



## **How Deception Plays a Role in Online Dating and Dating Apps**

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### ***Abstract***

Most young adults today find dating apps a significant resource for forming intimate relationships. However, by using dating apps and online dating to meet potential love interests, there is always the risk of being deceived. This paper delves into the role of deceit concerning online dating and how it ruins the experience of dating and finding love online due to the false personas put up to trick others for their gain.

Keywords: dating apps, intimate relationships, online, deception, personas

### ***Introduction***

In today's society, it is ubiquitous for young people to try to establish themselves in romantic relationships to improve their quality of life and to feel satisfied and complete, as it is within our human nature. Since meeting people the natural way has become a little complicated, there has been a considerable rise in online dating and the use of dating apps since the pandemic. According to Ellison et al. (2006, p. 416), "the use of online dating or online personals services has evolved from a marginal to a mainstream social practice." Finding love has been as easy as clicking a button or swiping your fingers with how accessible dating practices have become today. However, due to the tailored profiles often generated by individuals hoping to find a compatible partner, there is always a risk factor concerning dishonesty with online dating. Online dating is recognized as the process in which "individuals create profiles and initiate contact with others

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through an online service” (Hancock et al., 2007, p. 449). Within the context of online dating, it has become increasingly normalized in our society. Many young people are enticed by the fact that these sites and apps allow them to choose who they want to connect with and potentially form a romantic relationship with; however, they do not have reasonable control over who is portraying a false identity on these platforms.

This paper aims to highlight and bring attention to the conflicts that can develop when young adults are too vulnerable to date and find lovers on the internet. Because many individuals are blinded by attractiveness and popularity, they may not even realize that who they are seeing and talking to online may be a potential threat and that they could be getting duped. I hypothesize that the deception that exists within the context of online dating can be very dangerous to the people who use these platforms, and the experience of finding love should not be spoiled as a result of dishonesty.

### ***Background***

When an individual decides to put themselves out there in the dating world, many forms of uncertainty may cause frustration, especially when acknowledging how people lie online, as it can make the whole process more challenging. Online dating consists of forming a profile that is intriguing to others and would compel other individuals to want to connect with that person based on what they have seen. However, a factor that is often overlooked is that sometimes people can alter their profiles online to fit someone else's standards or try to be perceived in a way that would be deemed more acceptable rather than showing who they truly are. Concerning online dating, in a study conducted by Drouin et al. (2016, p. 134), on average, around “55% [of individuals] expected others to lie at least sometimes about their gender.” People can modify their appearance on these apps and dating websites by using edited photos of themselves or changing their height or occupation to seem more attractive and desirable. These are subtle forms of deceit that occur within the context of online dating.

Another aspect that may be more crucial concerning deception when individuals try to date online is the problems that may arise when they lie about their intentions and expectations. Some young adults seek casual hookups and sexual encounters without strings attached, whereas some look for long-term, committed monogamous relationships. Conflict may occur when people withhold the truth on these platforms or lie about what they want from the other person. The potential for harmful situations may happen all because someone was under the impression that they would receive sex or sexual activity based on what was placed on their dating profile.

It can lead to many issues when people lie on dating platforms. When individuals are misled and deceived, they can be in harm's way without preconceived notions about who they speak to and possibly meet up with. These factors should be considered when looking at the complications that arise when deciding to date online. Specifically, women and the LGBTQ+ community are the most vulnerable and susceptible to deceptive online dating behaviour. Because of that, there are higher chances that they can be placed in instances where they may be unsafe or victimized. As stated by Filice et al. (2022, p. 12), “The broader evidence based on technology-facilitated sexual violence indicates that certain population subgroups are disproportionately at risk, most notably

women and girls, sexual and gender minorities (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and gender-nonconforming persons), and people of colour.” The issue of victimization and subjecting individuals to circumstances that could hurt them is something individuals should stress in connection with the complications that can happen when young adults try to find love on the internet.

### ***Literature Review***

As many individuals are aware, a significant amount of research has been done analyzing the problems within online dating and how deception affects the process. Manta (2019) explains how severe actions can result from being misled when trying to form an intimate relationship online; notably, there is a strong focus on the connection between sexual fraud and online dating. As people are often deceived online, they can find themselves part of unsafe situations that can ultimately lead to coercion and sexual assault (Manta 2019, p. 207). Another study conducted by Mosley et al. (2020) theorizes how attachment style is a reason why individuals believe that deceiving others online regarding their dating profiles is acceptable and further explains why they do it. (p. 227). The studies completed by Manta (2019) and Mosley et al. (2020) provided various contextual aspects that give proper insight and information on online dating falsity and the consequences of an individual being deceived in these types of situations. When reviewing all of this literature, as well as other previously conducted studies on this subject matter, this paper intends to delve into all facets that pertain to online dating and the issues there are with it. By exploring how deception affects the premises of online dating, it should be clear for one to recognize how it is an unfortunate occurrence that ultimately leads to problems that take away the fun of dating.

