, cultural, and technological factors on dating. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent rise of dating apps and virtual dating in the 2020s is also examined. The article also discusses the risks and red flags associated with online dating, including scams and harassment, and provides guidelines for maintaining safety while using dating apps. This information to showcase the need for further investigation into the complexities of modern-day dating practices. The findings highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the complexities of current dating practices and further research on the implications of changing dating practices on social relationships and well-being.

Keywords: Dating Standards, Modern Dating, Dating Apps, Virtual Dating, Red Flags

INTRODUCTION

It's a Whole New Dating World in the 2020s: Exploring Online Dating Today

Around 142 million American adults are single, of which half want to pursue a romantic partner (Campbell et al., 2023). Due to changing societal attitudes, rebellion against the rigidity of courtship, world events, and technological advancements, dating in the United States (U.S.) looks very different today, compared to the previous 50 years. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has also undoubtedly changed the landscape of dating and romantic relationships in the 2020s (Boll, 2022; Duguay et al., 2022; Ting & McLachlan, 2022; Williams et al., 2021; Winking, 2021). In response to the initial "shelter-in-place" orders and subsequent social distancing requirements, many turned to virtual dating to cope during times of widespread isolation. Whereas, until a decade ago, internet dating was linked to social stigma, presently, dating apps have +320-million users worldwide (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022; Shen et al., 2023). Current literature does look at various aspects of dating. However, with online dating now considered to

be mainstream partly as a bi-product of the COVID-19 pandemic, the notion of love, relationships, hook-ups, and dating are entangled with dating apps (Portolan & McAlister, 2022), thus, we need to look at how this has changed in recent years. Therefore, the gap lies in determining risks and benefits as well as differences in dating from the past to current day.

Dating apps have been heralded as a flexible, often free, non-intimidating, and less time-consuming way to connect (Casto & Barrada, 2023). Following a brief overview of the history of dating, the balance of this article highlights what researchers have found as other advantageous aspects of online dating. While online dating offers several benefits in terms of accessibility and efficiency, there are also downfalls that must be considered. As such, this article also highlights some of the known risks and "red flags" associated with online dating and the use of dating apps, including dating violence, financial exploitation, and other threats to individuals' wellbeing. In doing so, researchers hope to begin fostering a more balanced understanding of the online dating experience, with the ultimate goal of helping users enjoy the benefits and diminish the associated risks.

A Brief History of Dating: From 19th Century to Now

In general, dating has different meanings to different people and can take on various cultural and generational customs. In the most general terms, dating can be described as individuals spending time together under a romantic context. As human beings are social creatures, forming intimate connections is fundamental human

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motivation and has been linked to better physical, emotional, and mental health outcomes (Baumeister et al., 1995; Chisom, 2021; Winking, 2021). Some people date to find a long-term partner to create a life together with. Others want to add elements of spontaneity and excitement into their lives. Many people enjoy casual encounters and sexual adventures with new and/or many people. Some date to stave off loneliness and others engage in order to increase their social skills. There are a variety of reasons for why people date, but the commonality among all of them is the natural instinct to seek out human connection and companionship.

Social exchange theory (SET) suggests that humans form and maintain relationships based on an evaluation of potential costs against the perceived benefits or resources the relationship can bring (Timmermans et al., 2018). In this context, relationship benefits can include love, status, money, information, goods; and in romantic relationships, sex and companionships (Adams and Sizemore, 2013). Relationship costs often involve unwanted emotional stress, financial costs, and time commitment (Timmermans et al., 2018). SET posits that relationships are pursued when (a) there is mutual interest, and (b) the transaction of benefits is rewarding to both parties in ways that allow them to maximize benefits while minimizing relationship costs (Adams & Sizemore, 2013; Shtafeld & Barak, 2009). The level of autonomy individuals have had in making such relationship evaluations has varied significantly over the years.

