



The Benefits and Dangers of Online Dating Apps

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on online dating services. It explores the advantages and disadvantages of online dating apps, concluding with a discussion to help users rationalize whether the benefits of dating apps can justify the risks and dangers. Marketers sell consumers the hope that finding a match is guaranteed. As online dating seeps into the modern world, more and more users are experiencing the negative consequences of using dating apps. This paper will include techniques and strategies to help users mitigate these potential harms.

Keywords: online dating, apps, strategies, services

Introduction

Dating and courtship underwent a considerable facelift due to technology, transforming the dating scene into a market where users can virtually shop for potential partners. Gone are the days when an individual's kin performed the role of matchmaker or when singles relied on matchmaking functions to score a date. The internet functions as a social forum that can expedite discourse; thereby, technology inherited the role of traditional matchmakers, affording users the privilege of effortlessly connecting with other singles via smartphones.

Alluding to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, entrepreneurs saw the profit potential in exploiting human's innate need to form social connections. Thereby transforming online dating into a highly lucrative market; as Michael Norton noted (as cited in Dinh et al., 2022), "finding a romantic partner is one of the biggest problems that humans face" (p. 402). Companies are investing billions of dollars in creating an immersive world for consumers, drowning individuals in an array of advertisements through billboards, displays on public transits, or targeted ads,

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proclaiming that dating apps are the modern cupid. Exposure to online dating is unavoidable in the current world due to the fact that they "are part of the fabric of everyday life" (De Ridder, 2022, para. 2). As a result of the extensive advertisement and the conditions of the modern world, dating apps are becoming increasingly popular, making them some of the most used apps on the market; as Dinh et al. (2022) reported, there is a 70% annual growth rate in the usage of online dating apps by Americans. In addition, some predict that "by 2040 seventy percent of individuals will have met their significant other online" (Anderson, 2016, as cited in Manta et al., 2019, p. 209). Furthermore, users are willingly spending money on these apps to unlock services in hopes of increasing their chances of finding a match, making online dating a "\$2.1 billion business in the US and is expected to continue growing in the foreseeable future" (Dinh et al., 2022, p. 402).

Online dating apps sell customers' the idea that finding a match is guaranteed. Online dating services provide several benefits that users can exploit, which further entices more singles to download the app, increasing its popularity. As online dating seeps into the modern world, more and more users are experiencing the negative consequences of using dating apps. This paper will explore the advantages and disadvantages of online dating apps, concluding with a brief discussion of whether the benefits can counter their risks and dangers.

Advantages of Online Dating

Efficiency and Convenience

Individuals are becoming increasingly busier in the modern world, and creators consider this factor when developing their apps. To attract busy individuals, creators intentionally designed dating apps to be time sensitive to accommodate those individuals who cannot afford the time to "proactively look for love" (Hobbs et al., 2017, as cited in Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022, para. 10). First, the portability aspect of dating apps allows singles to swipe and match with other users no matter where they are. It can be as easy as pulling out a cell phone while waiting in line for coffee, commuting to and from work, or lounging on a couch after a long day. The transportable platform grants an unprecedented degree of freedom, where users can dictate how much time they spend on the app and when to use it. Adding to the point of being able to online date from almost anywhere, users can comfortably hide behind a screen without putting in the effort of dressing up to meet with a match; they can converse via texting, calling, emailing, or through the dating app itself.

Furthermore, dating apps are easy to set up. Users display their interests on their profiles by selecting them from a pre-generated list of hobbies. By adding a few photos of themselves and a brief bio, they are ready to mingle. Apps afford users a fair amount of flexibility when curating their bio, allowing them to articulate who they are, their interests, the type of relationship and partner they are looking for, and anything other information they want to disclose. The bio effectively allows users to be direct and specific with others so that both parties can save time. For example, a single mother might explicitly state in her bio that she is only interested in looking for a sexual partner who can accommodate her busy schedule, thereby filtering out individuals who do not fit her needs.

The technology's algorithm is another way to guarantee efficiency during romantic exchanges, where it "mediate – and, in so doing, coordinate and regulate – the actualisation of a social relation between two parties who are brought together by a common interest or goal." (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022, para. 12). Dating apps take away the step of having to find like-minded individuals, which allows users to capitalize on their limited and precious time, and to start swiping and matching simply.

Exposure and Networking

The Internet is a powerful communication medium, allowing individuals to connect with others through social networking services (SNS). SNS are platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and other applications alike. Parties can use these online platforms to network and form relationships with unparalleled ease. Social networking apps provide the opportunity for individuals to meet new people, connect with others who share similar interests, and help rekindle old friendships.