### ***Sexual Fraud***

When people look for love and intimate relationships on the internet, it is rather apparent that there is a big chance that individuals are being lied to by another person as a manipulation tactic. Hence, they can achieve what they want from that other person. By doing so, the liar is acting in a predatory nature by searching for people to take advantage of, which is something that happens regularly in our society, and even more so online. According to Manta (2019), the most prevalent form of deception that occurs within the realm of online dating is a term coined as “sexual fraud” (p. 213). Sexual fraud, also known as “rape by fraud,” can be understood as “a scenario in which “the defendant has accomplished sexual intercourse by any type of fraud, deception, misrepresentation, impersonation, or other stratagem” (Manta 2019, p.214). This infraction can be a common theme amongst those who use dating apps. Potential perpetrators can mask their intentions with whom they are trying to date and make it seem as if they genuinely want to meet up to get to know each other when they have ulterior motives that can harm someone's physical and emotional well-being.

Many people are cautioned about ‘red flags’ online, especially when meeting up with strangers; however, they may not know how to spot the signs of someone potentially deceiving them and trying to commit something as heinous as sexual fraud. As we know, there are numerous instances where people tell more minor lies that may or may not be categorized as “dealbreakers” regarding how one may want to connect with someone they have been speaking online. However, despite the gravity of the situation or how severe the deception is, problems may arise due to the lie that the person involved told. When looking at the issues of sexual fraud in online dating, more often than not, this is a problem that specifically targets women, as they are more likely to be casualties in these cases. In correspondence with Manta’s claims, a study by Filice et al. (2022, p. 11) affirms when looking predominantly at women undergrad students who frequently online date, “nearly three-quarters (71.43 %) of those who were currently using dating apps were concerned about their potential for leading to unsafe situations.” The data obtained from that study is rather alarming since it is noticeably a large number of women who feel and relate to this amount of uncertainty there is when it comes to online dating.

When looking at the data which reflects the significant relationship between online dating and sexual fraud, it has been said that “online dating increases the opportunities for the perpetration of sexual fraud, it also reduces the evidentiary problems associated with this potential offence and creates less stigma than a high-stakes criminal case” (Manta 2019, p. 232). As more people emerge into online dating, more risks can increase. Concerning sexual fraud, it can be quite troublesome for users of dating apps and websites since it is difficult to point out if someone is deceiving another person for the sole purpose of sexual fraud or other offences of that nature. Whenever someone is on the internet, there is always a chance that they are going to be misled in some shape or form; however, when we examine the concept of online dating, it is more harmful because individuals are interacting with complete strangers. When you are talking to someone you do not know well, it is easier to be fed lies and not to know the absolute truth, which unfortunately makes it easier for you to be a target of online deception. This aspect of online dating diminishes the fun there is supposed to be when you try and look for a relationship. However, when you do not know the full extent of the truth someone is telling you or the intentions behind the profile that you are interested in, it becomes more straightforward for you to be manipulated and a victim of things such as sexual fraud.

### ***Catfishing***

When one thoroughly analyzes the intricacies of deception in online dating, it can be rather conspicuous that many individuals share a similar fear of speaking to someone other than who they have been made to believe they have matched with online. This phenomenon is known as “catfishing.” Catfishing can be defined as “falsely representing oneself to a potential romantic partner, without the intention of meeting in person” (Mosley et al., 2020, p. 227). This notion is ultimately deceptive because it makes individuals fall for the fake persona and identity placed online and emotionally violates individuals. Usually, when someone is being catfished, there are faked photos and names used of real individuals that make it seem like who they are is valid. Be-

cause of this, the person being catfished may develop a false sense of trustworthiness with who they are building a relationship, and this furthers the ploy of the one doing the catfishing. Like those who deceive people online for scamming purposes or for the intention of sexual fraud and other malicious reasons, catfishing is sometimes harder to spot because of the great lengths one must go to ensure that their profile and story are believable.

In relation to the concept of catfishing, one of the most famous cases of online dating betrayal is the 2012 case of Notre Dame university student and football player Manti Te'o. In accordance with Smith et al. (2017), Manti Te'o's story began following the aftermath of the tragic death of leukemia of his online girlfriend Lennay Kekua. As Te'o's community rallied together to support him at his time of loss, media later revealed that he was a part of a catfishing scam and Kekua was never deceased (p.32). This case is an extreme example of deception that can occur online because not only was Manti Te'o manipulated into forming an online relationship. He also was convinced that the girl he loved had died and was publicly shamed and ridiculed for it when it was made clear that he had been misled and taken advantage of.