For example, before the faster-paced approach to dating today, there was the cultural tradition of courtship, which was a process which was meant to lead to marriage (Burzumato, 2007). This practice was made for and engaged by heterosexual couples that played the part of very specific gender roles. Men were the pursuers and women the prizes to be won. Male suitors would visit their potential brides in the accompaniment of chaperones. The couple would attempt to get to know one another and form a bond before walking down the aisle together. While it is true that marriage was seen as a way to secure finances and alliances amongst families, during the 18th century the attitude amongst marriage began to shift more towards affection rather than allegiances (Brand, 2020).

By the 19th century, “compassionate marriages” that focused on emotional satisfaction and love were becoming the new relationship ideal as men and women were now allowed more agency in their choice of partners (Phegley, 2012). During this time, men and women had more opportunities to meet other singles outside of their social circles and parents matchmaking suggestions - a shift largely facilitated by the emergence of advertisements. Specifically, for the first time in history, singles could take out advertisements in periodicals expressing who they were and what kind of partner they were looking for; these were essentially the first “dating profiles”.

These matrimonial advertisements were evolutionary when it came to courtship developing into dating, however they did come with societal stigma. At that time, society viewed the women who utilized these advertisements unfavorably, as they were challenging gender roles by publicly announcing what they wanted in a partner, which was considered immodest. However, these advertisements were crucial in women being seen more as equals within the courtship circle in the 20th century (Phegley, 2013).

The 20th century was the defining timeline in which courtship transformed into dating. Between the years 1900 and 2000 so many technological advancements and world events took place that changed the way human beings romantically interacted with one another (Burzumato,

2007; Smith & Duggan, 2013). The early 1900s were filled with technological advancements that allowed singles new access to one another: telephones, record players, automobiles, movie theaters, dance halls, bars, and amusement parks. While, prior to the 20th century, courtship practices were public acts that were conducted in private places, during the 20th century a shift occurred where private or individual acts were able to be conducted in public spaces (Burzumato, 2007). To this effect, singles allowed more autonomy over their level of engagement in the ‘social exchange’ of dating. At this time, singles also had the freedom to privately and more intimately get to know their dates by having access to more public locations rather than being confined in their family homes under the watchful eyes of family members.

The 20th century was a century that was pivotal in changing society’s views of norms and principles that had long since been held as ‘American values’. The 20th century changed the dating game as it was home to many different revolutions (M. Coleman et al., 2007). In 1920, the 19th amendment was ratified which gave women the right to vote. It also put an end to marriage laws under coverture. Coverture dictated that women were denied property and contract rights as well as being denied the right to vote as their husbands were presumed to vote for the household.

The 19th amendment saw to it that women’s constitutional and democratic rights must apply to women within the context of marriage as well as to women as citizens (Hunter, 2020). In 1924, the Society for Human Rights was founded, which was the first documented gay organization in the United States. Under this organization the country’s first gay-interest newsletter “Friendship and Freedom” was published. The Society for Human Rights was the beginning of the LGBTQ+ community creating resources, visibility, and later on amassing enough support to decriminalize homosexuality as well as gaining rights in the United States (Francis, 2019). In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration approved the first oral contraception birth control.

The birth control pill gave women agency in who they wanted to have children with, when, and how many children they wanted to have. Women have also benefited economically in part thanks to birth control. Early availability to birth control accounts for a third of women’s wage increase relative to men since the 1960’s. The contraceptive pill is also credited with being an influential factor in keeping women in college. Birth control has aided in giving women agency over their bodily autonomy, personal lives, education, and finances (Landau & Smith, 2021; Pappas, 2012).

Then, in 1964, the Civil Right Act was signed into law. This ended segregation in the country and prevented employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (History.com Editors, 2022). The 1964 Civil Rights Act also led to the 1965 Voting Rights Act becoming law, which banned discriminatory voting practices against African Americans exercising their right to vote (NAACP, 2021). Additionally, in 1967 the Supreme Court ruled in the *Loving v. Virginia* case that banning marriage between individuals of different races went against the 14th amendment. This made interracial marriage legal throughout all of the United States (Duignan, 2022). Each of these shifts in law echo three of the major societal themes of the 20th century: ‘choice’, ‘access’, and ‘freedom’.

