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The Cultural Adaptation of Internet Dating: Attitudes towards Online Relationship Formation

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The Cultural Adaptation of Internet Dating:
Attitudes towards Online Relationship Formation

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Sociology

by

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Acknowledgement

I dedicate this to all those who have inspired me, know you are appreciated; I am grateful.

I give a special thanks to my committee - D'Lane Compton, Vern Baxter, and David Allen - for encouraging hard work and providing the guidance to accomplish it.

Foreword

(My interest in this topic and arrival to the research)

I have always been excited by technology (and have been afforded the unique vantage of “growing up” through an exponentially progressive period of personal electronics and expansive communication). Think of all the advancements that have occurred in the past ten years alone. Ten years ago, I traded in a beeper for my first cell phone. Today, it’s becoming more and more unlikely to find someone who doesn’t have access to the internet in the palm of their hand.

The wonders of living through such a technological time and the simple joy of using its devices have kept me in touch with the advancements. This, combined with my interest in human interaction, makes it seem almost obvious why I have come to the intersection of “internet dating” as a point of research. Shortly after considering the topic and mentioning it to others, it became obvious that people were often opinionated yet quite mixed. Noting the considerable variance in the beliefs held about online dating, I became curious as to the foundations of these conflicting social opinions.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	vi
List of Tables	vii
Abstract	viii
Introduction.....	1
Internet Dating Literature	4
History of Computer-Facilitated Dating	4
Internet Dating Demographics	5
Stigma and Deception	8
Identity	10
Choice	11
Attitudes and Perceptions	11
Theoretical Background.....	15
Cultural Lag	15
American Courtship	19
Script Theory	22
Technology and the Self	23
Mediated Communication.....	26
Early Concepts on Relationship Formation and Attraction	28
Propinquity Effect.....	29
Mere and Repeated Exposure	29
Law of Attraction.....	30
Matching Hypothesis	30
Hypotheses	34
Methodological Procedures	37
Background	37
Definitions.....	38
Research Strategy and Method	38
Instrument	40
Vignette.....	40
Demographics	41
Internet Affinity and Trust.....	42
Dating Customs.....	42
Procedure	43
Analysis and Results	45

Description of Sample.....	45
Testing of Hypotheses.....	51
Why You Do, Would, or Wouldn't Internet Date	57
Discussion	60
Summary	62
Considerations and Limitations	63
Further Research	65
Conclusion	67
Bibliography	69
Appendices.....	72
A. Informed Consent Form	72
B. Vignette Scenarios and Instrument	73
C. IRB Exemption Letter	77
Vita.....	78

List of Figures

Process of Cultural Lag.....	17
Distribution of age in sample.....	47
Pie chart of internet dating participation.....	49
Rankings of internet affinity and trust	50

List of Tables

US households reporting computer and internet connection	18
Demographics of the sample.....	45
Dating experience related to internet dating	48
Correlation of vignette measures	51
Variation of vignette scenarios	52
Average indexed legitimacy score	53
Average rankings of longevity and social perception.....	54
Derivation and results of hypotheses tested.....	55
Effects of internet affinity on internet dating attitudes	57

Abstract

This study explores the social approval of internet dating through the ranking of vignette scenarios. The scenarios are manipulated by the conditions of face-to-face interaction, presence of mutual acquaintance, and use of internet technology. Measures of legitimacy, predicted longevity, and social perception test for changes in attitudes of the varied ways in which a hypothetical couple meets. One of seven randomly distributed scenarios was ranked by a total of 346 undergraduates to disentangle the above conditions and test for an effect on social approval. Situated in the framework of cultural adaptation, script theory and the saturated self, support is found for low cultural approval of internet dating. Conditions of face-to-face interaction, issues of trust, and affinity to the internet demonstrate clear effects on the approval of relationships formed through internet dating.

Keywords: Vignettes, Internet Dating, Online Relationship Formation, American Courtship, Cultural Lag, Sexual Script Theory, Technology and the Self, Mediated Communication

Introduction

In current American society, there is a significant disparity in the attitudes and opinions held toward the social acceptability of internet dating (Madden and Lenhart, 2006). This is not surprising when internet dating is examined as the newest addition to a continuing progression of dating practices within the United States. The cultural norms of courtship in America have changed several times, most often in relation to significant changes in the material conditions of society. This is historically evident in the transition brought about by the popularity of the personal automobile and its effects on the culture of courtship. With the automobile came the independence, mobility, and new space that enabled traditional patterns of courtship to transform and adapt (Bailey, 1988). Just as the auto became more commonplace, so too is the internet today and its growing popularity changes the way in which we meet new people, communicate, and court.

The changing nature of culturally acceptable practices often follows major technological advancements as they become commonplace to the average citizen. This period of transition between material advancements (internet technology) and a resulting shift of non-material, cultural practices (internet dating) is defined as cultural lag (Ogburn, 1922). This basic model lays the foundation for the current state of cultural attitudes towards internet dating. The persistence of dating scripts (culturally normative scenarios describing how a date takes place) and added effects of technology on communication, self identity, and trust show how this process is not simply linear but dynamic and reflexive. It is proposed that the effect of the internet on traditional dating practices is congruent to that of the automobile decades earlier.

In addition to framing the theoretical background which guides the progression and understanding of courtship practices currently held in this nation, some time is spent analyzing classic and modern research devoted to the topic. Uninfluenced by the technological implications of cell phones, computers, and the internet, early concepts on relationship formation and attraction seem quite basic. Yet, not only in their time and place were these concepts important but also in their contribution to much of the research that followed. These concepts are examined in the light of today's technology to illustrate the necessity for adaptation of cultural conditions.

A review of literature is provided with the specific focus of online dating to chart its progression. The youth of this form of intimate relationship formation and the broad range of its implications is easily seen in the work that has been accumulated thus far. The limited amount of research done on internet dating is attributed to its only recent proliferation. Many of the studies are quite specific in their application and are spread thin by the vast topical area covered. Several of the pertinent studies that help to better explain this new phenomenon of internet dating are highlighted.

This study examines the cultural attitudes held toward this new practice of seeking love online. More specifically, it focuses on the contradictory opinions about using such services and why they may exist. This study manipulates aspects of internet dating that separate it from traditional avenues to test if it is the technology that is cause for varied cultural attitudes or the effect of other factors: a lack of face to face communication, the absence of a third party vouch, or a general stigma- something that discredits social identity (Goffman, 1963). In addition, a questionnaire component provides insight to the customs and practices currently held in the dating scene of college students. A test for internet affinity measures if attitudes about internet

dating are related one's ability to use and attachment to the technology. A measure of dating practices and experience similarly checks for an associated change in attitudes. Finally, an open-ended question allows for a discussion of why people do, would, or would not participate in internet dating.

Internet Dating Literature

New research continues to be done on the topic of internet dating as interest follows the growing numbers of participants. The expanse of research is warranted, yet it is still just a fraction of the potential. Since this method of dating is a new phenomenon and an intersection for a variety of fields of study, research published thus far is spread thin over the expanse of topics within. Just to state a few, internet dating studies have focused on demographics, deception, identity, choice, and perception. This review begins with the earliest uses of the computer in dating and follows with some of the more significant studies across all of the above areas to shed light on the new phenomenon and illustrate the changing culture of dating.

History of Computer-Facilitated Dating

In searching the history of computer -facilitated romantic relationship formation, there are a few facts that seem at first out of place. It may seem surprising that the idea of incorporating the computer into the realm of dating goes back into the early 1980s when the PC was still very much a novelty and the technologies were basic. Yet, in the context of finding love and turning profit, it is not surprising that several companies sought this new technology for the competitive edge in the market of love. It may also seem odd that first use of computers for match-making relationships is not far from its current use by industry leaders like eHarmony. Yet, in relation to some basic principles of attraction, it is obvious why this method persists. These first “computer dating agencies” would forward questionnaires to interested parties willing to pay the \$15-\$30 matchmaking fee with instructions on how to complete. The questionnaires were mailed back to the agency and entered into a database to match people on similar attributes.

Clients would be given some potential matches and could then receive and send messages, as well as request a search be done to select for desired attributes (Jedlicka, 1981).

The earliest use of computers to aid in dating provides an example of cultural turmoil surrounding a new technology as it raises question to traditions and customs. As the 1980's progressed, the lay public and even some social scientists saw the increase in singles and singles' services like computer match-making as symbolic of the loneliness and alienation of society in general. To the contrary, others find support that the development of these "singles' services" could be viewed more accurately as a healthy and innovative response to rapid social change. They add that "use of diverse and unique means to find persons with whom to relate, date, and possibly mate, may indicate a more purposive and rational approach as opposed to the 'game playing' of romantic love" (Bolig, Stein, & Mckenry, 1984). This begins to illustrate the underpinnings of the larger argument that is framed around the perceived legitimacy of forming a romantic relationship through these online mediums.

Internet Dating Demographics

In order to better describe the phenomenon of internet dating there have been studies and surveys interested in the demographic nature of who is involved. Many of these examine specific cohorts, subcultures, or universities and as such are limited in generalization but provide important insight to the adaptive culture. Although there is increasing interest, limited survey research has been conducted on a national level; but the work that has been done offers a confident generalization. These next two studies, taken complimentarily, show the extent to which the technological advancements of the internet impacts the way in which society comes to encounter intimate relationships. More specifically, they illustrate how being privy to these

technologies and being comfortable interacting within their settings can create a niche in which online sexuality is commonly explored at much higher rates than the general public.

A survey conducted in 2000 recruited 4,507 male and female participants through chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards, and list serves. Of the sample, 1,234 respondents were aged 18-24 and 40% of which reported having intercourse with a partner that they met online (Hollander, 2002). Although these data are not representative of the general population, it illustrates an important consideration. This may not be the norm of society at large but, within certain circles/sub-cultures, this behavior through online means of communication is relatively common. Similar to Waller's study of the changing mores within the specific cohort of college students, this modern study shows the adaptation of culture taking place. Taken in light of national surveys, this is a powerful statistic because it is quite anomalous to the trends of the average United States citizen.

A national survey of online dating conducted by Pew Research Center in the last quarter of 2005 used phone interviews with 2,315 adult subjects. This offers several key statistics that help define online dating in the United States; the first puts the previous study in perspective. They found that 11% of all American internet-using adults—about 16 million people—say they have gone to an online dating website or other site where they can meet people online. They categorize this cohort as “online daters” and go on to say that 43% of all online daters have gone on dates with people they met through the sites and 17% of them have entered long-term relationships or married their online dating partners (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). At first glance, 40% of 18-24 year olds reporting intercourse with someone they met online seems like a high number, especially when compared to a national survey that finds only 11% of people who use the internet have even visited a site where they can meet someone. Yet, with respect to the fact

that 43% of online daters have gone on dates, this 40% does not seem so extraordinary. Additionally, the Hollander study only sampled those 18-24 and the Pew study was inclusive of all ages. These differences between the general population and those who actively participate in online networks imply larger differences in how society views the legitimacy of seeking relationships online. Within certain age groups or cohorts it is common to extend online interaction into in-person dates and even intercourse but as a whole, the national acceptance and practice of this is very small in comparison. This shows how people adjust and adapt their social interaction according to the structures that provide the interaction.

Also included in the survey is an item to determine how people in long-term or married relationships met their significant other. Since my interest is the social approval of various ways people meet this question is particularly relevant. In their sample of internet users 38% met at work or school, 34% met through family or friends, 13% met at a nightclub, bar, café, or other social gathering, 3% met through the internet, 2% met at church. Four remaining categories consisted of one percent and the rest were less than one percent. One could assume that the social approval of the manner in which people meet will be positively correlated with the percentage of people in successful relationships from each method of meeting. With 72% meeting at either work or school or through a friend or family member, it could be proposed that either of these two scenarios would be seen as the highest social approval of manners in which couples meet. This argument would probably not hold true with respect to the “meeting at church” category since this would likely be seen as a very appropriate means to meet a compatible other, yet only 2% reported it. In relation to where most people spend the most time, this statistic is not surprising.

Stigma and Deception

Two significant findings of the Pew survey include insight on the use of deception amongst internet daters and the stigma associated with internet dating. One item found that 57% of internet users agree with the statement: a lot of people who use online dating lie about their marital status. It shows the skepticism that people hold toward investing in online dating when more than half of internet users think that people who use these sites to establish relationships are lying about already being in one. In conjunction with this, 66% agree that “online dating is dangerous because it puts personal information on the internet” (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). When examining stigma of online daters it was found that the majority (61%) of online adults do not think that people who use internet dating are “desperate” while 29% do. This shows that there is some negative stigma attached to internet dating. If this were measured again today it would presumably be less stigmatized, reflecting cultural acceptance as online dating practices become more common. Some other researchers have already attempted to show this trend toward more cultural acceptance.

In an effort to show that stigma of internet dating has changed some researchers have coded and analyzed open-ended descriptions of how some students view this activity. One participant stated, “I thought only losers met people over the internet, people who were social outcasts to begin with. But my friends were doing it so I started to also.” Another offered, “It’s not such a big deal anymore when a friend tells me about someone they met online.” (Katz & Rice, 2002). In both instances the shift in acceptable culture and general consensus can be detected. Both students describe how a previously stigmatized characterization of internet dating is shifting to normative acceptance.