Dating apps are also communication platforms; however, they differ from SNS due to their reliance on geographical information, making them geo-social network (GSN) apps. These apps contain software that tract the users' location to "facilitate interpersonal connection between previously unacquainted persons who are physically nearby to one another for all manner of purposes, including dating, casual sex, friendship, and professional networking" (Grindr, 2021; Tinder, 2021, as cited in Filice et al., 2022, p. 2). With the explosion in the popularity of dating apps, millions of people are downloading them; as Chen et al., (2021) state, online dating services "provide an opportunity for people to find potential partners from a large pool they are unlikely to encounter otherwise through normal social contacts" (p. 341).

The embedded algorithm within the apps developed a new and more advanced approach to matchmaking; as mentioned by Chen et al., (2021), "dating sites can also make recommendations of 'ideal' matches through matching algorithms, based on user profiles (p. 341). Dating apps bond users together in a calculated manner, linking them to multiple strangers who share common interests, hobbies, opinions, and preferences, a phenomenon that traditional matchmakers cannot compete with. An increase in exposure to like-minded singles heightens the probability of finding a romantic connection.

Increased Sense of Control

Online dating gives users a sense of control over how they want to present themselves to their audience. According to Lawson & Leck (2006, as cited in Lauckner et al., 2019), dating apps allow users to carefully construct a profile that helps them feel confident (p. 290). Users can also control their relationship dynamics by setting boundaries and expectations through their bios and openly announcing the type of relationship they seek. For example, Amanda recently downloaded Bumble in hopes of finding a meaningful and fulfilling relationship. During the set-up of her profile, Amanda can communicate with other users via her bio prior to one-on-one conversations.

Amanda can state that she is only interested in finding a long-term partner; thereby, anyone who does not share the same end goal will not receive the time and attention from her. Part of the reason why Amanda can exert control in this way is due to the fact that she can afford to be direct; losing five or six matches out of a hundred does not phase her in the slightest. As Hobbs et al., 2017 found in their study, “66% of survey respondents agreed with the proposition that these apps afford them ‘a feeling of control’ over their romantic and sexual encounters” (para. 18).

Since the emergence of online dating, users have greatly benefited from dating apps. Singles can also control the time invested in the app and swipe through it for hours within a day or as little as a few minutes. Users can also control how much effort they put into talking with their matches. Singles on the app are not obligated to devote their time and attention to matches. If they are bored with using the app or lose interest in people, they can exit the app. Singles can also control the number of matches they chat with at once. Conversations via dating apps made it easier for users to have multiple one-to-one conversations simultaneously. According to Smith (2016, as cited in Lauckner et al., 2019):

a majority of individuals who have used online dating report that it allows them to find a better match for themselves, likely due to this ability to find others with common interests, and also report that it is easier to find dates than it is using other methods of meeting people (p. 290).

Disadvantages of Online Dating

Lies and Deceit

Society reaps the benefits of dating apps; however, society must recognize the drawbacks of online dating. One issue that arises out of online dating is deception; as mentioned by Manta (2019), "about eighty percent of individuals lie on at least some part of their online dating profiles" (p. 207). Unlike previous generations, singles are turning to online dating services to find a match, meaning there are no pre-existing social ties with matches. Lying on one's dating profile is extremely easy since online dating services fail to conduct any "rigid background checks [or] profile verifications" (Andersson, 2016, as cited in Chen et al., 2021, p. 342) on users. Individuals can lie about their weight, height, career, interests, or just about anything. Often, users will lie on a small scale, tweaking some information about themselves to stand out and seem more desirable. However, on the other end of the scale, dating apps create cyberspace for predators to prey on vulnerable individuals who are looking for love, giving birth to the act of catfishing. Nolan (2015, as cited in Lauckner et al., 2019) describes catfishing as "the current internet trend of creating and portraying complex fictional identities through online profiles" (p. 291) in an attempt to deceive others for monetary gains. Whether users are spurring micro-lies to appear more desirable or committing fraudulent acts such as catfishing, in the end, apps leave users unprotected, bare, and vulnerable, making them more susceptible to victimization.

Mental Health

The impact of online dating on users' mental health is an unavoidable topic of discussion. As follows from above, users are left defenceless against predators' lies, and "these deceptions can have negative effects on the victim's mental health, including post-traumatic stress disorder, loss of one's social support system, and social isolation" (Whitty & Buchanan, 2016, as cited in Lauckner et al., 2019, p. 291). Although exposure to hundreds of matches increases the likelihood of successfully finding a partner, on the flip side, it can cause damage to the users' mental health. More users equal more competition, and as Penney (2014) shared in his study, Grindr users repetitively compare themselves to their competition, leading to a decline in self-esteem. Let us examine a fictitious scenario to digest the harmful impact of online dating on users' mental health. Jenny is a 21-year-old university student who recently moved into the city alone. To cope with the loneliness, she decides to download Tinder. Everything was going smoothly, and she received several matches. However, Jenny becomes frustrated when she realizes that she is not matching with the individuals of her interest; as a result, Jenny feels invisible and inadequate, causing her to experience a decline in her self-esteem. Jenny then begins comparing herself to her competition, altering how she poses in her pictures and using explicit pictures to try and draw more attention to herself. Jenny feels as if her physical appearance is lacking in some way and begins to critique herself. Jenny might also become insecure in her self-identity, feeling like she is not exciting or funny enough. Therefore, she feels the need to lie or change details in her bio to sell the idea that she has a great personality. As Penney (2014) shares, individuals' mental health is negatively affected when they feel they are not meeting the standards and expectations created by dating apps.