These collective experiences and shifts in societal themes over the years continue to shape and form what we

know as modern dating in the 21st century. Today's dating world is one driven by individual preference and increased accessibility facilitated by the rise of virtual dating.

Dating in the 2020s: Shifts in Dating Standards

Researchers have noted how the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent rise of dating apps has affected the dating experiences for many people (Bandinelli, 2022; Gibson, 2021; Duguay et al., 2021; Portolan & McAlister, 2022; Shen, 2023). For example, Pew Research found that men were more likely than women to report feeling more interested in a committed relationship now, than they were before the pandemic (Brown, 2022). In another study on single Americans, Campbell et al. (2023) reported that at least 50% of participants wanted their potential partner to be vaccinated against COVID-19, while 18% preferred a vaccinated partner but would make exceptions, and at least 6% of participants wanted an unvaccinated partner.

For the last 12-years, the Match Company and Dynata have collaborated to produce the "Singles in America" (SIA), a survey developed to better understand the experiences of between 5,000 and 6,000 single people throughout the United States; the SIA study has been used as the data source for several scholarly publications in varying disciplines (Campbell et al., 2023). The 2021 and 2022 SIA data noted several differences in dating standards. For example, researchers found that between 2020 and 2021, participants reported a 12% decrease (from 90% in 2020, to 78% in 2021) in how important they rated physical attractiveness (Match, 2022). Coincidentally, in the 2022 survey, 49% of participants reported having fallen in love with someone they were not initially attracted to (Match, 2023).

The 2021 SIA also reported that fewer women participants were interested in casual dating for the sake of "hooking up." Specifically, 62% reported being more interested in finding a meaningful, committed relationship, and 51% reported being more thoughtful in their dating app communications (Match, 2022). Similarly, Andini (2021) reported that an online dating survey showed that 72% of the women participants reported feeling it was vital that the profile includes the type of relationship that the other person seeks as opposed to the 53% of the men participants involved in the survey.

Further, people are increasingly expressing their preferences for their own and their potential partner's mental and emotional health. For example, 87% of participants in the 2022 SIA expressed that it is important for them and their partner to prioritize mental health (Match, 2023). 83% of SIA's 2021 participants reported wanting an emotionally mature partner (Match, 2022). Relatedly Matos (2022) suggested that younger and middle-aged heterosexual men are significantly more lonely than men in generations due to deficits in emotional maturity and relationships skills. Matos added that, because men make up over 62% of dating app users, women have shifted their dating standards to become considerably more selective. The 2022 SIA also found that more than 50% of participants reported an openness to longer distance relationships (Match, 2023). Relatedly, the 2022 SIA data showed that 48% of participants wanted to get to know a potential date by talking over the phone before meeting in person, while 43% preferred communicating via text, and another 29% reported liking to use social media.

Apps & Virtual Dating

As the Covid-19 pandemic led to public health efforts to minimize the spread of disease, billions of people were required to reduce physical and social interactions (Duguay et al., 2022; Ting & McLachlan, 2022). Consequently, some individuals reported increased levels of loneliness and consequent increased mental health distress (Dailey et al., 2022; Williams et al. 2021). For others, however, the pandemic might have helped foster more intimacy in their close relationships. Konrath (2020) suggested that the pandemic might have sparked more people to (a) be more intentional about whom they date, (b) have deeper conversations with their connections, and (c) spend more quality time with new partners.

Technology has played a significant role in helping maintain social connectedness with others and mitigate social isolation during national requirements of quarantining and social distancing (Duguay et al., 2022; Marston et al., 2020; Ting & McLachlan, 2022). Over the last few decades, and especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual dating, largely via mobile phone apps, have become a more prominent way to form relationships. On average, one in ten Americans reports having used online dating websites or mobile dating apps (Shen et al. 2023). Gibson (2021) noted that, while some may have to rethink how to achieve intimacy in virtual ways, for others, the use of dating apps may just be dating-as-usual.