One last study examining stigma used an online survey of 367 Dutch singles to test opposing hypothesis that explain which type of person (high dating anxiety vs. low dating anxiety) is more likely to use dating sites. They reason that the “social compensation hypothesis” would favor the high anxiety people since the internet offers many features that compensate for their shortcomings offline. This hypothesis is grounded in the stereotype that internet dating is for those who aren’t successful on their own. The “rich get richer hypothesis” would predict low anxiety people to be more successful since they are already confident that internet dating will be just another strategy to find a partner. The findings support the rich get richer hypothesis and coincidentally refute the negative stigma of the social compensation hypothesis (Valkeburg & Peter, 2007).

In addition to stigma, deception is a recurring theme that carries through much of the research on internet dating. One common concern is whether people lie on their profiles online and without a verified picture, it is almost impossible to tell if someone really is who they say they are online. A few researchers trying to measure deceit conducted height and weight surveys in a university lab setting and then checked the numbers against subjects’ online profiles. The data collected suggest that, on average, online profiles trim off about five pounds and add perhaps an inch in height (Epstein, 2007). Although very simplistic in design, this study shows one simple way that people lie in profiles and that without in-person verification these embellishments are more easily passed off. Another study has found that some people openly admit to stretching the truth and do so in hopes of manipulating potential searches to their favor. One woman claims, “she had to create a new profile so that her age was under 40, as she felt that was a ‘magic cut-off’ for men: ‘I’m actually 42, but just shaved 3 years off to bypass the soulless

rigidity of a search engine...” (Kambara, 2005). This research shows that there is reason for caution when blindly believing others are who they say they are online.

Identity

Where some studies see discrepancies between one’s profile and their actual self as simply lying, others theorize that this is a case of “identity testing” as a way of posting potential attributes about themselves they may hope for or be curious about. An ethnographic interview technique was used to examine the process undergone in creating internet dating profiles with 6 female and 5 male informants. It was found that “posting anonymous profiles allowed informants to explore safely aspects of their personalities that they may or may not have wanted to explore through overt behavior in the offline world” (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005). All the participants reported that the process of creating a profile forced them to examine their identities as they currently were and how they might like them to be.

This idea of testing multiple identities has been found in other research as well. In an assessment of whether internet matchmaking is more successful than traditional dating an examination of the current research is undertaken. While highlighting some of the perceived advantages of online dating they state, “It is possible to be a conservative soccer/hockey Mom on Match.com, a pink-haired rock star on eHarmony.com, and a sex-goddess on yahoo Personals all at the same time.” (King, Austin-Oden, & Lohr, 2009). The researchers conclude that there is no significant evidence that proves matchmaking sites any more or less effective than traditional means. While some companies make big claims, provide testimonials, and state that their methods are scientific, there has yet to be conclusive support, and the cautious consumer should not take these claims as any more than marketing propaganda.

Choice

While some question scientific claims to matchmaking, others suggest that there may be a paradoxical nature to the process of searching through profiles to find the best match. An experiment divided 128 Taiwanese into three groups to view a set of potential dates. Using a 16 character scale each subject gave their ideal type. The groups were generated based on the ideal types by randomly assigning the top 30, 60, or 90 potential partners to each participant. Each was then asked to examine the potentials until they select a partner that is the best match. The number and length of time spent viewing potential dates was measured. It was found that the more options given the more potential partners each participant reviewed. Also, when comparing to the ideal type, the more options given the greater the difference between the partner selected and the ideal type as well as the greater the difference between the alternatives examined and the ideal type (Wu & Chiou, 2009). It was found that having more options correlated with selecting worse choices in potential partners.

Attitudes and Perceptions

The last two studies reviewed focus on attitudes toward internet dating and forming online relationships. They employ a comparison survey between undergraduate and Ph.D. students, a control group/test group experiment to check for an exposure effect, and another survey to measure outsider opinions of internet dating. Although both studies are closely related to my specific interest in legitimacy they prove to be limited in scope and minimal in significant findings. As such, they provide good examples and offer a few scales for measures when constructing my own study.

In a two-part study university student attitudes and practices about using the internet to form intimate relationships are examined. First, a survey is conducted with 235 undergraduates and 76 Ph.D. students to measure their attitudes toward forming relationships online. All the data from the study are presented as a comparison between the undergraduates and the graduates. In all cases the graduate students reported more experience with online relationships as well as better perceptions of these relationships (Donn & Sherman, 2002). In this study, the data being compared between the two groups does not offer the richest detail or most valuable description of the population being studied. As well, many of the differences that naturally exist between the groups (e.g., age and experience in relationships) may have a significant effect in influencing the outcome of differences in beliefs. A few of the items included were loaded questions and may have yielded different results if they were worded differently. “People who try to find relationships on the Internet must be desperate” is one measure that shows this potential bias (Donn & Sherman, 2002).

The second part of the study was an experiment that exposed one group of 40 undergrads to two examples of dating service web sites and then surveyed them. For a control group, another 51 undergrads were simply given the survey. The purpose was to determine if exposure and hence familiarity with matchmaking sites contributes to a more favorable view of online dating. Very few significant findings resulted from the experiment. It was found that the overall impression of the sites was significantly more positive in the experimental group than the control group. The surveys given to both groups also included measures on issues of lying and being able to form a relationship without seeing the other’s face and perceptions of speed and efficiency when seeking relationships online. (Donn & Sherman, 2002). Neither of these showed significant effect between the two groups.

In a separate study, perceptions of online romantic relationships are measured in relation to internet attitudes, internet use, and romantic beliefs. A survey was administered to 177 people who had never been involved in an online romantic relationship to assess their perceptions of such as related to: “(a) amount of Internet use, (b) Internet affinity, (c) perceived realism of the Internet, and (d) romantic beliefs” (Anderson, 2005, p. 521). She predicted that use, affinity, and perceived realism are positively correlated to perceptions of online romantic relationships. She found that both internet use and affinity are positively correlated to perceptions but perceived realism showed no correlation. In a final research question she inquires if people’s general perceptions of online relationships are affected by their romantic beliefs but the research does not support any correlation.

Traci Anderson’s research does not produce any astounding findings but it does illustrate an important positive correlation between an affinity for the internet and one’s perception of romantic relationships formed online. She hypothesized this on the basis of cognitive dissonance, citing that it has similarly been seen that people who have negative feelings towards computers attribute negative impressions to partners engaged in computer mediated communication (CMC). For her measure of internet affinity Anderson used an “adapted version of the five-item, Likert-type Television Affinity Scale” by simply replacing the word “television” with the word “internet” (Anderson, 2005, p. 525). The application of this scale was particularly beneficial in support of the reliability and validity of the measure since it had shown rigor in its original form, previous “internet” adaptations, and again in this study. This will hopefully provide a reliable and valid measure of internet affinity in my research.

These studies only begin to lay the foundation for future research about online dating. It is clear that the topic can be approached through many lenses and that there is no shortage of

research areas to be explored. It is also apparent that dealing with such a young phenomenon the existing work is scattered and spread thin which is all the more reason that further study is warranted. The next section provides theory to frame the conditions explaining how the use of the internet for dating is a transitional adaptation.

Theoretical Background

Theories of technology, social interaction, and self-identity provide a framework for assessing attitudes about internet dating. The following highlights three complimentary theories relevant to this research with examples specific to internet dating. A theory linking cultural change to material changes is seen in a study of college dating habits. Next, the progression of American courtship exemplifies how we share common interpretations of social interaction. Last, theories of the modern self are examined and then expanded upon in light of computer mediated communication (CMC) and social networking sites (SNS).

Cultural Lag

It does not require training or even a keen sense of observation to recognize the fast pace with which technology is advancing. The effects of computer technology are astonishing: the expansion of online social networks, the sharing of information including pictures and video, the use of virtual space, instant communication across great distance and between previously unthinkable numbers of people, and the ability to do all of this from a cell phone, anytime and anyplace. Communication is forever changing and with it, the way people form relationships.

“That this is an age of change is an expression frequently heard to-day. Never before in the history of mankind have so many and so frequent changes occurred. These changes, it should be observed, are in the cultural conditions.” (Ogburn, 1922, p. 199)

Although written 90 years ago, the description of American society is just as applicable today. This opening to the chapter “Social Maladjustments” is the setting for William Ogburn’s introduction of his Theory of Cultural Lag. Living in a time when technological and social

changes are abundant he hypothesizes a relationship of their correlation. He states that society consists of “material conditions” and an “adaptive culture” which function like variables-independent and dependent. Whenever there is a discovery or invention that changes the material conditions in one part of culture there is a response and adjustment in any dependent parts of the culture. Usually, this occurs with a lag in response “during which time there may be said to be a maladjustment” (Ogburn, 1922, p. 201). He continues with examples of the relationship between these two:

“A large part of our environment consists of the material conditions of life and a large part of our social heritage is our material culture. These material things consist of houses, factories, machines, raw materials, manufactured products, foodstuffs and other material objects. In using these material things we employ certain methods. Some of these methods are as simple as the technique of handling a tool. But a good many of the ways of using the material objects of culture involve rather larger usages and adjustments, such as customs, beliefs, philosophies, laws, governments.” (Ogburn, 1922, p. 202)

An example of the relationship between forestry and the conservation movement helps illustrate. The forest is a material object that society positions itself around. In the early 1800s with minimal population and need for cleared farmland a policy of exploitation was embraced towards forestry. With time, increased population and observation it was realized that the condition of the material object (forest) would not be sustained under the currently practiced policy. Although this material change became commonly known and conversed there was still considerable time before the policy of exploitation was dropped and replaced by a policy of conservation (Ogburn, 1922).

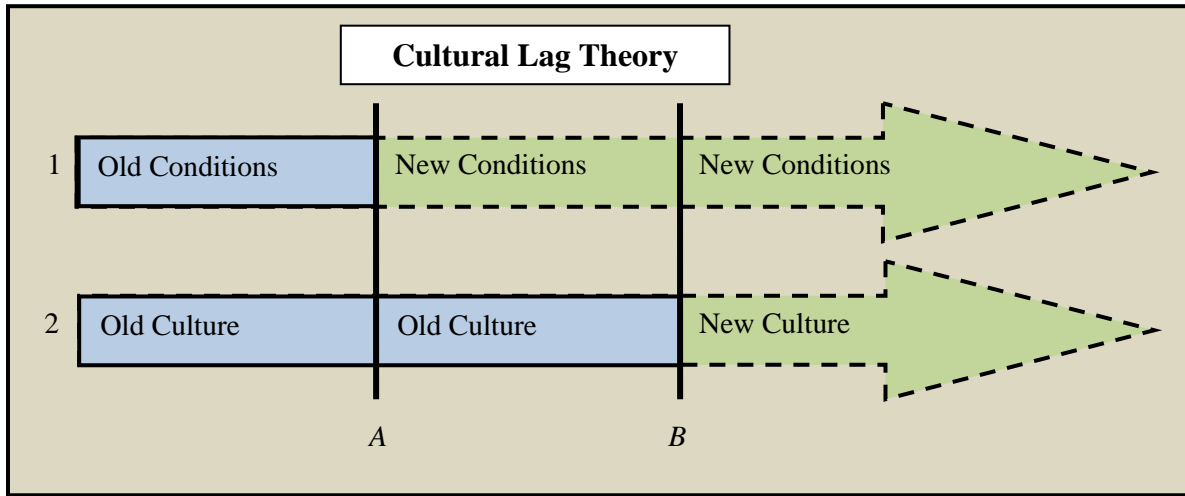


Figure 1 Illustration of adjustment between material conditions and cultural adaptation

In the diagram, line 1 is representative of the condition of the forest (material object) and line 2 represents the policy of using the forest (adaptive culture). Solid lines signify the old conditions of plentiful forest and policy of exploitation and the dotted lines are the new conditions of diminished forest and a policy of conservation. The period between *a* and *b* is where the changed conditions of the forest have been realized but the policy of exploitation remained in place creating a period of maladjustment (Ogburn, 1922). This is the Cultural Lag. It is the time between realization of a material change and society's adjustment. This example illustrates the lag between the occurrence of a material change and the adaptation of policy, custom or practice that results from the cultural correlation. This theory underpins the current attitudes held toward the effects of new technology on communication and by proxy, relationship formation.

This explanation of a link between conditional changes and cultural adaptations begins to explain the relationship between internet dating and the current attitudes held. A current example can easily be made by replacing the material object of the forest with internet technology and replacing the adaptive culture of conservationism with the culture of dating. As we see access to

these technologies increase, then we begin to see shifts in culture to adapt. It is clear that the recent past has provided the context for cultural lag with accelerated advances in technology coupled with a proportionate increase in access to it.