As discussed earlier, online dating apps provide the option for users to write their own bio. Users can be explicit when formulating their bio and set strict boundaries and expectations to inform other users of their intentions. Essentially, users can write anything in a bio. However, due to the degree of freedom granted to users, it is no surprise that racial slurs exist in bios, along with other derogatory messages. In the study by Lauckner et al., (2019), the authors reported that respondents came across profiles "that stated explicitly that the user was not interested in particular races or ethnicities" (p. 298). Some respondents received direct messages containing racist remarks. Other respondents reported, "encountering profiles stating things like 'no fats, no femmes'" (p. 298). Users' lived experiences with dating apps amplify the harm that these apps can cause and how "among members of the already marginalized SMM community, this additional discrimination likely has effects on mental health" (Lauckner et al., 2019, p. 298).

Fraud

As a continuation of the section on *Lies and deceit*, online dating allows for the growth and perpetuation of cyber-criminals. Whitty (2013, as cited in Suarez-Tangil et al., 2020) explains that individuals will create fake dating profiles, disguising themselves as attractive singles in order to trap potential victims. Once cyber-criminals secure contact with their targets, "scammers apply a range of techniques to exploit their victims, [engaging] in a long-term fictitious romantic relationship to gain their victims' trust and to repeatedly defraud them of large sums of money"

(Huang et al., 2015, as cited in Suarez-Tangil et al., 2020, p. 1128). Scammers gain their victim's trust through messages and other forms of communication that appear to be personalized and genuine. Part of the scammer's strategy is to hold communication with victims for an extended period of time. Once they determine that sufficient time has passed, they will attempt to relocate communication to unmonitored media (Suarez-Tangil et al., 2020). Tung (2015, as cited in Suarez-Tangil et al., 2020, p. 1128) reported that the FBI estimated "a total loss of \$85 million through online romance scams in the US"; this type of cybercrime is life-changing and can be detrimental to victims' mental and physical health. As Whitty and Buchanan (2016, as cited in Suarez-Tangil et al., 2020) emphasize, cybercrimes leave victims feeling traumatized and stigmatized: "victims find it difficult to seek support due to being left traumatized by the loss of the relationship and suffer from the stigma of being an online dating fraud victim" (p. 1128). The case of The Tinder Swindler is a real-world example of this phenomenon. The perpetrator Simon Leviev used Tinder to connect with several women and develop rapport with each of them. Once he gained the victim's trust, he emotionally manipulated and frauded them for financial gain.

Sexual Violence

Online dating services increase the occurrence of sexual violence, and some "qualitative studies also depict experiences of sexual violence in online dating as commonplace" (Comunello et al., 2021; Dietzel, 2021a, 2021b; Gillett, 2021; Lauckner et al., 2019; Mandau, 2019; Toch & Levi, 2013, as cited in Filice et al., 2022, p. 11). Technology facilitates new ways for perpetrators to victimize individuals, as Snaychuk & O'Neill (2020, as cited in Filice et al., 2022) reported that "11.4% of men and 25.3% of women previously had an unwanted sexual experience with someone met on a dating website or app" (p. 11). The act of sexual violence against users is so prevalent on dating apps that it has become a norm. Kaakinen et al., (2021, as cited in Filice et al., 2022) found a positive correlation between the usage of online dating services and the experience of sexual harassment and cybercrime (p. 11). Another study conducted by Shapiro et al., (2017, as cited in Filice et al., 2022) found "that Tinder users were over three times more likely than non-users to experience non-consensual sex (p. 11). Another factor that predicts the likelihood of a user experiencing sexual violence due to the usage of dating apps is individual differences:

The broader evidence base 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 (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Henry & Powell, 2018, as cited in Filice et al., 2022, p. 12).