Virtual dating encompasses a wide range of digital dating platforms that offer both short form "swipe-based" interfaces or long form biographies that detail users' interest and other areas of their lives (Williams et al. 2021). In years prior, people often met via family connections, social activities, or by happenstance in public places (Marston et al., 2020). At this time, online dating and the use of dating apps were stigmatized as odd, sexually deviant, used for casual sexual encounters, and socially unacceptable (Duguay et al., 2022).

However, dating app platforms have changed this dynamic by promoting virtual communication and with the ease of access and decision making (Duguay et al., 2022). Whereas, until a decade ago, internet dating was linked to social stigma, presently, virtual dating has eliminated previous forms of non-contact dating, and emerged as a new relational phenomenon (Lozic, 2021). In general, virtual dating via dating app platforms has seen an increase in usage from 2% to 39%, with 60% of individuals reporting preferring to video chat with a potential date, over meeting publicly for the initial encounter (Duguay et al., 2022; Ting & McLachlan, 2022).

Match.com was the first of its kind in 1995 to propose dating online (Stylight, 2019). The gay community were the pioneers of navigating dating through apps with the creation of Grindr in 2009 and Scruff in 2010. These apps helped single men find other single men within a geographic radius. Tinder was the first app to appeal to people of all sexualities who were looking for love, sex, or casual dating. A year after its 2012 exclusive launch for iPhone users, Tinder became available to android users and then to seventy percent of smartphone users worldwide (Lunden, 2013; Pamanian, 2022). Other dating apps began to show up on the market shortly after the apparent success of Tinder and dating has become synonymous with mobile apps ever since. With the popularity of these apps, other businesses decided to capitalize on this new lucrative app experience (Fetters, 2020).

From the inception of mobile dating apps in 2009, every year more and more singles join them. A 2019 survey from the Pew Research Center conducted on cohabiting

Americans who said they used dating apps tripled from 15% in 2015 to 46%. Castro and Barrada (2020) estimated that an average of 40% of single adults are seeking online. Since the start of the pandemic alone, dating usage increased by 30-31% in the United States, to where dating apps have over 300 million users worldwide today (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022; Duguay et al., 2022; Ting & McLachlan, 2022). Shen et al. (2023) reported that roughly 67% of online daters had met someone they know through dating websites or apps. Shen et al. also noted that 23% of the study's participants reportedly had met their spouse or long-term partners through a dating site or app. With the growing popularity in dating apps, social connectedness and intimacy are more easily accessible today than in years prior (Duguay & Myles, 2022; Marston et al., 2020; Ting & McLachlan, 2022).

Dating App Advantages. According to Gibson (2021), dating apps have made a significant contribution to reducing physical and social disconnection, increasing interactions between people, and offering promising opportunities to create sexual and emotional intimacy. In addition to making dating in the pandemic more accessible, dating app companies also focused on providing their users with a sense of safety while navigating in this new dating environment. For example, Bumble introduced a COVID-19 tab that informed users of the World Health Organization's guidelines for safety. At the height of the pandemic, several dating apps began offering new features and online activities that accommodated for social distancing such as video chatting, virtual speed dating, dating advice sessions, and virtual therapy. Once vaccinations became available to the public, Tinder, Hinge, OkCupid, and Bumble partnered with the United States Government to include the addition of badges to profiles of users who had received the COVID vaccine. In March of 2021, Tinder also offered at-home COVID test kits.

Anderson et al. (2020) suggested that online platforms promote ease and efficiency in the dating process. Andini (2021) discussed the increased access afforded by online dating platforms, noting that the virtual options give individuals the exposure and opportunities to identify romantic partners whom they would not typically meet in passing. Specifically, virtual dating generally affords individuals access to a wider network of potential partners who would otherwise be unknown or inaccessible (Chisom, 2021).