Table 1 Percent of households with computer and internet for years collected by US Census

	Households	Computer at home	Internet use at home
Year	Total	(Percent)	(Percent)
..2009	119,296	(x) ¹	68.7
..2007	117,840	(x)	61.7
..2003	113,126	61.8	54.7
..2001	109,106	56.3	50.4
..2000	105,247	51.0	41.5
..1997	102,158	36.6	18.0
..1993	98,736	22.9	(x) ²
..1989	94,061	15.0	(x)
..1984	87,073	8.2	(x)

This chart shows the drastic increases in households reporting a computer and internet connection as calculated by the Current Population Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). It is this broadening proliferation of computers and internet access (the material object) that is central to change in culture. Once a majority of the group has realized (uses and accepts) the change in the material condition a period of maladjustment will ensue until culture adapts. Now is the period of maladjustment.

News topics abound with what is appropriate internet regulation, how to deal with online pornography, what role can social media play in business, relationships, advertising, etc. and the list goes on. These issues themselves show how our culture is now in a lag behind internet

technologies and trying to adjust to the implications of the material change through policy (internet regulation), law (pornography), and custom (social media).

It is the adaptation of customs that lends the most significance to internet dating and this research. An example of internet technology's power to adapt change in this way is clear. Facebook has more than 500 million active users (those logging on in past 30 days) 50% of whom log on in any given day (Facebook.com, 2011). This is an amazing fact but doesn't describe the national condition. Facebook also states that about 70% of users are outside the United States. To define this nationally, there are 150 million active facebook accounts- almost half of the 2010 population count of 308,745,538 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This means that in the brief existence of these technologies the custom of almost half of the nation has adapted to checking their social network once a month (and half of these participate on a given day).

Cultural Lag Theory provides a fitting foundation to build a better understanding of the current state of internet dating. In a broad sense, it illustrates a common path by which changes in one part of society result in a response by a related area of society which facilitates an adaptation of culture. Specifically, it is dictated by a period of maladjustment created by a lag in the cultural response to the material change. A couple of prominent researchers focusing on American dating practices parallel Ogburn in their explanation of how dating culture has adapted as a result of significant societal changes.

American Courtship

The way in which Americans seek intimate relationships today compared to a century, fifty or even ten years ago is a much different process. What was once courtship- a fairly prescribed process for a man to seek the marriage of a woman, today has become dating- a term

with much more loosely defined by parameters engaged in for a multitude of purposes. For clarification in this discussion, *courtship* is used to define both the antiquated, formal practice of wooing for marriage and the general terminology describing the progression of how people seek intimate relationships. *Dating* refers specifically to the phenomenon of the past 90 years, where marriage may be the end goal but is not always the express purpose of the interaction.

The formal study of courtship in America is by no means a new interest, but the factors involved today are a substantially more expansive set. Not that anyone could have predicted the progression of technology and its impact on the culture of dating but, early scholars did acknowledge how the function of courtship is varied between cultures and time:

“Although there are endless variations in courtship customs, they are always functionally related to the total configuration of the culture and the biological needs of the human animal.” (Waller, 1937, p. 727).

Biological needs are considered innate and little argument is needed to say that this is not the source of variation. It is this “function related to culture” that negotiates the current practice of dating in the United States. In this framework, the changing attitudes, customs and behaviors of today’s dating culture are better understood.

Willard Waller (1937) referred to the “mores of courtship” as a “formal code” of a culture providing the “function” of a path to marriage through progressive commitments. In this work, as he describes the courtship customs of college students, he sees this unique community departing from the formal traditions. Fueled by a necessity to prolong marriage to post-college for the need of financial stability this unique cohort is set apart from the restrictions of others. It

is this material change in the condition that provides the climate for an extended period of courtship practices without the express purpose of marriage.

More recent research on twentieth century courtship describes a system of “convention” that provides a social structure for experience and is defined by “public codes of behavior and systems of meaning that are both culturally constructed and historically specific” (Bailey, 1988, p. 6). Whether it is called mores or convention, both authors are alike in their positioning of a cultural-centric function of courtship; although the formal code that Waller described as beginning to deteriorate is all but completely dissolved by the time Bailey writes.

Beth Bailey (1988, p. 7) explains that this “convention” which governs courtship has resulted from “national systems of communication, transportation, and economy; the extension of education; and the forces of urbanization and industrialization.” She continues to suggest that “cultural media” was the most important of these influences reaching large majorities of households through magazines, radio, movies and television. She quotes that “80.8% of all American households read popular magazines in 1959” and it was these commonalities that structured the national convention (Bailey, 1988, p. 7). Similar trends can be seen today.

Just as the personal vehicle, cultural media, and a push for further education have influenced the customs of dating, so too has the advent of the personal computer (pc) and its child, the internet. Mirroring Ogburn, the material change of popular magazine circulation (amongst other cultural media) being realized by a majority of the national population (80.8%) led to the change of cultural customs of dating. The most current data on internet access show that more than 77% of the population has availability (Internet World Stats, 2011). This expansion happened quickly (more than 70% increase over 11 years) and some cultural

adaptations of this internet proliferation can already be seen. Yet, since this condition is just reaching significant national availability it should be expected that laws, policies, and customs will continue to adapt until cultural attitudes settle to match, ending the period of maladjustment.

Bailey explains how the national definition of courtship has continued to change with society. This echoes Waller's belief that the function of courtship is related to the configuration of society. The start of twentieth century saw a shift in which going out un-chaperoned was no longer a threat to a girl's reputation. National advice columns opined that this was only appropriate at approved restaurants and after the guy has called the girl at home (Bailey, 1988). Dating had become a nationally recognized phenomenon, but the majority still viewed the system of calling as the respectable way. By the 1930s dating was fully embraced by middle-class. In this definition, dates were commodities and the point was to make them visible so others would acknowledge popularity, which would increase desirability to be dated. The 1940s and 50s emphasized the monetary element of dating. Now, a date occurred when a couple went out and spent money- a "real date" only occurring if the guy paid (Bailey, 1988, p. 59). Due to many changes in society and accelerated by the automobile, the cultural definition of courtship has changed meaning several times. This pattern of defining and redefining what it means for a couple to engage in courtship is an example of how national culture uses scripts to frame social interaction.

Script Theory

A *script* is a "coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as a participant or as an observer (Abelson, 1976). These sequences are learned and culturally reinforced over the lifetime of an individual. People rely on symbols and definitions to understand their role in different situations. Interactions that are very common or routine become

a finite sequence of events that predicates behavior. People build expected behaviors of a situation before or as they enter. Common scripts exist for most human interaction and can be seen in small things such as riding an elevator or large ceremonies like weddings. While script theory in general is acknowledged as both a psychological and sociological phenomenon; sexual script theory is grounded most specifically to sociological study (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001).

Sexual Script Theory (SST) began as a way to “define the who, what, where, when, and why of sexual conduct- guiding our sexualities at personal, interactional, and cultural-historical levels” (Gagnon & Simon, 2005, p. xiv). SST explains how the expression of sexuality is socially constructed and sexual behaviors are culturally reinforced. This is evident in gender roles, marriage, and dating practices to name a handful. Repeated studies of college undergraduates show that common dating scripts do exist and those with more dating experience are more familiar with the script (Pryor & Merluzzi, 1985; Rose & Frieze, 1993). Through examination of popular magazine dating tips, editorials and other media Bailey shows several examples of these scripts and how the traditional way to date changes with the norm of culture. Once, calling on a girl at home was the only respectable way to date. This shifted to dates moving outside the home and into the public sphere. Moving into the public arena, dates became tokens of popularity. With a little more time, a “good” date wasn’t defined by popularity but instead by how much money it was worth (Bailey, 1988). These four different definitions of a date each correspond to a unique script.

Technology and the Self

In addition to the forces of technological change and the adaptation of dating scripts, theories explaining self-identity also contribute to an explanation of attitudes about internet

dating. Two modern theories are prominent when examining the effects of globalization and technology on the construction (or deconstruction) of the self. They both agree that modern society is characterized by increasing numbers of interactions and consequently varied perspectives. This can easily be seen in the number and variety of viewpoints that one faces every day- through news and media or through the institutions with which we identify. Both theories propose that this is causing the self to become clouded and saturated but they differ on the effects of the true, core self.

Kenneth Gergen believes that individuals have lost the ability to maintain a core self because of globalization and increased exposure to conflicting perspectives. This influx of viewpoints causes a “saturation” of the self. He explains this condition through *multiphrenia*- “the fragmenting and populating of self-experience” (Gergen, *The saturated self: dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*, 1991, p. 16). This occurs through three stages. First, as others are incorporated into the self so too are their desires causing an unattainable goal of wants and needs. This places guilt into the saturated self by constantly evaluating the values one embraces with contradictions. Finally, this diminishes the ability to make rational decisions in light of opposing perspectives. Overall, multiphrenia can cause a confusion of desires, values, and decisions within the individual.

Writing a few years later, Gergen gives a personal example of how the self is affected in daily interactions. He describes how the computer has replaced the pen and the internet is taking relationships electronic. Through email and the web he is able to encounter as many differing perspectives as time will permit. “My computer screen moves like a magic carpet around the globe, into people’s offices, their private spaces, their very private fantasies.” (Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 1999). It is this constant access to multiple perspectives that

fosters multiphrenia. The ability to interact quickly and with numbers of others regardless of distance illustrates how the rapid movement of politics, economics, people and their lifestyles causes individuals to lose sense of what is worth valuing- who their true self is.

Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein agree that the self is being divided and influenced by an increasing number of perspectives. They part from Gergen in their belief that this does not cause a loss of true self but rather provides a myriad of perspectives from which a core self can emerge (Gubrium & Holstein, *Institutional selves: troubled identities in a postmodern world*, 2001). Instead of a breakdown of the self, focused on contrasting perspectives, they see the self as composed of institutional beliefs. The self becomes defined by the belief systems of the various institutions that we regularly interact in. Each of the organizations, associations and networks to which we belong provide “distinct patterning for our thoughts, words, sentiments, and actions” (Gubrium & Holstein, *Postmodern Interviewing*, 2003, p. 43). A black, republican who plays poker at a regular Thursday night meet would have three distinct, and somewhat conflicting, identities of the self amongst these associations. Rather than this causing a loss of self, the core self is maintained by negotiating and drawing from the different institutional beliefs.

Gergen raises the clear dilemma of whether we can decipher a true self from the ever increasing and contrasting perspectives we encounter. More importantly, if we cannot then how do we trust anyone else to. Gubrium and Holstein maintain that we have a core self but that it exists as pieces that are attached to the beliefs of the various institutions and associations that we maintain. The self that is salient in one institution is not the same self in another. The true self then is comprised of the beliefs that we hold strongest from all of our associations but never truly evident since the self we portray is always in relation to the immediate scheme of things.

Regardless of the effect on the true self, both theorists describe the modern condition of a multitude of morals and perspectives contributing to our identity. Taken in light of internet dating, followers of Gergen would question if we can trust anyone to represent themselves truthfully because “under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated” (Gergen, *The saturated self: dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*, 1991, p. 7). Followers of Gubrium and Holstein would question the profiles of internet daters as representing their true and total self. Instead, they would expect a representation related to the specific association as an online dater.

Mediated communication

Expanding on this dilemma of ever increasing perspectives and associations, Sherry Turkle examines the current question of how we are changed as technology continues to offer more substitutes for face-to-face (f2f) interaction (Turkle, 2011). She explains the cycle in which technology offers a way to communicate when traditional face-to-face interaction isn't possible (a text when you don't have time to talk) but very quickly, the exception becomes the rule. This trend has been overtly seen with teenagers- sending thousands of texts each month, cursing the unnecessary time it takes to check antiquated voicemails, and avoidant of phone calls for fear of revealing too much. “We discovered the network--the world of connectivity-- to be uniquely suited to the overworked and overscheduled life it makes possible.” (Turkle, 2011). This cycle of technology providing more free time that we simply use to cram in more connections is a conundrum reiterated throughout. Constant connection through our devices has caused the emergence of a new self, one split between the virtual and the personal, called to existence through technology.

She continues to question the effect of communicating through these new technologies and highlights a few paradoxes that emerge. The idea of “alone together” refers to the observation that when people in groups are given some downtime (a break at a conference, a taxi ride) they commonly turn to their mobile devices rather than talking to the physical others around them. This reflects the notion that we are more connected yet more alone- “what people mostly want from public space is to be alone with their personal networks” (Turkle, 2011, p. 14). Most of the advances in communication were conceived to increase efficiency at work but now the same technologies are being used to make us more efficient in our private life. More and more, people are using mass communication (email, facebook, etc.) to spread news of engagements and pregnancies but does efficiency equal the cost of intimacy? We turn to technology to help us make more time but it ends up providing ways to make us busier.

As more and more of our lives become infused into the virtual, the paradoxes above question the costs to benefits. and there may be pushback and mixed feelings about using this technology for forming intimate relationships. Specifically with intimate matters like beginning a relationship it is questioned whether expedited, mediated communication is “well suited for opening a dialogue about complexity of feeling” (Turkle, 2011). Although efficiency can be increased, connections can be maintained continuously, and “free” time can be created- these are all achieved at the expense of more intimate and substantive communication. Those recognizing these qualitative differences may be unwilling to compromise efficiency for quality when it comes to such interactions as dating.