Unlike previous generations, where the victim's personal networks with family, peers, and colleagues functioned as a protective barrier against offenders, now, the "Internet has created more differentiated and dispersed networks of potential victims" (Brayford et al., 2013; Whittle et al.,

2013, as cited in Filice et al., 2022, p. 13). Walther (1996, as cited in Filice et al., 2022) explained the term 'hyperpersonal communication' as when individuals are more trusting and tend to "develop a greater sense of closeness more quickly due to selective self-presentation and halo effects" (p. 13). Building off Walther's explanation, it is evident that digital media allows this phenomenon to occur since technology is the medium for interpersonal communications. Individuals falsely idealize the person they are communicating with due to the absence of non-verbal cues, thus making it harder to read someone through a screen. Almond et al.; Scannell (2020; 2019, as cited in Filice et al., 2022) elucidated that once the offender successfully gains the victims' trust, they can proceed to "encourage risky behaviour, such as agreeing to meet within a private residence" where abuse can occur (p. 13).

Conclusion

Discussion: Does the Pro Outweigh the Con?

As the literature review comes to an end, it is time to discuss whether the advantages of online dating apps outweigh the disadvantages faced by users. Beginning with the advantages, studies have found that users praise the efficiency and convenience online dating services provide them. Users have never experienced such a high degree of freedom when dating prior to dating apps. Users can pull out their smartphones anywhere and at any time; as long as there is service, they can begin matching with other singles. The app's robust algorithm also contributes to the factor of efficiency. Through its calculated technique, the algorithm matches users with others who are like-minded and share common interests, which is scientifically proven to increase a relationship's success rate. In addition, online dating services grant users an unprecedented amount of control over their love life. Users can be as direct and specific as they want with their profile, making sure other users understand what type of relationship they are looking for and under what conditions. Users can also talk to as many matches as they want, therefore, playing the field in a way that was only possible after the invention of online dating.

Shifting to the disadvantages of online dating. Due to the large pool of singles, users often feel unnoticed and invisible, damaging their self-esteem and leaving them feeling discouraged and frustrated. As a result, users may fib or lie about themselves on their dating profiles, commodifying themselves to appear as the best product on the market. The degree of lying can vary drastically on dating apps. Some, as previously mentioned, will lie about their weight, height, occupation, religion, and interests and skew other minor details. Others, however, possess an insidious goal when creating their dating profiles. Cyber-criminals will fabricate a fake identity to seduce victims looking for love, with the end goal of defrauding them. Another significant repercussion of online dating apps is the increased victimization due to sexual violence. Online dating grants offenders nuanced ways to prey on victims, and studies reported that sexual violence occurs so frequently on dating apps that, in a sense, has become the new norm.

Online dating services help foster a new environment for users to be harassed, assaulted, discriminated against, and exploited, which ultimately damages users' mental health, lowers their self-esteem, and can decrease their overall quality of life. It is difficult to speak for everyone and their experiences involving dating apps; however, it is evident that the advantages brought on by these apps cannot compensate for the disadvantages. The unfortunate reality is that online dating apps will persist and continue due to their efficiency and convenience. Users will keep using online dating services; however, strategies and techniques can be adopted and practiced to increase their safety when using these apps.

Techniques and Strategies

When connecting with others through dating apps, users should keep in mind that these platforms do not conduct any formal background checks on accounts; therefore, users must be calculated and logical when making decisions that involve matches.

First, users should provide only a tiny amount of personal information when creating their dating profile. This will ensure more privacy for the user and prevent potential offenders from using the information to spy on or stalk them. Another essential aspect of this is when communicating with matches, users should avoid sharing too much personal information until the user feels comfortable and believes an adequate amount of time has passed.

Second, when swiping for matches, analyze other users' profiles to see if their photos seem legitimate. If they only have one photo that seems sketchy, then proceed with caution. The next step is to check their bio and see if they have linked other social media accounts to their profile; this can function as a secondary background check. In addition, it is always a good habit to search for their name on Google to see if any additional information surfaces. This step can help prevent users from being catfished.

Third, block and report any account that is acting in an inappropriate way. Users can block a match anonymously, thereby being encouraged to do so immediately when users feel unsafe or uncomfortable. A few examples for users to keep in mind when trying to identify a suspicious user: if they are persistently asking for personal information such as your address, where you go to school, or where you work; if they are pushing to meet in a private setting; being inconsistent; requesting and sending unwarranted explicit photos; sending messages that are offensive and discriminatory.

Fourth, when users feel comfortable and are willing to meet their match in person, consider asking to video chat or facetime beforehand. By doing this, users can confirm that their match is who they claim to be. It is also an effective way to get a better read on the person now that users can hear their voices, see their faces, and assess their non-verbal cues.

Finally, if the user decides to meet their match in person, make sure to meet in a public space, and refuse to meet at their home or workplace. Make sure to tell multiple people where the meeting spot will be; sharing your location with multiple people can be lifesaving. Users should share their match's profile with their friends. It is vital to update friends and family about your situation periodically.

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