Additionally, virtual dating facilitates nearly instantaneous communication, regardless of users' proximity to each other (Chisom, 2021). To this effect, dating virtually can also be cost-effective, in terms of minimizing the costs of travel, food, and activities (Marston et al., 2020). Further, populations who may not generally be included in social activities (i.e. older populations, individuals with disabilities, those with social disorders or lacking social skills, etc.) are allowed the same access as other populations (Marston et al., 2020; Toma, 2022). Andini also noted that the convenience of being able to search for matches from any place at any time adds to the accessibility benefits.

The computer-mediated communication aspect of online dating and dating apps offers another benefit by allowing users to match with people based on their preset preferences and assess for an initial sense of compatibility before meeting face-to-face (Andini, 2021). Anecdotally, this feature may help initiate the social exchange evaluations theorized to underpin the relationship building process. Social exchange theory posits that (a) people establish reciprocal relationships based on mutual interest, and (b) people are generally attracted to people who are

similar to themselves and/or offer meaningful resources or rewards (Cropanzo & Mitchell, 2005; Shtafeld & Barak, 2009). In this context, virtual dating platforms allow users to identify such prospective partners with more ease and precision.

Specifically, Toma (2022) noted that, for some, online communication can be more comfortable due to the enhanced ability to control messages and more easily find like-minded individuals. Further, Cropanzo and Mitchell (2005) noted that the 'exchange' in social exchange theory involves a series of interactions that are interdependent and that, under certain circumstances, have the potential to generate high quality relationships. Presumably, the computer-mediated communication aspect of virtual dating supports these interactions, too. For example, there is research that suggests virtual interactions can assist in intimacy via flirtation, foreplay, display love or trust, create humorous bonding, enhanced sexual satisfaction in relationships, and even replace physical intimacy for long-distance relationships (Van Ouytsel et al., 2020).

Dating App Risks & Red Flags. While there are certainly positive implications to the use of dating apps, there are also negative impacts that should be noted, including inherent risks to users' privacy, security, and health (Williams et al. 2021). Lee (2023) noted a lack of commonly adapted guidelines for designing interventions that create safe and inclusive dating apps. Conceivably as a result, dating app users report having experienced various abuses and risks, including romance scams, hate speech, and privacy invasion (Lee, 2023).

With regard to dating app users' health, studies have found that online dating may worsen mental health symptoms for some (Her & Timmermans, 2021; Holtzhausen et al., 2020; Rydahl et al., 2021). For example, one study found that roughly half of its participants reported that the use of online dating during a depressive episode aggravated their symptoms (Rydahl et al., 2021). Similarly, a study on mental health and swipe-based dating apps (SBDA) found that SBDA use was associated with higher levels of psychological distress, anxiety, and depression (Holtzhausen et al., 2020). For instance, Tinder use has been linked to decreased satisfaction with appearance, more appearance comparisons, greater body shame, and in men, lower self-esteem (Alexopoulos et al., 2020; Holtzhausen et al., 2020).

Further, according to Toma (2022), because online dating exposes individuals to more choices, they are more likely to engage in frequent search behaviors, less likely to be satisfied with whom they pick, and more likely to reject potential partners. Perhaps consequently, not every user reports feeling equally successful on dating apps, to the extent that users may report feeling frustrated, socially excluded, sad, anxious, angry and/or experiencing significant reductions in self-esteem (Alexopoulos et al. 2020; Toma 2022). An increase in self-objectifications is also a negative when online dating because of mental health issues such as clinical depression and eating disorders (Andini, 2021). Additionally, Andini (2021) posited that short-term gratification when online dating could cultivate dysfunctional coping styles when dealing with unpleasant emotions offline.