The above theories and research fit together like building-blocks to construct a more thorough interpretation of cultural attitudes about internet dating. Separately they each lend insight but together they offer a more robust interpretation. Cultural lag describes a basic

relationship between conditional advancements and cultural adaptation. Waller adds support by showing how this occurred with the dating habits of college students. Bailey builds upon the foundation by examining the multiple factors that have guided the progression of courtship; she shows how cultural adaptation isn't necessarily a simple linear function but more of a dynamic process in which many factors can influence dating customs. Script theory supports Bailey's account of the transformation of acceptable dating practices by explaining that common interactions (going on a date) become interpreted and understood in relation to the cultural normative scenario. These scripts are guided by the majority's behavior and belief and are constantly changing in reflection to the culturally popular. This shows how the process isn't just dynamic but also reflexive as well. Theories of the self and technology suggest that the condition of society and its members may be fundamentally different because of globalization and increased interaction. In this view, society and culture may be entering a new era rather than simply undergoing an adaptation or transformation. Turkle solidifies this with an examination of how we develop technology and how it develops us.

Early Concepts of Relationship Formation and Attraction

Early knowledge about interpersonal attraction offers a foundation for the field of research and plays a large part in understanding the effects of the internet on the culture of dating. The following concepts provide basic insight into who will form relationships, the significant role of exposure, a tendency towards similarity, and the importance of physical attraction. In this research they serve three functions. They illustrate the impact of internet technology in comparison to the parameters under which these rules were originally formulated. They show several benefits of internet dating, as it uses these principles advantageously to facilitate relationships. They provide explanation throughout, from aiding in hypothesis

formation to helping frame the analysis and results. Simply put, they show how internet dating challenges the traditional rules of interpersonal interaction.

Propinquity effect

One of the most simplistic yet best predictors of who will form relationships is developed out of work conducted in the 1950s. Research showed that more than any other factor, propinquity, the physical proximity between two people, played the most significant role in determining who formed friendships with whom in a neighborhood experiment (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). It was observed that people formed relationships with their neighbors most commonly and then decreasingly less as the distance between subject's residences increased. Those who lived near stairways or high traffic areas were more likely to befriend someone of a greater distance, i.e. another floor or building. Known as the Propinquity Effect, it states that as a result of mere exposure there is a tendency for friendships and romantic relationships to occur between those who are physically closest to each other.

Mere and repeated exposure

Others have complimented the Propinquity Effect by showing that simple exposure to stimuli (people or other objects) produces a tendency for positive reaction and increased attraction (Zajonc, 1968; Harmon-Jones & Allen, 2001). It is human nature to be weary of and uncomfortable with the unknown, as things are recognized the uncertainty of expectation is removed and hence a more positive association becomes possible. This effect can be seen with anything from shapes to music, people and practices. When familiarity to a stimulus is present, the affect of a person becomes more positive; in a multiple-experiment research, it was shown that the nonsensical words, Chinese characters, and photos of faces all had this effect (Zajonc,

1968). Proximity speaks to who will most likely meet; exposure effect helps to explain why they may end up forming relationships.

Law of attraction

In addition to proximity and exposure, many studies have been done to better understand interpersonal attraction. Another seemingly obvious correlation can be found in the Law of Attraction which states that interpersonal attraction is positively related to the proportion of similar attitudes held in common (Byrne, The Attraction Paradigm, 1971). In an early study, he had students fill out an attitude and opinion scale on 26 issues ranging in topic from integration and God to western movies and classical music. Then later, using the same subjects, he distributed a fictitious set of completed surveys done by “strangers” and this time had them rank likeability, intelligence, knowledge, morality and adjustment based on the made-up questionnaires (Byrne, Interpersonal Attraction and Attitude Similarity, 1961) The fictitious questionnaires were manipulated so that some of the students received similar attitudes and others dissimilar attitudes. When comparing the ratings to the questionnaire he found that people had the most positive feelings about those who shared similar attitudes and beliefs (Byrne, Interpersonal Attraction and Attitude Similarity, 1961). This same basic principle can be seen at work in many popular dating sites today. In a very similar fashion dating sites like eHarmony boasts that their scientific matchmaking process pairs people on a number of compatible traits””

Matching hypothesis

In the final theory of relationships discussed here, it has been shown that physical attraction plays the most significant role in determining the extent to which a subject reported liking their date (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottmann, 1966; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster,

1972). Although some studies have shown that other characteristics like age play a more significant role (which was controlled for in the above experiments) physical attractiveness is consistently one of the strongest predictors (Buss, 1985). A study matched 752 freshmen for a date to a dance (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottmann, 1966). Each participant was measured for personality and intelligence as well as third-party attractiveness. The couples were randomly matched to ensure a mix of ugly, average, and attractive participants in the coupled pairs. The male subjects were surveyed again at the dance intermission to record their impression of their date and then followed up with later to see if the relationship continued. Regardless of their own physical attraction, the males all reported stronger liking, desire, and attempts to pursue females that were correlated with higher levels of rated attractiveness. The other measures of personality and intelligence were not significant in predicting couple compatibility. In the follow ups a correlation showed that those who were matched with similar ratings of attraction were the most likely to continue dating after the experiment. They define this as the Matching Hypothesis stating that romantic partners tend to have similar levels of physical attractiveness.

The above concepts form a basis from which much of the research on dating has grown. Taken together, propinquity effect, exposure effect, the law of attraction, and the matching hypothesis all contribute to a crude understanding of interpersonal attraction. In accordance with these rules, one is most likely to become involved (for friendship or intimate relationship) with someone they come in close and frequent contact with, someone who shares personal characteristics, and someone who is similar in attraction. Others have manipulated variables and replicated procedures to further test these findings and although anomalies have been found and other rules annotated, these basic tenants remain strong in their intended applications.

These three basic rules about dating and forming friendships are important studies alone and in their own time, but when considered in the context of online networks they assume new definitions. Propinquity Effect takes on new meaning in the realm of virtual space where people on opposite sides of the world can exist and socially interact in the same chat room together. In-person contact is still very much limited by propinquity and although people do befriend each other and even start intimate relationships online, one would believe that these relationships are qualitatively different to the extent that physical distance plays a role; this is a hypothesis for another study. It is noted that the ability to seek dates online allows people who would not otherwise meet to establish that first interaction. Someone who lives in New Orleans can meet someone who lives across the lake 30 miles away. Fifteen years ago this most likely would have been a very impractical relationship due to propinquity. The drive itself is not the biggest obstacle; many make the commute daily for work. Fifteen years ago the average person's access to communication tools like high-speed internet, social networking sites, chat rooms, instant messaging, video conferencing, and even text messages were a fraction of what they have become today. With these becoming commonplace people are able to play more active roles in each other's lives despite the physical distance. Therefore, despite propinquity, the internet allows people to meet who would otherwise not have; and, it allows for more active communication than ever before supporting these relationships. In essence, the internet has become the stairwell.

The effect of Byrne's Law of Attraction is clear when examining the selection of internet dating sites. There are a variety of sites that are specialized to specific character traits so that similar people can search for each other. Dating sites have emerged for almost every niche: for Catholics and for Jews; for cheaters, swingers, and sadomasochists; for those looking to date,

looking to get married, or just looking for sex- and none are lacking in members. In addition, the availability of search criteria allows people to specify characteristics they desire in a person and display only those profiles. Of course this can be used by a brown-haired guy who has a thing only for red-heads; more relevant, people can search for others based on race, religion, age, education, etc. with little effort.

In relation to the Matching Hypothesis, internet dating offers a bounty of data. If having a similar level of physical attraction is the most predictive factor in determining whether a couple will continue dating then the ability to look at pictures of potential dates before meeting a person would seemingly expedite the process of finding a partner online. Yet, there are many arguments and conflicting views about this. Some say that it gives too many potential options which hinder definitive decisions on who to date. Others believe that opinions about physical beauty change after you get to know a person. Either way, being able to search through pictures before deciding to interact with potential partners is a unique method that will most probably have significant implication in the sociology of dating.

Hypotheses

This research tests several main hypotheses. The primary was derived from cultural lag and script theory. Since the use of this new technology has proliferated only recently its contrast to traditional dating scripts is still being culturally adjusted. Mocking the automobile's effect of moving the date "from the front porch to the back seat" (Bailey, 1988), the internet today is in a similar position to challenge the culture of dating. As such, it should be seen that there is currently a period of maladjustment as the technology is diffused and traditional customs push back. To test for signs of this maladjustment, scenarios of relationships begun online are compared to other scenarios to see if they are received as less culturally apropos. H1, it is predicted that relationship begun through online interaction will be perceived as less culturally acceptable than relationships begun through other ways of meeting. Turkle clearly notes some of the negative aspects of online communication which also supports the prediction that online relationship formation will be less culturally approved. The next hypothesis tests to see if there is a stigmatizing effect on a relationship that starts through an internet dating sites as compared to a social networking site (SNS).

The next hypothesis draws on stigma and computer mediated communication (CMC) research to disentangle attitudes held toward using the internet to date vs. using an internet dating site. It can be seen in popular media that the perceptions of internet dating are a mix of negative and positive. This test is designed to see if a stigma condition is being attached to internet dating compared to another very similar way of meeting online. The format of these sites (profiles, character descriptions, photos, etc.) is quite similar and involves common ways of communicating- users send messages in an email fashion, type instantly back and forth when

both are on the site, or even “poke” each other as a way to show interest. Since both the internet dating site (match.com) and the SNS (facebook) scenarios involve the same limitations of interaction and internet technology, a more negative approval of the internet dating scenario would suggest a stigmatized affect. The same three measures of legitimacy, longevity, and social perception will test for this effect on approval rankings of relationships begun through facebook compared to Match.com. H2 predicts that a relationship begun through internet dating will rank with less cultural approval when compared to a relationship that starts through a SNS.

A third hypothesis focuses on the general use of scripts with specific interest in the control. Script theory explains that most common practices of interaction become scripted scenarios reinforced by society and used to base expectations and judgments. This research tests for variation in approval of relationships based on the manner in which a couple met using seven varied scenarios (one being the control). Each vignette starts with the same brief description of a couple and then varies by the conditions under which they met (online, face-to-face, etc.). A control was included, no description of the meet, in order to assess a baseline of approval for the couple. As scenarios vary away from the most common script they are perceived as less normative and hence less acceptable. The characteristics of the couple were chosen to be generic and void of any tarnishing qualities so that any variance in approval from the test scenarios could be attributed to the way they met and not the description of the couple. In line with script theory, the normative description of the couple should rank as the most approved. It is predicted, H3, that the control group will be ranked with the highest cultural approval.

The last two hypotheses test for exposure effects on cultural approval of relationships formed through internet dating. The affect that people hold towards almost any stimuli is shown to increase with familiarity through mere or repeated exposure. Simply put, people are more

liking of things they have already experienced. Therefore, those who have close associations to others who have internet dated or those who are more comfortable with the technology will likely rank relationships that begin on Match.com as more acceptable than others due to the exposure. Increased familiarity by mere exposure and high internet affinity should relate to increased positive sentiment toward internet dating. The fourth hypothesis considers participants' social connection to others who have experienced varying degrees of online dating interaction to see if this exposure affects perceptions of internet dating. H4 states that those close to people with higher amounts of online dating experience will have higher rankings of approval for the internet dating scenario. The fifth and final hypothesis uses a measure of internet affinity to see if having an increased attachment to or greater competency with the underlying technology has an effect on approval of internet dating. H5, I predict that the higher the affinity towards the internet, the more positive the ranking of approval for relationships that begin through internet dating.

Methodological Procedures

Background

As more and more people rely on the internet for everyday services, it seems only natural that the quest for love would turn there too. With some clear advantages to overcome common barriers to finding love like distance, limited selection, and free time, it's a wonder why internet dating receives so much negative sentiment. I believe that now is a transitional period of cultural acceptance for a new era of courtship- internet dating. The diffusion of the internet to facilitate dating is occurring in fashion similar to when the personal automobile allowed for a characteristically different style of dating- freeing constraints of distance, time and physically moving the date out of the parlor (Bailey, 1988). Combined with the existence of dating scripts and the effects of technology on the self this supports a fuller understanding of attitudes about internet dating.

Between TV commercials boasting that "1 in 5 relationships now begin on an online dating site" (Match.com, 2011), and the pop culture of movies such as "Must Love Dogs" that depict online daters as outcasts and the act of online dating as embarrassing, it can be seen that not only is significant attention drawn to internet dating but that there also is a varied acceptance of it. Intrigued by this phenomenon, I have identified elements of internet dating that are inherently different from "traditional" dating in order to test the cultural acceptance attributed to various conditions under which a hypothetical couple meets. Not long ago, the technologies that make much of today's communication possible limited meeting someone to a face-to-face arrangement or through a slow process of mail. Another very common way couples meet is through an introduction by a mutual acquaintance (Madden & Lenhart, 2006); this 3rd party

vouch is removed from internet dating. Manipulating the variables of face-to-face meeting and a 3rd party vouch I test how these differences alone (removed from the context of the internet) affect perceived legitimacy. By comparing a meet that occurs on a social networking site (facebook) to one that occurs on an internet dating site (match.com) I test whether there is a stigma associated with internet dating since both occur online and still lack the traditional face-to-face and 3rd party vouch.