The most critical problem regarding catfishing and the use of false identities on dating websites and apps is that it may be challenging for the victim to recover emotionally since their sense of trust has been entirely shattered. When forming a relationship with another person, it becomes routine to talk to them daily and share intimate details; when that bond is broken, it is difficult to let go of the relationship they thought was real. Regardless of the type of relationship, one has with another individual when someone is emotionally manipulated, especially to a degree as serious as catfishing, it will be hard for them to regain trust in dating as well as believe what they see and what they are told on these platforms. In reference to Drouin et al. (2016, p. 135), catfishing falls under one of the four main categories that are present within the context of online deception; aside from trolling, category deception and identity concealment, catfishing is a form of impersonation, and society can recognize this type of deception as more extreme than other forms of online betrayal. Most of the time, the perpetrators of catfishing acts go without getting caught or facing the consequences of their actions. Because of that reality, the person who gets deceived rarely gets closure of the relationship they thought they had and were a part of, which is why it is one of the most harmful factors that should be considered when acknowledging online dating.

### ***How Gender Affects Catfishing***

Since deception within the context of online dating is something that directly impacts both men and women, it can be pretty challenging to identify who a catfish might be since any gender can be a culprit. In a cohesive qualitative research study by Mosely et al. (2020, p. 234), they found that "23% [of women] identify as catfish perpetrators, and 77% identify as catfish targets." And concerning men, the data by Mosely et al. (2020, p. 234) showed that "38% [of men] identified as catfish perpetrators, while 62% were targets of catfishing behaviour."

There is a significant difference in the number of women and men catfish perpetrators than there are targets, and this is something that individuals should acknowledge. In most heterosexual relationships, regardless of whether they are formed online, there is a consequential requirement

in needs for each partner. Women tend to be more emotional and crave more emotional attachment to their partners. Because they long for that, it is easier for them to be targets of catfishing and online deception. Some men, on the other hand, may value feeling wanted and desired because of low self-esteem and self-image. It might make it easier for them to deceive others online and use fake pictures on dating sites to help them find a potential partner. Consistent with Mosley et al. (2020), “men are more likely to be perpetrators, and women are more likely to be targets of catfishing” (p. 236). From the data obtained by Mosley et al. (2020), it is very distinguishable for one to discern the dynamics of relationships between catfish perpetrators and their targets, and something that is the driving force behind the deception is the strong sense of closeness they feel when they behave in such a manner.

### ***Attachment Theory***

As we know, various types of fraud and deceptive behaviours can be presented online regarding online dating. However, when one thoroughly inspects the individuals who are not truthful online, there is a common factor present with most perpetrators. The commonality for these assailants is their sense of attachment to the person they are fooling. According to Mosley et al. (2020), the attachment theory plays a significant role in forming these relationships. Whether online or offline, individuals will have a certain level of attachment to the person they are building a connection. Because of that, it is often more complex for the person lying to stop the facade, as they are already too attached. (p .229)

When observing the way intimate relationships are formed with respect to deception in online dating and dating apps, it can be said that the attachment theory is the main reason people do not fully trust the process. As claimed by Mosley et al. (2020, p. 229), “In adulthood, romantic partners become the object of attachment from whom individuals seek support and to whom they provide care.” When one is on the internet seeking out love and intimate partnership, one will inevitably gain a sense of attachment based on the levels of consistency developed through their relationship. However, online lying wholly ruins the experience because someone's selfishness and deceptive nature have hidden agendas.

Regarding sexual fraud, individuals can apply the same essence of the attachment theory to the connection between the potential victim and perpetrator. Because of the same sense of wanting to feel close to someone to get what they want from them, it is clear that the motive is still the same. Regardless of the type of deception that occurs online, attachment is one of the main reasons these people try to fool others into believing their lies in these situations. To exemplify how the attachment theory is a part of the process for those who carry out deceitful acts, one can look at the Gayle Newman case, as mentioned by Manta (2019). In this case, a woman online duped her friend into having sex with her by posing as a male suffering from cancer. (Manta 2019, p.214). Before the assault carried out by Newman, she formed an online relationship with a woman she had already known and developed an attachment to her by speaking to her on the phone and Facebook for nearly two years. This example mentioned by Manta (2019) thus demonstrates how the attachment theory is necessary to execute the intended deception and how far someone can go with dishonesty to perform their malicious fantasies.

## *Consequences*

Within this context of online dating deception, it is quite palpable that deceiving others is morally wrong, especially in instances where the intentions are to emotionally, physically, or sexually harm another individual. Although this is one aspect of deceit that is usually focused on when discussing online dating, another facet of deception that society should take into consideration is how it affects the individual themselves when they lie on these dating platforms.