Over the years, horrific stories have been shared about online dating that highlights the harassment and violence that could ensue whether online or after an in-person meeting (Filice et al., 2022). The most common form of sharing these stories has been through Netflix, while some stories are still being shared on the news and retold on popular social media websites all of which has shined a

spotlight on the need for better precautionary and security measures on dating apps. Facing pressure from society, media, and government agencies; technology companies have begun deploying safety measures to combat sexual harassment, sexual assault, and abuse on the dating apps they have created (Stardust et al., 2022). Research on the potential abuses users face while engaging with dating apps, including during the lockdown periods due to COVID-19, are now being conducted to learn the physiological and psychological side effects of using these apps as well as the security risks present in regard to keeping sensitive information of its users private (Phan et al., 2021; Stoicescu & Rughiniş, 2021; Valentine et al., 2022). Although there are happy endings and safety nets have been deployed to lower negative outcomes, the risks that come with dating online are not diminished and further exploration of safeguarding measures need to be researched and implemented.

Though there is a convenience for matching, and it is easy to communicate on online dating platforms, this is a drawback as well (Andini, 2021), considering the social communication morale, which is the quality and tone of intersocial stimulation. Paradoxically, online dating and dating apps have increased accessibility to dating for many, but the increased change of contact paired with ease of localization, and the inclusion of personal data, also makes those users more vulnerable (Casto & Barranda, 2020). For example, features like video calling, which is advertised as a benefit to many dating app platforms, can facilitate invasions of privacy, harassment, and discrimination (Duguay et al. 2022). Dating apps have also been used to facilitate intimate partner violence, in ways that have disproportionately affected users who identify as women (Phan et al., 2021). Additionally, since dating app profiles are created individually, it is easy to engage in selective self-presentation, deception or misrepresentation of oneself (Marston et al., 2020; Ting & McLachlan, 2022; Williams et al., 2021). To this effect, scamming and harassment are two of the more commonly encountered dangers of online dating (Anderson et al., 2020; Andini, 2021).

Scamming. With the increased use of dating apps, instances of “romance fraud” or scamming have increased significantly after April 2020 (Buil-Gil & Zeng, 2021). Romance fraud, which is most commonly committed through dating apps and websites, refers to situations where an individual is deceived for financial gain by someone with whom the victim perceives to be in a romantic relationship (Buil-Gil & Zeng, 2021). Another harmful tactic that scammers use is sending pornographic material and require payments in order to receive more photos (Leano, 2021).

In addition to severe financial effects, victims of romance fraud are also known to experience anxiety and depression. Consequently, one of the things that needs to be understood when online dating is how to spot virtual dating scammers. A tactic that scammers utilize is creating fake online profiles with fake photos and false identities of real people (Scamwatch, 2022). Scammers use social media platforms (online dating apps included) by emailing or telephoning their victims, commonly known as *catfishing* (Scamwatch, 2022). In general, scammers use whatever they find on social media to create pictures and fake profiles, the more information scammers the more manipulative they can be (Scamwatch, 2022).

Victims of online dating abuse have been able to share their stories through documentaries such as *Tinder Swindler*. The film is based on a true story about a man who dated women online and emotionally manipulated

them into financially supporting him. He was able to manipulate them by sharing fabricated stories of duress convincing his victims to send him money. (Morris, 2022). The *Tinder Swindler* scammed women out of more than \$10 million (Feldman, 2022; Wong, 2022). Following the documentary, the individual was banned from dating apps (Wong, 2022). The day before the documentary was released on Netflix, Tinder announced that they updated their guidelines to include “Romance Scams: How to Protect Yourself Online,” providing tips on how to identify scammers and what not to do while online dating (Wong, 2022). Though financial scamming within a dating app is less prevalent than other dangers, the documentary was pivotal to bring awareness to the issues that come with dating online.

These are some helpful tips for safeguarding against virtual dating scammers. 1) never send money, that includes giving card information, online account details, or copies of personal documents, 2) remove emotions from decisions, 3) do an image search using Google or TinEye, 4) be alert to spelling errors and grammar mistake, inconsistencies in stories, and cameras “never” working for video call. Additional helpful tips include: (a) be cautious when sharing personal pictures or videos, (b) tell friends and family where you are going if meeting in person, but it is strongly recommended not to meet overseas (c) avoid meeting someone that asks or demands payments of any kind (money order, wire transfer, etc.), scammers asking to transfer money for someone else, also known as money laundering, (d) being aware of how much personal information is being posted on social media.