Definitions

Clarification should be made as to the definition of *date*; for the purpose of this study it is most synonymous with *meet*. This distinction is made since I am specifically interested in the attitudes held towards someone who initially meets a person online as compared to meeting in another fashion. So while the common term is “internet date” I see it more as an “internet meet” and my interest lies in how the simple difference of this occurring online manipulates the sentiment of an ensuing relationship. The use of the term *legitimacy* in this context is synonymous with *social approval*, there is no distinction. The terms *attitude* and *sentiment* may also be used interchangeably as they are the measures that support the previous concept which is at the center of this research. In line with Ogburn, Waller, and Bailey it is expected that cultural adjustments to the proliferation of internet technologies have not balanced out since the availability of such advancements are still new and growing.

Research Strategy and Method

I have chosen a quantitative quasi-experiment since I want to test the attitudes attributed to various ways in which people meet. The topic of internet dating is a personal one so a straightforward survey, questioning the legitimacy of an online relationship, would likely be

offensive to some (specifically those who are active users of the services). As well, just asking someone their opinion about relationships formed online and in direct comparison to other ways of beginning a relationship might prime them to rank in a referenced way. Including the variable of how the couple meets in a vignette avoids potential priming, allows each participant to only have to respond to one scenario rather than seven and provides a more life-like assessment.

A vignette questionnaire was chosen as the instrument in the design of this experiment. Vignette studies offer a more discrete way to examine an array of social hypotheses. One of the many definitions of a vignette and the one that applies here is “**a** : a short descriptive literary sketch **b** : a brief incident or scene (as in a play or movie)” (Merriam-Webster, 2009). Adapted from literary use, this method allows researchers to portray scenarios and then ask analytical questions about subjects’ reactions or opinions concerning the vignette. As opposed to vague survey questions, using concrete, descriptive examples allows for a more salient understanding of the situation. In this respect, the “stimulus would more closely approximate a real-life decision-making or judgment-making situation” (Alexander & Becker, 1978, p. 93).

Vignettes offer a way to conceal the explicit purpose of the study and disentangle multiple variables within each scenario while holding all other information constant. This is important since asking questions on a survey such as, “what is your opinion of relationships... that start online, that start at a bar, that start through a mutual friend?” will yield responses that can be analyzed but the validity of the results is questionable. There is a strong chance that a person filling out the survey will be able to determine the goal of the study or at least that I am interested in a comparison of different avenues of relationship formation. Knowing this, a subject is more likely to answer the questions in reference to the experimenter’s or others perceptions and not on their own.

Instrument

Vignette

Each instrument begins with the same brief description of a newly formed hypothetical couple, Megan and James, including their occupation and interest. This is directly followed by one of seven possible variables describing the conditions under which the couple met. The first set of vignettes describes a face-to-face interaction (also called a “warm meet”) and the variable of whether or not there is a mutual, third-party acquaintance is manipulated. The second set of vignettes describes a cold meet (lacking face-to-face interaction) and again manipulates the third-party vouch. The final set of vignettes test if there is an effect between using a social networking site (facebook) and using a dating site (match.com) to initiate a relationship. Last, there is a control vignette that gives no description of how the couple met (see Appendix B).

Coffee Shop Scenarios-	A1: f2f; 3 rd -party; no tech A2: f2f; no 3 rd -party; no tech
Phone Call Scenarios-	B1: no f2f; 3 rd -party; no tech B2: no f2f; no 3 rd -party; no tech
Online Scenarios-	C1: visual; no 3 rd -party; tech - (social networking site) C2: visual; no 3 rd -party; tech - (internet dating site)
Control-	D: no description of meet

Exposure to each vignette is followed by three measures: legitimacy, longevity, and social support. A total of eight questions are asked in response to the vignette; all are scaled using a likert-type seven point distribution. First up is the measure of social legitimacy which is comprised of three rankings. This asks participants to rank their perception of the hypothetical couple’s relationship as each of three words describes. Using synonyms of “legitimate”,

acceptable, valid, and normal (Thesaurus.com, 2011), participants rate each vignette on a scale of “not at all” to “completely.” The main hypothesis tested is that relationships that form through online interaction will be scored as less legitimate than relationships that originate from any other means.

The next question stands alone and deals with the predicted longevity attributed to Megan and James’s relationship, simply asking, “How far along will the relationship make it?” The responses range from “hook-up/dating to “happily ever after” to include a total of seven categories.

The final section of responses to the vignette is a four-question measure of social approval of the relationship. This section asks if friends would approve, if family would approve, if they would socially interact on a double date with the new couple, and if Megan and James are “a model for new couples beginning a relationship.”

These three sections assess the attitudes of the participant as well as their perception of the sentiments others hold toward the manner in which a couple meets. With random distribution of the vignettes, each participant responds to the same set of measures with the independent variable being the method in which Megan and James meet. Cumulatively, this creates a set of data that highlights and compares the perceptions of a relationship varied only by the form of initial introduction.

Demographics

The next component of the instrument gathers general demographic data: age, race, sex, religion, politics, and educational major. These six variables serve two purposes. First, they help to describe the sample studied and show its diversity. A comparison to the UNO student body at

large shows how representative the sample is. Second, they provide measures to determine if attitudes of internet dating are varied between demographic groups. I do not have any grounds to make predictions about race or gender trends but none the less am interested to see if they do exist.

Internet affinity and trust

Measures of proficiency, attachment, and experience with the internet are used to test any effect on attitudes about relationships that form online. I use a modified version of the Television Affinity Scale to measure affinity to the internet. I draw on other studies that have implemented this five-item, Likert-type scale by rewording the items to read “internet” in place of “television” (Anderson, 2005; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). In both of these studies and in its original form the Television Affinity Scale has proven a reliable instrument. Also in this section are three questions on trust. The first simply addresses mistrust of the internet. The other two ask if people represent themselves truthfully online and in everyday interaction. These too are rated on five-point Likert scales. (Refer to Appendix B for the actual measurements).

Dating customs

This section of the questionnaire asks about dating preferences and patterns. Modeling previous survey research, I included questions similar to those asked in a 2005 national survey to assess experience and participation in online dating (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). It begins by asking if they are single, how many committed relationships they have been in, and if they have ever visited an internet dating site. I then ask, if they have ever created a profile or an account with an online dating site. This is followed by, “if yes, how many” and “if no, would you”. Thereafter, is an open-ended question asking, “Why you do, would, or would not internet date?”

to allow respondents to speak freely about their opinions toward internet dating. This analysis will seek common reasons people give to justify their attitudes about internet dating. The next two questions test to see if people are using other online methods to form romantic relationships. I ask if they have “ever used a social networking site (like facebook or MySpace) for the purpose of dating” and how many people have they gone on a date with that they met online.

Finally, three questions inquire whether the participant knows someone close to them who has used an online dating service, gone on a date with someone they met through a dating site, or been in long-term relationship as a result of internet dating. I hypothesize that more second-hand experience with online dating will correlate with a more legitimate view of online relationships. It concludes with an area for general comments and the option for participants to leave a contact for follow up clarification via email or phone or for the possibility of further research. The last fifty participants were given a reversed order of the questionnaire which placed the open-ended question before the questions about trust and truth online to see if responses were being primed.

Procedure

I chose to sample all introductory sociology classes, four classes, as well as a couple introductory English classes at the University of New Orleans during the fall semester of 2010. Access to the population came through each teacher’s permission and their classrooms provided the setting for the study. The introductory sociology classes were chosen because they are substantial in enrollment. Using the university required English classes for a comparison group offered a sample outside of the social sciences and a classroom setting characteristically different. Both lent themselves to being easily accessible.

A goal of 300 participants was set so that a significant proportion of respondents would evaluate each of the seven vignettes. This was important for analysis so that a varied set of participants was exposed to all possible vignettes. In order to compare results amongst demographic characteristics such as race it is essential that a significant number of participants from each race category respond to each version of the vignettes.

The instrument was administered at the start of class and was done in the same fashion for each. I began by stating, "It is a survey about relationships. It is completely voluntary. The first page is a consent form for participation and any data collected is confidential." I had prepared a sufficient amount of surveys dictated by class enrollment and they were arranged in repeating sequential order (1-7, repeat) of the varied vignette scenarios. This randomized the surveys and made sure that I did not administer too many of one version while appearing as if each student was receiving the same instrument out of one large stack. It took approximately 15 minutes until surveys were collected at which time I thanked them for participation and left.

Analysis and Results

Description of Sample

A total of 346 students completed surveys. They represent a diverse background of ethnicities, academic majors, religions and political affiliations. Below is a comparison between my sample and the University of New Orleans fall 2010 undergraduate student body.

Table 2: Distribution of Sex, Race and Academic College by Sample Population and University of New Orleans 2010 Undergraduates

	Sample	UNO
Sex:		
Female	56.93%	50.5%
Male	43.07	49.5
Race:		
White	57.1%	55.3%
Black	22.0	15.5
Asian	8.63	6.6
Hispanic	7.44	7.0
NRA	0	4.6
Other	4.77	11.0
College:		
Business	16.42%	26.61%
Education	6.57	6.35
Engineering	6.57	12.68
Liberal Arts	23.58	22.24
Science	29.55	24.33
Pre-Professional	11.34	0
Interdisciplinary	2.69	6.42
Undecided	1.79	0
Other	1.49	1.37

This glance at the distribution of the sample compared to the school shows that the populations are fairly congruent. There are no severe differences in proportions or complete lack of representation and therefore no concern that the sample is significantly misrepresentative of

the school at large. A few things should be noted. First, the race category of Non-Resident Alien (NRA) accounts for a significant (4.6) percent of the schools population and this is not reflected in my sample. As well, blacks may be over sampled in proportion to the school, but the sample has less unaccounted for in the “other” category. As far as the distribution of colleges, business and engineering majors are underrepresented but the sample still contains a considerable number.

These demographic variables were collected for the main purpose of showing a representative diversity between the sample and the UNO student body. Although blacks are over-sampled in proportion to the school, an assessment of the variation of measures by white and black shows that on four of the scenarios, there were only 7 blacks that responded to each. This number is close to the five-case minimum that supports cross-tabulation analysis. It is for this reason too that other ethnic groups, smaller in number, could not be adequately compared.

The average age of the sample is 20.8 but perhaps the more telling statistic is mode and skew of the distribution. The single largest category of respondents’ begins at age 18 and then tapers off substantially with only 20 participants being older than 27. This should be expected considering only intro-level classes were sampled but it does limit the ability to test for cohort effects of those over thirty.

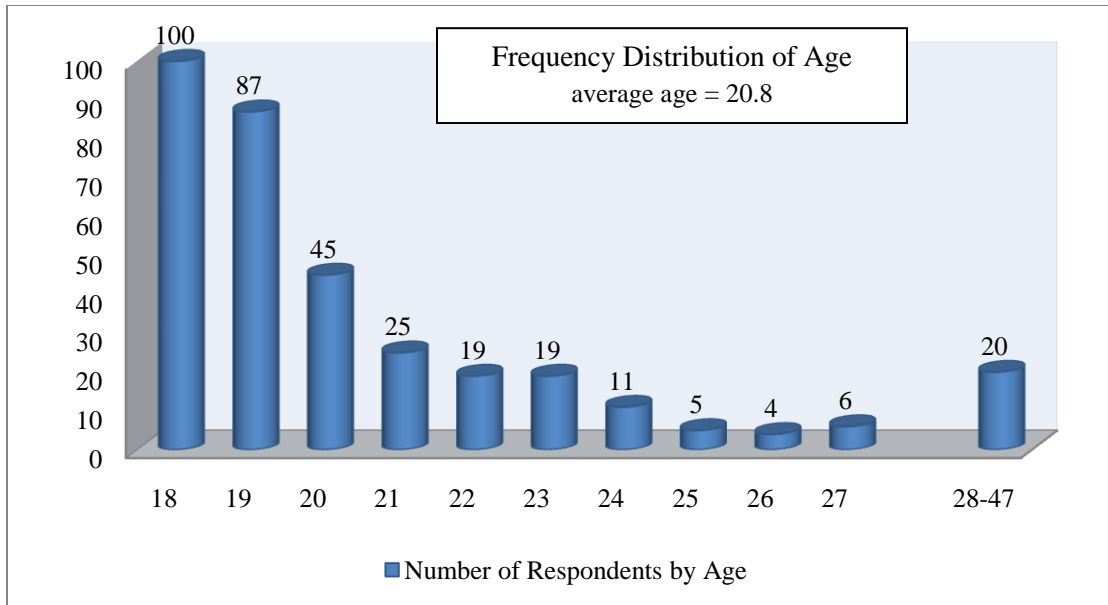


Figure 2 Youth of sample as a skewed distribution (with only twenty people between the ages of 28 and 47)

Politics and religion had a much more expansive set of responses as well as the most missing data left blank. Political affiliation was the most skipped question with 45 left blank. Additionally, 89 responses were either marked “na,” “none” or just had a slash marked. It was surprising that so many (40%) respondents either marked a slash, “na”, “none”, or left it blank indicating a lack of political affiliation. The other categories were distributed 27% democrat, 17% republican, 7% independent, 4% libertarian and 5% other. Sixteen people chose liberal and two conservative which I coded as democrat and republican, respectively. The most common religious affiliation was Catholic 32% with Christians 19% second. Those marking “na” or “none” were the third most significant category at 14% followed by the wide range of responses that made up the 11% “other” category. Baptist and Agnostic had seven and six percent respectively; the other categories had three percent or less. The question of religious view had the second largest amount of skipped or blank answers with 30.