Many people on dating sites enjoy not being face-to-face with their potential partner or love interest because of their personal insecurities. On these platforms, one can hide behind their phone or computer and not worry about their appearance or what the other person may think about them when they meet. This may alleviate some pressure. However, in the long run, this may cause more problems for the individual because it is not ideal to be in a relationship without meeting the other person in real life, and it will be harder to maintain a lie to that extent for so long. According to research conducted by Peng et al. (2022, p. 3), there are three significant consequences of deception in relation to online dating “cognitive, affective and behavioural.” These three dimensions of deceit are imperative to online dating as they provide better contextual features of what happens to these individuals when they deceive others.

## *Cognitive and Affective Consequences*

Each time a person decides to lie about something online regarding dating, whether something as subtle as a change in height, or things they are interested in, there is a more profound internal repercussions for them to face as a result. As cognition plays a substantial role in the way people behave deceptively, there is no doubt that there is a consequence for Individuals when they trick others online for their benefit. Concerning cognitive consequences, Peng et al. (2022, p. 3) suggest that “the discovery of deception is treated as a cognitive event.” When people are made aware that they are being deceived while online dating, they may first have to process and acknowledge what is happening to them mentally. While the person acting out the deceptive behaviour reaps the benefits since they are selfishly doing it for their pleasure. As a result, it often leads to an emotional response, where the affective consequence appears.

The practical consequence often associated with online dating deception can be strongly linked to the cognitive aspect since it responds to triggers that generate emotions for the deceiver and the unsuspecting dater. According to Peng et al. (2022, p. 5), the reason for the correlation between emotions and deceptive behaviour in retrospect to online dating is due to “the interruption of an existing activity or an established norm [because it] induces an arousal state, which is followed by emotional behaviour.” Most of the time, the person who is deceiving is obtaining gratification at the expense of the other person, which takes away from the motive for online dating in the first place, which should be because the person genuinely wants to find love and a long-term relationship partner.

### ***Behavioural Consequences***

As mentioned, the last type of consequence commonly associated with betrayal and online dating is connected to behaviour, as it demonstrates the intentions behind an individual when they choose to trick someone. An example of how behaviour can cause consequences for online dating can be shown through fake pictures on dating apps and the aftermath of what happens when one meets up in person with their date. Following Manta (2019), when men and women lie on dating platforms with the hopes of starting a healthy intimate relationship, they ruin the process for themselves by assuming that their potential partner would be accepting of deceptive behaviour in a future relationship. When someone tries to intentionally lie to someone when they are online dating, one of the most considerable risks they face is the termination of the relationship due to the behaviour they exhibited once they were found out. Most of the time, lying is a dealbreaker for most who are looking for love, and when deception is displayed through one's behaviour, it can ultimately stop the relationship.

### ***Legal Consequences***

As it is clear, behavioural, cognitive and affective consequences occur due to deceptive conduct within online dating and dating apps. These consequences affect the individual who partakes in the deceit and the person being deceived. However, aside from all these consequences, what should happen when the betrayal is so extreme? In some cases, the deception is so severe that a person may be harmed, whether it be emotionally, physically or sexually. In these cases, sometimes there may be external forms of consequences, such as looking to the legal system to see if they can intervene. According to Manta (2019, p. 243), "One way to provide recovery for that dignitary harm, as well as overcome the problem of calculating the exact level of emotional harm and deter future wrongful behaviour, is through the mechanism of statutory sanctions."

Sanctions may be necessary to resolve issues regarding online dating deception because the person affected may be so traumatized from their situation that it may completely deter them from wanting to put themselves out there again in hopes of finding love or a fulfilling relationship. Most dating platforms can not guarantee that someone will or will not be defrauded or taken advantage of. Although the notion of legality comes into play, it may be seen as a counter to stop deceit from happening in the first place or at least try to minimize the chance of it happening. Manta (2019, p. 244) claims, "Given that the dating apps allow some people to defraud dozens or even hundreds of individuals a year, providing this type of deterrence could have a significant effect on reducing the sum total of harm that sexual fraud causes. Since sexual fraud is one of the most grievous forms of deceit that can occur in online dating relationships, there needs to be some form of repercussions for those who violate others and hinder their process in trying to build a genuine relationship."



### ***Conclusion***

With all things considered, it can be concluded that there are critical issues when deception occurs throughout the online dating process. When one lies online or tries to deceive another person in the hopes of finding love, it ruins their opportunities to find someone who would actually be interested in them or want a serious relationship with them. Society should consider deceptive behaviour online in the context of dating as it could lead to dangerous outcomes such as sexual fraud and emotional consequences resulting from catfishing. The dating process should not be tarnished just because some individuals' poor decision-making led them to lie. Therefore, more preventative measures should be implemented to ensure that online dating deception can be minimalized as much as possible.

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