Also worth noting, virtual dating scammers often use fake profiles from real people to take advantage of their victims. Noticing the well-crafted fake profiles becomes easier now that there are helpful tips in recognizing the red flags of fake profiles and avoiding the *catfishing* scheme (Leano, 2021). Red flags for detecting false profiles can include: (a) Too-Good-To-Be-True photos (b) limited photos, (c) no other social media, (d) automated conversations, and (e) being straight forward (Leano, 2021). While there are positive outcomes when online dating, being able to identify potentially harmful individuals is imperative.

Harassment. Within the last five years, harassment has been more prevalent online (Vogels, 2021), some of which may be partly attributable to the types of environments different online dating platforms create. For instance, Tinder, which is often regarded as a ‘hook-up’ app, has been scrutinized as a platform that eases sexual demands and harassment by offering access to people within close location, with limited identifying information required (Lee, 2023; Stoicescu, 2019). Since 2014, there has been a rise in online abuse and harassment from 16% to 28%. In 2017, 19% of Americans had experienced multiple forms of online harassment (Vogels, 2021).

App developer responses to privacy and protection have varied. For example, Grindr, an app for LGBTQ+ dating, was found to have shared users’ locations and HIV-positive status with third-party firms for years (Lee, 2023). In a qualitative study that examined how the dating apps Tinder and Bumble performed across fifteen (15) ‘Responsible Social Media Guidelines’ (RSMG) aimed at (a) protecting users’ privacy, (b) raising awareness, and (b) controlling abuse, Lee (2023) found that while both apps provided users with basic privacy settings and the ability to block and report other users as means of avoiding and protecting themselves from abuse certain RSM guidelines were only available to users who paid for subscriptions.

Additionally, the study identified that both apps lacked features geared toward protecting LGBTQ+ users.

With the rise of online abuse and harassment, there are some helpful tips that have been created for online users to understand what this looks like. Some red flags for detecting harassment: 1) starting the initial conversation off with sexual content, 2) sending unwanted sexual advances or comments, 3) sending unsolicited sexual imagery, 4) trying to have virtual sex without consent, (Bumble, n.d.). Statistics show that 32% of female users experience harassment or being bullied and 19% of male users experience those same occurrences (Anderson & Vogels, 2020). The data shows that it is more common in females than males to experience harassment, but both males and females should utilize these tips to point out cyberbullying and harassment.

Surveys from Pew Research Center report that 37% of online dating users explained that despite disinterest, individuals will continue to message on the platform (Andini, 2021). Thirty five percent of online dating users reported that the other party sent unsolicited sexually explicit messages or images, and 28% report abusive tendencies from the other party after being rejected (Andini, 2021). Unfortunately, these numbers are higher for women (Andini, 2021). A Pew Research Center survey confirmed that women have a more difficult time finding individuals they are physically attracted to and attempting to meet the other party in person tends to be more difficult (Andini, 2021). Six out of ten women between the ages of 18 and 34 reported another person attempting to contact them after stating they are uninterested (Andini, 2021) and 44% stated there were offensive names directed towards them. Based on the statistics given, harassment and rape culture are not solely limited to in-person interactions and has permeated the digital scene.

Worth noting, is the phenomena of “misattribution of arousal,” which is when an individual experiences a major stressor, such as a global pandemic, and misinterprets that stimuli for romantic feelings (Ting & McLachlan, 2022). As a result, the individual may create inauthentic feelings of emotional and intimate connectedness, which can result in feelings of sadness, concern, or disappointment. Idealization of image is another negative to online dating (Andini, 2021).