In addition to demographic data, the questionnaire provided insight into dating customs and use of the internet. The following chart summarizes dating experience. Attention is drawn to the number of people who have used a Social Networking Site (SNS) for the purpose of dating in comparison to those who have internet dated or even visited a site.

Table 3 Describes selected measures of dating experience as related to the Internet

Dating Experience				
	Percent	Freq.		
Currently Single	50.88%	174		
Visited a Dating Site	12.54%	43		
Created a Profile or Account*	8.80%	30		
Used a Social Networking Site for Dating	14.20%	48		
	Average	SD	Min.	Max.
Number of Committed Relationships	2	1.41	0	10
*Number of Accounts Created	2	2.04	1	11
Number of People Dated that Were Met Online	3	2.68	1	15

Also noted was the anomaly that a few people reported going on dates with individuals they met online but also stated that they had never signed up for a dating service nor had they used a SNS for the purpose of dating. This means that there is a population that is meeting people online and dating through other means not tested. This could be online personals, interactive video games, or any number of forums or other networks not specifically designated as a dating site or SNS.

The question, “Have you signed up for an internet dating service?” was followed up by the question of “If not, would you?” This simple, yet telling measure gives a quick view of the personal positions taken towards internet dating. Three-quarters of the sample said they would

not. When designed, it was a yes/no answer. It was quickly realized that substantially more people marked “maybe” than yes, which in itself suggests that there is quite a lot of reserve held when it comes to associating oneself as an “internet dater.” This begins to support the hypothesis that internet dating is not perceived as a culturally accepted way to begin a relationship. For comparison purposes of the illustration below, the “would” category is a combination of those who said “yes” (5.6%) and those indicating “maybe” (13.2%). Those who were not asked the question because they already indicated that they have used an internet dating site were also drawn into the picture to show how the distribution of the whole sample compares on the issue.

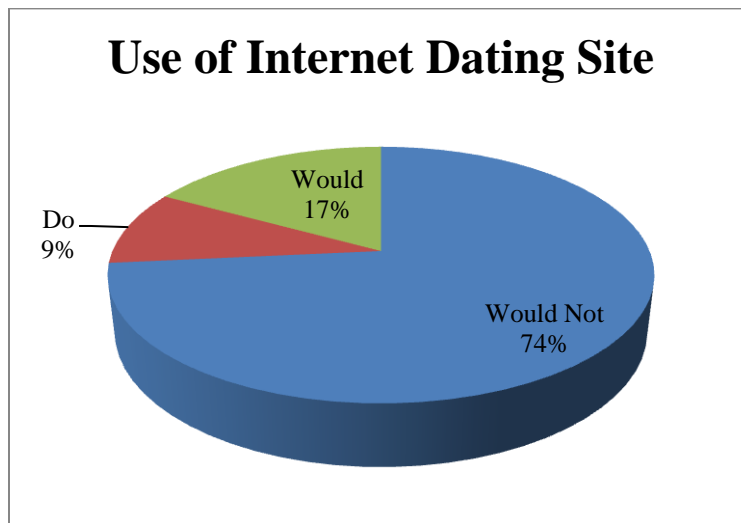


Figure 3 Respondents' position on the practice of internet dating

The last description of the sample shows the average rankings of Internet Affinity and Internet Trust on a 5-point scale. Affinity is measured by two variables of attachment and one of competence- which is easily noticed as the highest ranked. This shows that the sample on a whole is very confident in their ability to use the internet. On average they rank a 4.2 with one standard deviation falling above a 3.3. More than 70% of the sample feels stronger than neutral that they can complete almost any task on the internet. The other revealing finding is seen in the

difference between trust of the internet (3.3) and trust of people online (1.6). This suggests that people are significantly more trusting of the technology and its use than they are of people to be truthful using it. Comparing the two measures of truth online vs. truth in everyday, it is clear that there is substantially less belief in truth online. It is also worth noting that in general, with both of these measures being so small, the sample does not believe in people representing themselves truthfully.

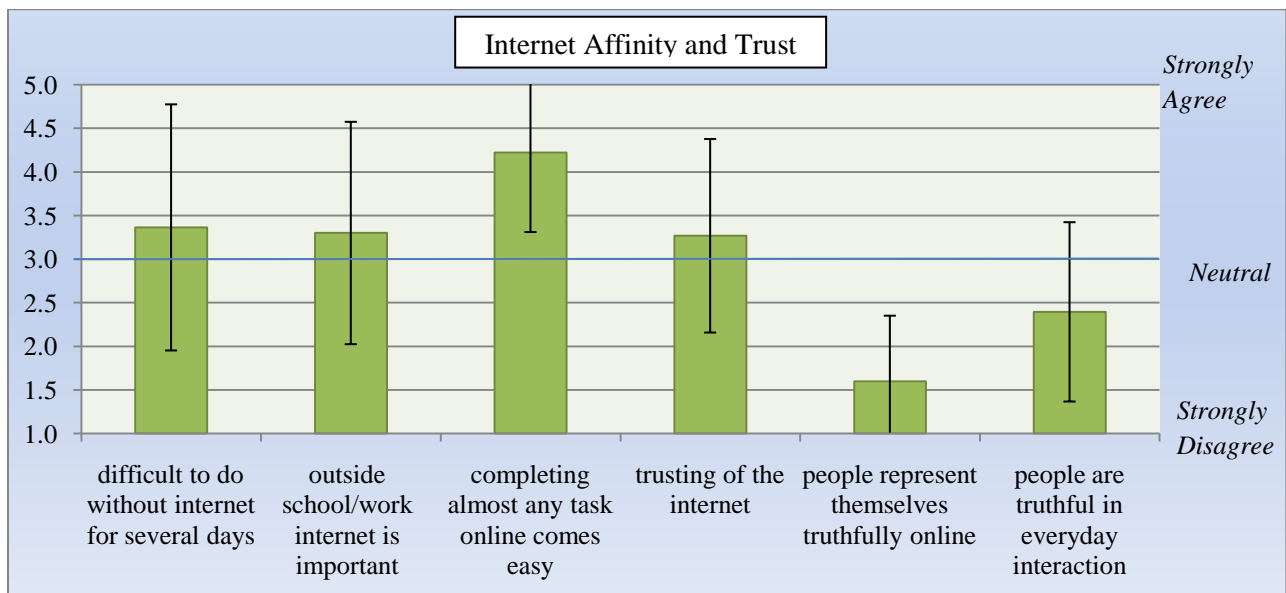


Figure 4 Measures of internet affinity and trust on 5-point scale (showing mean with 1 standard deviation)

For clarification, the first measure of affinity and the scale of trusting the internet are both reciprocal values of the measurements as they were on the survey instrument. The first asked about “ease” of going without the internet and the other was a rank of the statement, “I am mistrusting of the internet.” These were reordered to match the direction of the other four measures so that an increase in score correlates to an increase in either affinity or trust for the internet.

Testing of Hypotheses

The main hypothesis and several others rely on the three related measures of Legitimacy, Longevity and Social Perception to examine an overall composite of cultural acceptance. To begin with, correlations were run with all eight measures of the vignette. The three measures of legitimacy- acceptable, normal, and valid- are correlated between .69 and .76 (highlighted in green below). The only other correlation at this level was between the two measures of friend and family approval (.76) in the Social Perception section.

Table 4 Correlations of the eight measures ranking vignette scenarios (highlighting index of legitimacy)

	accept	norm	valid	long	family	double	friend	model
accept	1.0000							
norm	0.7008	1.0000						
valid	0.7616	0.6891	1.0000					
longevity	0.3324	0.3718	0.4062	1.0000				
fam	0.6168	0.6014	0.5892	0.3588	1.0000			
doub	0.3852	0.3469	0.4213	0.2687	0.4493	1.0000		
friend	0.6481	0.6099	0.6363	0.3536	0.7617	0.4814	1.0000	
model	0.4144	0.5169	0.4619	0.3400	0.5279	0.3956	0.5420	1.0000

With all the measures of legitimacy correlated that high, an index was created by multiplying the ranking of acceptable, normal, and valid (three 7-point scales) for each participant in order to create their legitimacy score (between 1 and 343). Friend approval and family approval were not indexed because they are only two of the four measures. To test for changes in cultural approval between scenarios each form will be tested across the legitimacy index and the five other measures. The scenarios are referenced by their form or easiest delineable name (e.g. Coffee Shop with 3rd party). Below is a table of how each form varies by scenario. The actual scenario descriptions are listed along with instrument (see Appendix B).

Table 5 Variation of Vignette Scenarios

Form	Where Couple Meets	Vouching	Face-to-face	New Technology Involved
A1	Meet at a Coffee shop	3 rd -party	f2f	no technology
A2		no 3 rd -party		
B1	Meet over the Phone	3 rd -party	no f2f	no technology
B2		no 3 rd -party		
C1	Social Networking Site	no 3 rd -party	non-traditional	technology
C2	Internet Dating Site	no 3 rd -party		
D	Control (no description of meet)			

It was determined through analysis of variance that the vignette rankings for seven of the eight scales were significantly distributed at an $\alpha < 0.01$. The outlier was the measure of a hypothetical double date where closer examination showed the distribution of mean scores as much more tightly grouped than the other measures (all of the means falling within a range of 0.75 on a 7 point scale). Even with variance so close, the general trend for the online scenarios to be seen with the least approval is shown and being in line with the other two significantly varied measures (family and friend approval) suggests that it is not just coincidence or anomaly.

In the primary hypothesis it was stated that online relationships will be ranked as the least culturally approved (All hypotheses listed below, see Table 8). In the first of three measures to test this- H1₁ -it was predicted that online relationships are perceived as less “acceptable, normal, and valid” than the other test groups in an indexed measure of legitimacy. In order to test this, a cross tabulation between the legitimacy index and the seven scenarios was run. On this measure there was no support found since the means of the online scenarios (C1, C2) were not the lowest; therefore I fail to reject the null hypothesis.

Table 6 Index of Legitimacy Tabulated by Vignette Scenarios

Form	Mean	SD
A1	225.86	111.24
A2	232.09	121.91
B1	138.13	115.39
B2	119.33	115.28
C1	149.52	105.54
C2	169.70	111.18
D	250.59	106.60
Total	181.98	121.48

p < 0.01 r²=0.16

Second, the ranking of hypothetical longevity will be significantly shorter for the online relationships- H1₂. In a similar tabulation, the average rankings on the longevity scale and the various scenarios were run. The mean longevity for the online dating scenarios was higher than one of the phone call vignettes-B1, which also refutes the hypothesis. Third, - H1₃ -social perception will be less for the online scenarios as measured by family and friend approval, willingness to double date, and rank as a model couple. Again using a tabulation of mean scores for each of the four measures by the seven form types, support was found in two of the four. On the family and friends approve variables, there is a clear digression of positive sentiment as the scenarios move from A1 to C2 (highlighted columns in table below), corresponding with the most traditional way to meet (face-to-face, 3rd party) to the least traditional (internet dating site). This same linear relationship is not seen in the other two measures, double date and model couple.

Table 7 Average Rankings of Longevity and 4 Measures of Social Perception (min=1, max=7)

Form	Longevity		Family Approve		Friends Approve		Double Date		Model Couple	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
A1	2.83	1.85	5.94	1.39	5.92	1.31	4.71	1.95	4.65	1.83
A2	3.26	1.79	5.88	1.61	5.79	1.68	4.77	1.92	5	1.65
B1	2.15	1.23	4.81	1.70	5.04	1.46	4.35	1.95	3.13	1.68
B2	2.48	1.71	4.63	2.12	4.73	2.09	4.67	1.96	3.63	1.73
C1	2.45	1.12	4.57	1.96	4.69	2.03	3.98	2.25	3.43	1.92
C2	2.91	1.64	4.41	1.99	4.59	1.73	4.14	1.99	3.73	1.64
D	4.15	1.89	6.32	1.02	6	1.16	4.54	2.03	4.82	1.73
Total	2.88	1.73	5.21	1.86	5.24	1.76	4.45	2.01	4.05	1.86
	p < 0.01; r ² =0.13		p < 0.01; r ² =0.16		p < 0.01; r ² =0.11		p > 0.3		p < 0.01; r ² =0.14	

Overall for the main hypothesis (H1) it was observed that support was found by the measures of family approval and friend approval but on the other six variables the null hypothesis failed to be rejected. This linear relationship for these two measures, A1 being the most approved and decreasing till c2 is the least approved, not only supports this hypothesis but also gives support in the next.