Another important thing to consider when creating an online dating profile is the type of photographs the individual is uploading to their bio. Two red flags on profiles include photographs that are over-edited or display individuals holding up obscene gestures (Lewis, 2022). Additional red flags include displaying emotional immaturity, being unstable, and listing requirements from the other party with no mention about what can be brought into the relationship (Lewis, 2022). Even though online dating is pervasive and has altered the romantic process of compatibility, what is displayed on a profile does not always reflect the person in real life (Finkel et al., 2012).

After an individual signs onto their online account, sees another individual they find attractive, checks off all of the boxes that are wanted in a partner, and has some conversations with the other party they would then plan to meet in person. Though it may appear that their online personas are a match, in-person compatibility could be far from a perfect pairing. Unfortunately, online, an individual is able to carefully craft a profile leaving out their less than desirable traits. For example, ABC7 Eyewitness news reported on a case involving a In one case, a Texas man who kidnapped and abused a woman for five days, after meeting through the Bumble dating app (Ehling & Willey,

2023). While the woman was able to escape and the offender was later arrested and blocked on the dating app, this is a single example of the many online interactions that have resulted in individuals being victimized through virtual dating.

Online dating is popular in society and continues to romantically bring individuals together. However, there are numerous risks and dangers that must be accounted for when entering into the online dating pool. In recent years, prevalence of scamming and coercion within online dating has been exposed. Proper education regarding the warning signs of a falsified profile and indicators of misleading attributes is vital to ensuring individual’s safety online. Awareness of such signals could better guarantee an individual's well-being as well as aid in their search for a potential match online.

Limitations and Future Directions

This paper is subject to several limitations. This is an initial piece that was written to

inform future dating research and highlight major gaps in the literature and areas of focus for further exploration. Thus, this paper is not an empirical study. This paper does not have coinciding data. We selected and analyzed sources that were relevant, recent, and discussed dating in the 2020s. We understand this is a major limitation and call for future research to use more robust methodology. We present this information to showcase the need for further investigation into the complexities of modern-day dating practices. Moving forward with the material presented in this paper, future research could demonstrate how online dating can differ for individuals of varying ages, genders, races/ethnicities, sexual identities, disabilities, and intersectionalities. It is important and necessary to acknowledge how societal issues affect online interactions which creates inequitable and dangerous experiences for online dating users. As online dating has become the most common way couples meet, it is vital that these domains reflect the multifaceted dynamics of society as well as ensuring a safe environment where people can freely be their diverse and authentic selves (Fedina et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2021; Rosenfeld et al., 2019).

As there are gaps in academic research concerning inclusivity and diversity in online dating we recommend future papers focus on minority experiences. Understanding the unique challenges minoritized communities face online can be paramount in making practical improvements in the algorithms in which these dating websites operate. Some methods in obtaining this data include: 1). Conducting in depth qualitative interviews with racially and ethnically minoritized individuals who have engaged in online dating to explore their successes and challenges while using dating platforms. 2). Administering quantitative surveys to a large sample of individuals from different racially and ethnically minoritized groups to gather information about perceived barriers specific to their communities. By studying their unique perceptions and experiences in online dating, as well as comprehending the juxtaposition of how algorithms currently contribute in perpetuating social bias’ but also the potential of algorithms fostering inclusivity can significantly impact safety and success rates in the world of online dating.

Conclusion

In conclusion, online dating provides a multitude of both advantages and disadvantages to its users. On the positive side it offers unprecedented accessibility for connecting people from all across the world and creating matches based on mutual connection rather than proximity or societal pressures. On the negative side online dating currently presents challenges in safety and perpetuating stereotypes and bias'. Introducing diversity, inclusivity, intersectionality, and safety measures into online dating is paramount because it aligns with the morality and ethics of today's society. People care about their personal safety and also about making online dating more inclusive because it represents the diverse environment they live in. Designing online dating platforms that embrace diversity creates more authentic, representative, safe, and fulfilling experiences for the millions of user's that utilize dating apps to make human connections. Continuous research, education, and improvement to online dating is fundamental in ensuring responsible and ethical practices for online dating.

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