The second hypothesis (H2) was analyzed across the same three categorical measures to test if there is a negative connotation or stigma associated with internet dating as compared to a social networking site (SNS). It was predicted that the internet dating vignette will rank less legitimate in terms of “acceptable, normal, and valid”; shorter in projection of longevity; and with diminished social perception. Referring to table 6, the prediction that the SNS would be perceived as more legitimate than the internet dating scenario (H2₁) was not supported. On the measure of longevity (H2₂) the opposite directionality of what was predicted is shown, also refuting the hypothesis. The measures of Social Perception are divided; half support the statement (H2₃) that internet dating scenario be less approved than the SNS. Again, on family

and friend approval rankings, support for the hypothesis was found but the other two failed to reject the null. A chart of the hypotheses their derivation and conclusion is found on pages 55-56.

The third hypothesis tests the ranking of the control scenario in which no description of a meet is given. It was predicted that the control scenario would be ranked with the highest approval. Mirroring H1 and H2, an analysis of the control across the measures of legitimacy, longevity, and social perception was conducted. The control vignette most often ranked the highest in cultural approval across the measures. This did not hold true for the double date measure where variation was very small or for the measure as a model couple where it was interestingly only beat out by the coffee shop without 3rd party scenario. Overall, support was found for H3 on 6 of the 8 measures. The control of this experiment was an interesting measure on its own. The consistency of its placement as the most often approved suggest that the less information people know about a situation the more they assume as appropriate. By not telling anything about the way a couple met, the rankings of acceptance were almost always significantly higher. This supports script theory since the control was written to be as normative of a scenario as possible and it was most often ranked with the highest approval.

Table 8 Derivation and results of hypotheses tested (table continued)

Hypotheses	Derivation	Results
H1- Relationships beginning through online interaction are perceived as the least culturally accepted.	Cultural Lag Theory/ Script Theory	Difference seen in subjective measures- family and friend approval
H1 ₁ - Legitimacy of online relationships is least.		No support- (without f2f scenario ranked least)
H1 ₂ - Expected longevity of online relationships is least.		No support- (without f2f scenario ranked least)

H1 ₃ - Social Perception of online relationships is least.		Partially Supported: Ranked Least on 3 of 4
H2- A relationship begun through internet dating is perceived as less culturally acceptable than one formed through an SNS.	General Concepts of Stigma/ Computer-Mediated Communication	Difference seen in subjective measures- family and friend approval
H2 ₁ - Legitimacy of internet dating is less than SNS.		No support- (SNS ranked less)
H2 ₂ - Expected longevity of internet dating relationships is less than SNS.		No support- (SNS ranked less)
H2 ₃ - Social Perception of internet dating relationships is less than SNS.		Partially Supported: Ranked Least on family and friend-2/4
H3- The control scenario is ranked the most culturally acceptable	Script Theory	Support found for 6of 8 measures
H4- Those close to people with higher amounts of online dating experience will have higher rankings of approval for the internet dating scenario.	Exposure Effect	No Support- social connections to those who internet date does not increase approval
H5- The higher the affinity, the more positive the ranking of approval for online dating.	Exposure Effect	Supported- shown in legitimacy index for Match.com scenario

The last two hypotheses test for exposure effects. The first considers participants' social connection to others who have experienced varying degrees of online dating interaction. The vignette rankings of those who reported knowing someone close to them who has "been in a long term relationship or married someone they met through a dating site" were compared to the vignette rankings of those who did not even know someone who "used an online dating site". I hypothesize (H4) that those close to people with higher amounts of online dating experience will have higher approval rankings for the internet dating scenario. Testing all three measures of legitimacy, longevity, and social perception, no support was found for the hypothesis.

Table 9 Averaged Legitimacy Index and Family Approval scores for the internet dating and SNS scenarios as measured by low and high affinity scores (“Index” measured on a scale of 1-343; Family scale is 1-5).

Higher Legitimacy of Internet Dating from those with High Internet Affinity.						
	Affinity	Legitimacy Index			Family Approval	
		fb	Match	SD	fb	Match
Variable		mean	mean	SD	mean	mean
Can’t Easily Go Without Internet	high	129	194	115	4.19	5.10
	low	178	152	107	5.15	3.89
Internet Important out of School/Work	high	152	216	109	4.55	4.57
	low	146	129	98	4.59	4.27
Ease of Completing Task Online	high	151	224	104	4.67	4.82
	low	148	126	107	4.46	4.07

The last hypothesis, H5, used a measure of internet affinity to see if increased attachment to the underlying technology has an effect on approval of its use in facilitating relationship formation. I predict that the higher the affinity, the more positive the ranking of approval. In order to test this, I had to create a high and a low affinity sample for each of the three measures of internet affinity and compare the two groups across the means of the variables that measure attitudes towards the two online relationship scenarios. To do this, I found the midpoint of the mean scores for each affinity measure and divided the respondents accordingly. The most prominent association found in the analysis of affinity scales is that an increase of internet affinity is related to an increase in the legitimacy attributed to the relationship begun through the Match.com scenario.

Why You Do, Would, or Wouldn't Internet Date

The open-ended question asked participants to explain why they do, would, or would not internet date. This was included as an additional measure to allow for input not surveyed and to get a general idea of the reasons behind attitudes about online dating. Almost 75% (233) of the sample said they would not internet date. With such a large number, this category lent nicely to pulling out common recurring reasons as to why not. An analysis of some common codes or

themes shows that trust (53) and lack of face-to-face communication (54) were the two most often listed reasons why people would not use the services. In light of the data collected in the vignette portion, this supports the finding that the scenario which included face-to-face introduction was consistently the most socially supported. The codes lie (12), and safety (9) reiterated the issues of trust. Other notable codes were desperate (16) and for “old” people (13). Some telling quotes from those opposed include: “dating sites are a place for people to hide behind”; “can't have a first impression when meeting over the internet...” These speak to the ideas that it's for people who lack social skills, reinforces the importance of interpersonal attraction and specifically first impressions.

Reasons why people did use online dating services included: for fun, compatibility, it worked for a friend, and hadn't found anyone through other ways. One simply said, “to meet new people (I) normally wouldn't.” Another expressed the cliché, “Don't knock it till you try it.” These codes show some of the innocent and positive applications of using such services. Not all users spoke praise, one participant expressed a negative opinion after giving it a try, “thought it would help me meet someone faster but it was stupid.”

Those who responded maybe (16%) to the question represented a unique and actually larger group than those answering yes (6%). Within this group, a repetition of similar phrases was noticed. People who were not single used phrases like, “in a relationship now” (7) or married, engaged, etc. indicating that it would be an option if they were single. The code “no need to” came up in 30 places and was sometimes complimented with statements like, “if old and desperate” which was also a repeated theme for those who answered “maybe.” One explanation stated, “no interest now... if 30 with no prospects” suggesting that there is no need to now but maybe when they are older and more desperate.

There were a number of participants who seemed to give support to internet dating but distance themselves at the same time. They said things like, "it's valid but no need to." The attitude of, "I don't think there is anything wrong with it but I just wouldn't do it" was stated by a few respondents. This reflects directly on the discrepancy between the rankings on the legitimacy index compared to the friends and family measures. The respondents are essentially saying, "It's okay for others to use it but I wouldn't". Again, this supports the idea that the internet has become socially recognized as an avenue to form intimate relationships but the majority of people cautiously distance themselves from personal association.

Multiple participants alluded to a stigma effect. One person who said they might try it stated he'd be "embarrassed"; another who said he would not try it gave the reason, "it's embarrassing." The most powerful statement capturing a stigmatized view of internet dating comes from a female, 18, who said, "(I) don't want to explain that's how we met" for why she wouldn't internet date. This clearly shows how relationships formed through internet dating are expected to be met with criticism and stigma.

In the shadow of Byrne's law of attraction, others mention the benefit of being able to search for potential partners on the basis similar beliefs and interests. A Jewish respondent, claiming they would try it, said, "jdate is an option" (a site for Jewish online daters). One 20-year-old white female lists it as not only a convenience of matchmaking and time but also a way to overcome a social disorder. She describes it threefold, "To meet people with similar interests. Busy with work and school. Anti-social". Finally, one 23-year-old Caucasian who has dated 4 people he met online sums it up, "Internet dating lets you specify what you're looking for and put everything on the table".

A few quotes almost seem as if they were specific interview questions for this research. An 18-year-old black female speaks directly about a natural way of meeting and gives the idea of 3rd party vouch as an example. She explained, "I do not trust people that have not actually met naturally such as at a party or through mutual friends." A white female, 20, echoes these sentiments, "(I) would rather meet a significant other through a mutual friend or in a commonly frequented place." Almost in retort or counter argument to the previous two, a 27-year-old black male said, "Social sites are becoming the new coffee shops". These statements support the theory that tradition scripts and customs dictate cultural attitudes about dating but also show that these attitudes are changing. Analysis of the open-ended questions illustrate the varied range of opinions about internet dating as well as the mix of reasons, beliefs, and attitudes that contribute.

Discussion

A trend was noticed with the first two face-to-face scenarios which were almost always perceived with the most approval of the test groups and followed most closely behind the control. Although A2 (coffee shop without 3rd party) is often ranked slightly higher, the closeness of the two and their separation from the rest is a strong statement that the tradition of an in-person meet is the more important quality of a legitimate way to begin a relationship.

The fact that there was little variation between the two coffee shop scenarios (often switching places as 1st and 2nd most approved of the six test groups) clearly suggests that the variable of 3rd party vouch is not as big of an issue as face-to-face (f2f) interaction but I suspect something else is contributing to this ranking. The face-to-face scenario without 3rd party was the highest ranked scenario of the six test groups for the indexed measure of legitimacy and for the measure of longevity; for the measures of double date and model couple it even surpassed the

control. Taken in context of open-ended statements that cited meeting through a mutual friend as a “normal” way to start a relationship, the minimal variation resulting from 3rd party manipulation suggests a confounding effect. Most probable is the idealized romantic script of two strangers meeting eyes across the room of a mundane location (coffee shop) and romance sparks, as is so often seen in pop media. This explains the consistently high ranking despite the lack of face-to-face. I suggest that the “fairy tale” script of two strangers meeting eyes and falling in love contributed to higher rankings of the face-to-face, no 3rd party scenario.

The flip-flop in rank of the online meet scenarios (amongst themselves and with rankings of the phone meet scenarios) also suggests some interesting considerations. When ranked on indexed legitimacy, longevity, and as a model couple, it is seen that the online scenarios receive higher approval than the phone meet scenarios and the facebook scenario is ranked lowest. When compared to the measures of friend approval and family approval this trend is reversed- the phone scenarios are last and the facebook meet is ranked with higher approval than the match.com scenario. I propose two factors at play that contribute.

First, the observation that there is little separation between the rankings of the phone meet and online meet scenarios in general shows that their approval rankings are comparable. My prediction that the online scenarios be ranked lowest because of the lack of face-to-face interaction, absence of third party vouch, and the use of technology deserves re-examining. The coffee shop scenarios being ranked the highest suggest that face-to-face is the main variable affecting approval and the 3rd party vouch was minimal in its effect. Analysis of internet affinity and trust suggests that the technology itself is not a hindrance to this sample (although trust of people online is very limited). Therefore, if 3rd party vouch and technology are removed from the equation, it must be that the difference in face-to-face interaction is most affecting the rank of

approval. Originally, the online scenarios were considered “without face-to-face” variables. Taking into account the availability of pictures (and other profile information) it could be argued that an online meet is more similar to a face-to-face meet than the blind, over the phone scenarios. This is supported by the fact that the face-to-face scenarios were ranked much higher in comparison and the reiteration of its significance in the open-ended questions. I suggest that this feature of limited visual communication is what lessened the separation in ranked approval between the phone and the online meet scenarios.

Second, I suggest that this pattern change is a result of a variation in the framing of the different measures. I believe that the framing of the family and friend approval measures is done in a subjective manner, asking for a personal assessment by bringing the subject into the hypothetical. On these two questions the participant has to imagine how *their* friends and *their* family would react. On the other measures this assessment is left as objective, asking only of the scenario if it is valid, how long will it last, etc. This suggests a differing social acceptance vs. personal acceptance. It is almost as if the data says people think idealistically that online relationship formation is legitimate but personally and within close circles it is less approved. I found this to be reinforced by several of the open-ended responses when someone would comment that they saw “nothing wrong with it” and in the same section indicate that they wouldn’t do it.

Summary

The measure of face-to-face interaction as the way for a couple to meet was most consistently ranked as the culturally appropriate method and often substantially higher than the other methods. This consistency and separation show the importance that society places on in-

person contact and more specifically, first impressions. These sentiments were iterated in the open-ended questions, reinforcing the findings that face-to-face interaction is heavily tied to cultural ideals of the initial meet when forming relationship.

The measure of Internet Affinity was revealing about the sample's attachment and competence towards the internet. It was shown that overall, the sample was very confident in their capabilities to perform tasks online (ranking an average of 4.2 out of 5) and that those who ranked higher competence also ranked higher approval of the relationship that began through internet dating.

Trust was an important issue for respondents in regards to online dating. Alongside face-to-face limitations, "trust" was the most common code for reasons why people would not internet date. In conjunction, an analysis of the three measures of trust showed that belief in people representing themselves truthfully online was much lower than belief in people representing themselves truthfully in everyday interaction (yet, both of these measures showed less than neutral belief in people to be truthful). A measure whether participants are trusting of the internet showed that on average, the sample does trust in the technology. In conjunction with affinity scores, this tells that the technology itself is viewed positive and issues of trust arise from disbelief in the people who use the technology and not the technology itself.

Considerations and Limitations

In general, I acknowledge several limitations due to the scope of my study. The use of UNO students and introductory Sociology courses for the majority of sampling means that the results are not generalized to national populations and may only be done so within the university to the extent that my sample is representative of gender, race, area of study, and other

characteristics in a proportionate amount to the rest of UNO. To mitigate uncertainty, I illustrated that my sample was fairly proportionate to the university in respect to the above listed demographics.

My sample was significantly skewed to the mode of 18 in terms of age range. This does limit my view and knowledge of older populations in regards to these issues. Yet, since my research was founded in theory that states customs change in response to material changes the cohort who has had most familiarity and comfort with the technology should be the first to socially accept it and exhibit the least amount of maladjustment. Therefore, evidence of cultural lag within college freshmen gives the most support to the theory since this is where it would be least expected.

In testing the hypothesis that Internet Affinity would be associated with increased positive attitudes of internet dating (H5), I had to choose between two ways of analysis. I first analyzed it by dropping the neutral rankings (all those who marked “3”) and comparing those who ranked 4 or 5 to those who ranked 1 or 2. Although the differences between the high and low affinity groups showed more variance in attitudes about online dating, I opted for a different method that would not omit any cases. I searched for differences in rankings of the two online scenarios by selecting for a dividing point as close to the center of the distribution as possible and then compared those with higher affinity to those with lower. For example, on the first question of separation from the internet, grouping those who ranked 4 or 5 (indicating high affinity) yielded 171 cases; those ranking a 1-4 totaled 147 cases. This created a high and a low affinity group without omitting any cases and with a more balanced view by considering the midpoint of the range neutral rather than the midpoint on the scale.

In the middle of data collection and after the first round of coding it was noticed that several common responses were focused specifically around the idea of trust. This concerned me since the section immediately before the question asked people to rank their trust of the internet and faith in people representing themselves truthfully online. In order to test for a priming effect I reordered the last 47 instruments so that the open-ended question was ahead of the “trust” questions. In comparing the codes, there were 43 mentions of trust in the first 299 and 10 in the last 47. This works out to 14.4% and 21.3% of the samples mentioning trust, respectively, therefore quenching any concern that a priming effect occurred.

The first four questions had the larger number of skipped responses (other than demographic questions of politics and religion, which were most likely skipped for other personal beliefs). With 13, 21, 26, and 16 blank responses, respectively, this is not concern to question the overall results but it does question if there was something unclear or assumed by the way the directions were stated and/or the format of these. Since the last four questions on the page were all responded to by 345 out of the total 346, I question why the differing in number of skipped questions in the first half of the vignette section. This is so especially in light of the fact that pre-testing of the instrument didn’t show this. When entering the data I made note that in the first section of the three measures of legitimacy several people only ranked one of the three questions. As well, it was noted that a few were skipping the fourth question on longevity.

Further Research

There are countless areas of study that fall under the broad umbrella of internet dating. Just looking at this research alone, it almost appears that it opens more doors ahead than it closes

behind. Below, I propose three conditions that intrigue me the most as possibilities for continuing research.

Foremost, the discrepancy between the rankings of the online scenarios as subjectively measured compared to the objective measurements raises the curiosity of this being a regular trend. A study could be done solely on why these flip-flopped and why they did so in such a uniform manner. By specifically testing a group of objective measures on internet dating attitudes and comparing these to a group of subjective measures, research could better determine the effects of these types of framing on corresponding attitudes.

It was almost always seen that that the first set of scenarios ranked the top two highest for social approval (not including the control). But more often, the scenario without the 3rd party vouch (A2) was attributed the higher social approval. It raises an intriguing question as to why a scenario that appears less traditional is given more support. I speculated that pop media portrayals- two strangers exchanging glances across a mundane setting and sparks fly leading to happily ever after- may contribute to an idealized notion of how romance “works.” Research to see first, if this is the most commonly portrayed scenario in pop culture could lead to additional studies determining the effect of this portrayal in creating cultural ideals of dating.

Another avenue for future research could be a longitudinal approach. Since this study is based on the theory that cultural norms are continually adapting to material advancements within society, a replication or modification of this research five years from now would make a great comparison. It would show if dating culture is progressing towards a larger acceptance of internet technologies playing a role or perhaps if some other technology or avenue to dating has been introduced to the scene by then.

Conclusion

The attitudes held towards internet dating are better understood as part of a dynamic and reflexive process of cultural adaptation. Cultural lag explains how significant changes in the condition of society are related to an adjustment with associated cultural attitudes and customs. Often, the adaptation of culture occurs at a slower pace than the conditional change in society. This basic relationship is evident in the effects of internet technology on the changing beliefs and practices of online interaction.

One main factor contributing to the reluctance of change related to attitudes held toward internet dating is script theory. This illustrates how society and pop culture promote scripted patterns of behavior that are used to guide expectations in common interactions. Guided by the practices of the majority, scripts do adapt to changes in cultural beliefs. Yet by their nature, scripts usually reinforce common behavior rather than promote change. Dating scripts through the history of American courtship exemplify how this process both promotes the persistence of common patterns of interaction and has a reflexive nature of adaptation to change.

The effects of internet technology on the self and our consequent trust in others is third factor contributing to current attitudes held toward internet dating. The rigidity of a core and true self is questioned as a result of conflicting perspectives and institutional associations. This causes people to question the ability of others to represent themselves truthfully. Additionally, the proliferation of mediated communication brought about by the technology causes doubts to the authenticity and overall benefits of using these methods for forming relationships. It is evident that internet technology has associated issues of trust and skepticism of mediated communication which also affect cultural attitudes of internet dating.

In line with the above theories, it can be said that the realization of internet technologies to facilitate relationship formation has been achieved within society, indicated by a moderate level of social approval. Yet, the adaptation of the culture that would equally support this realization is lagging behind. So while the overall approval of internet dating as a method of starting a relationship varies it is still seen as the method that people would associate with the least and would get the least approval within the customs and norms of friends and family.

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Appendix A

Vignette Questionnaire Consent Form

Project Title: Intimate Relationship Formation: Exploring Attitudes

I agree to participate in a study that explores attitudes toward intimate relationship formation. The study will involve approximately 300 people and questionnaires will be given out across the UNO campus exploring what people find socially acceptable or unacceptable, the strength of acceptability, and a brief explanation of their responses. The questionnaire should take approximately ten minutes to fill out. I understand my participation in this study is entirely voluntary. I also understand that I do not have to answer any questions that make me feel uncomfortable and I may withdraw consent and stop participating at any time.

This study is not associated with any class at the University of New Orleans. I understand that no class credit is involved and that my participation in this study will not affect my grades now or in any future classes at the University of New Orleans. I understand that I must be 18 years of age to participate in this study and I will not be paid for my participation. This study has few risks and no direct benefits to being a participant in this study. I understand that this study may ask for personal information but that the information I give in this study will remain confidential, I can skip any questions, withdraw my consent to participate at any time and do not have to participate in any further studies. All tapes, transcripts and consent forms will be kept in a locked closet.

If you have any questions concerning this research study, please call Dr. Compton at 504-280-6200 or Corey Miller at 504-280-5760.

Please contact Dr. Ann O’Hanlon (504-280-6531) at the University of New Orleans for answers to questions about this research, your rights as a human subject, and your concerns regarding a research-related injury.

Sincerely,

D’lane Compton and Corey Miller

By signing this consent form, you agree that you understand the procedures and any benefits and risks involved in this study. Additionally, you understand that participation is voluntary and consent can be withdrawn at any time without any consequence, prejudice or discrimination. Furthermore, you are consenting to participate in this study.

_____ I consent to participation in this study.

Date _____

Appendix B

Vignette Scenarios and Instrument:

(The above and highlighted text was not included in actual vignettes)

Megan and James are a couple, both in their mid-twenties.

Megan is a writer for a newspaper; she enjoys camping and trying new foods in her free time.

James is a high school teacher; he enjoys bicycling and seeing live music.

(Immediately following HERE would be ONE of the seven vignette scenarios below)

A1. At a coffee shop James noticed a girl he hadn't seen before, Megan, sitting across the room with one of his friends. He approached them and after a bit of small talk got Megan's number. A few phone conversations later and they decided to start dating.

A2. At a coffee shop James noticed a girl he hadn't seen before, Megan, sitting across the room. He approached her and after a bit of small talk got her number. A few phone conversations later and they decided to start dating.

B1. James was calling a friend one day who was busy at the moment and Megan, a girl he hadn't met before, answered the phone instead. After a bit of small talk he got her number. A few phone conversations later and they decided to start dating.

B2. James was calling a friend one day but dialed the wrong number. Megan, a girl he hadn't met before, answered the phone instead. After a bit of small talk he got her number. A few phone conversations later and they decided to start dating.

C1. James introduced himself to Megan after seeing her profile on facebook (a social networking site). After a bit of small talk he got her number. A few phone conversations later and they decided to start dating.

C2. James introduced himself to Megan after seeing her profile on Match.com (an internet dating site). After a bit of small talk he got her number. A few phone conversations later and they decided to start dating.

D. none (control)

(These 8 measures <the first 3- legitimacy, the 4th- longevity, and last 4- social perception> followed the vignette to create the first page)

Rank your perception Megan and James’s relationship as you see each of these words describes (fill in the appropriate circle):

acceptable

(not at all) (completely)

normal

(not at all) (completely)

valid

(not at all) (completely)

How far along will the relationship make it? Circle your answer.

a fling	boyfriend/ girlfriend	seriously committed	engaged	to the alter	divorced	happily ever after
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Rank your level of agreement with each of the following statements:

Your family would approve of this relationship.

(Strongly Disagree) (Strongly Agree)

You would double date with Megan and James.

(Strongly Disagree) (Strongly Agree)

Your friends would approve of this relationship.

(Strongly Disagree) (Strongly Agree)

Megan and James are a model for new couples beginning a relationship.

(Strongly Disagree) (Strongly Agree)

Please answer the following questions about yourself.

Age _____ Race/Ethnicity _____ Political Affiliation _____

Sex _____ Academic Major _____ Religious view _____

I could easily do without the internet for several days.

(Strongly Disagree) *O* *O* *O* *O* *O* (Strongly Agree)

Outside of school and work the internet is very important in my life.

(Strongly Disagree) *O* *O* *O* *O* *O* (Strongly Agree)

Completing almost any task on the internet comes easily to me.

(Strongly Disagree) *O* *O* *O* *O* *O* (Strongly Agree)

I am mistrusting of the internet.

(Strongly Disagree) *O* *O* *O* *O* *O* (Strongly Agree)

People represent themselves truthfully online.

(Strongly Disagree) *O* *O* *O* *O* *O* (Strongly Agree)

People represent themselves truthfully in everyday interaction.

(Strongly Disagree) *O* *O* *O* *O* *O* (Strongly Agree)

Are you currently single? _____

How many committed relationships have you been in? _____

Have you ever visited an internet dating site? _____

Have you ever created a profile or account with an online dating site? _____

If yes, how many? _____

If no, would you? _____

Explain: (why you do, would, or would not): _____

Have you ever used a social networking site (like facebook or MySpace) for the purpose of dating? _____

How many individuals have you gone on a date(s) with that you met online? _____

(Not counting yourself) Do you know anyone close to you who has...?

Used an online dating website _____

Gone on a date with someone they met through a dating site _____

Been in a long-term relationship or married someone they met through a dating site _____

Please leave any other comments you may have about the survey.

Appendix C

**University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans**

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: D’Lane Compton
Co-Investigator: Corey Miller
Date: September 3, 2010
Protocol Title: “Intimate Relationship Formation: Exploring Attitudes”
IRB#: 01Sep10

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are exempt from federal regulations under 45 CFR 46.101 category 2, due to the fact that any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Exempt protocols do not have an expiration date; however, if there are any changes made to this protocol that may cause it to be no longer exempt from CFR 46, the IRB requires another standard application from the investigator(s) which should provide the same information that is in this application with changes that may have changed the exempt status.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project.
Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

Vita

The author was born in Metairie, Louisiana and was raised there until completion of Jesuit High School. He obtained a Bachelor's of Arts in Sociology and a Bachelor's of Science in Psychology from the Louisiana State University in May of 2007. He joined the Master's program in Sociology at the University of New Orleans in August of 2008 with a research assistantship at the university's Center for Hazard Assessment, Response, and Technology (CHART).