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Communication Studies

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Communication Studies

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Abstract

Even with the increasing popularity of online dating, stigmas surrounding this form of internet connection persist. Since society is inundated with images of deception in online dating, those who have never experienced online dating may believe that mass media accurately represents this type of communication. This study's main research question asks if perceptions about online dating differ between users and non-users; furthermore, these differences will be taken into account when regarding the prominence of mass media in shaping these impressions.

Currently, digital communication is a societal norm; more and more of our lives are documented and facilitated by the internet. Through understanding the differences between online daters and non-online daters, the reach of modern mass media can be better measured and combated. Through survey questioning and follow-up interviews, Pace University undergraduate students were asked to reflect on their online dating experiences, or lack thereof, and its position in relation to popular mass media, social networking, and individual personality factors. Research designs such as this provide communication studies with the proper balance of quantitative data and qualitative responses to paint a more accurate depiction of society's sentiments.

While this research provides a glimpse of American youth's opinions about online dating, enough data has been gathered to indicate that mass media plays a strong role in shaping perceptions for non-online daters. While those that do online date are less influenced, the role of popular media along with social media necessitates more analysis to contest stigmas surrounding internet communication, especially online dating. Future research can use this study as a tipping point to discover if anxiety from mass media influences not just online dating, but perceptions of other online communication. Since computer mediated communication plays an increasing role

in the lives of society today, the relevancy of such studies can prove invaluable to mass media content creators and consumers alike.

Keywords: Online dating, stigma, representation, deception

Introduction

Living in a large city, much like New York, can pose a seemingly endless opportunity for connections, networking, friendships, and romance. However, countless nights are spent alone, either exhausted from work, turned off by typical nightlife, or a combination of both. Many young people, especially in collegiate settings, adopt online dating applications as a means of meeting others: platonically, sexually, and romantically. After being introduced to online dating, this limitless world of connections with potential partners mimics the nature of social media, aligning with an internet-saturated culture. Unfortunately, a generally held opinion is that most online dating is used to find “hookups”, or end in abject failure. And many relationships online that do end up going anywhere, are considered “strange” or “weird” since they did not first meet in “real” life. The creation of connections online does not gain the same respect as encounters that initiate offline.

This popular perception may, in part, be a result of the widely-viewed program *Catfish: the TV Show*. This series has gained so much notoriety that the term “catfishing” has permeated virtually every conversation about online dating. While privacy is a concern for internet users, “catfishes” and other individuals that intend to deceive others online perpetuate this harsh image of dating online. Although this television series is meant to educate its viewers, it furthers the stereotype of online relationships and adds to the societal anxiety surrounding it. While it may seem that online dating is gaining legitimacy, the truth is that many online daters are judged, warned, and sometimes scoffed at for their encounters on the internet.

Previous studies have identified some of the traits of and motivations for deceptive behavior in online communication, yet there is still an overgeneralized perception of dating facilitated by the internet. After experiencing both the good and bad of online dating, it seems there is a stereotype of online dating, mostly emerging from those who have never experienced

it. I even noticed a difference within myself, from the moments before I downloaded the OkCupid application onto my phone, all the way to my current relationship that came from online dating. In-between these two moments, I had only one "catfishing" moment, a few awkward first dates, and some awesome meetings. The more I spoke with my peers about online dating experiences, the more I found that they also had experienced the spectrum of good and bad, but it was mostly the bad stories that became the center of discussion. This can, in part, be credited to the humor we can find in these situations, it seemed that these horrible encounters were the only stories worth telling. In general, those that did not have first-hand experiences with online dating deemed my encounters and conversations as risky, outrageous, or twist of fate.

It seems that there was a different general consensus of users and non-users: one accepting, and the other seemingly non-judgmental but coming from a place of fear. Plenty of online media publications are readily available on the subject now, since meeting people online has become commonplace. This study addresses popular perceptions about online dating, mainly derived from media, and the potential repercussions of this media has on the representation for the online dating community. Even with increasing acceptance, the general sentiments surrounding online dating have the potential to prevent others from experimenting with it. A better understanding of the mass media's influence on users and non-users can occur with the eradication of these socially held attitudes about online dating and its deception.

Literature Review

Although online dating has managed to become a staple of conversations about the internet, a common image of this vast, "world wide web" remains. This depiction of a limitless world includes the concept of constant individual performance for the judgment and acceptance

of others; social networking sites encourage users to post content for their social circles to receive likes, comments, follows, friend requests, and other reactions. Erving Goffman, writing from a sociological perspective, developed the idea of performance in communication with each other (1959). When interacting with someone else, individuals attempt to manage how another perceives them; this concept has become a fundamental component in understanding how humans interact with one another. Although Goffman originally produced this ideology with regards to face to face conversations, it translates into computer mediated communication. Continually through conversation, likes, and social networks, the anticipation of negative attention causes a perpetual management of the impressions one “gives” and “gives off”; meaning, the manner in which we represent ourselves does not always align with how our representations are perceived by others. People participate in “self-presentation” online in order to curate an identity for professional reasons, romantic endeavors, and social networking. Naturally, we attempt to project an identity that not only puts us in the best light possible, but also in a way that will be received well by those with whom we connect.

Similar to physical (“real”) life, these online personas are managed for the sake of self-esteem, desired reactions, and social image. Leary (1990) argues that, “people have an ongoing interest in how others perceive and evaluate them” (p. 34). This interest then causes individuals to build a motivation to control these perceptions, which can sometimes become problematic in the world of social media. Although the internet creates a wide window of opportunities to connect with one another, these contacts are often made for professional incentives, informal friendships, or romantic attempts. While these images of one’s identity are usually pretty accurate, the choices a user makes online for “approval or other desired reactions” is in a, “tactical, but not necessarily deceptive” manner (Leary 1990, p. 41). Through internet

communication, the impression given and impression given off collide; meaning, when a user is attempting to be professional, for instance, he or she may not always be received as thus. This engenders a misconception of what really is online deception. While most use the capabilities of life online to develop an honest, positive extension of themselves, others exploit the limitless identity prospects the “world wide web” offers.

For the case of online dating, those that misuse the malleability of identity online seem to be the center of discussion. The media plays an important role in this, considering the thousands of television shows, movies, news articles, and web pages dedicated to the extreme stories of online deception. Although deception via emerging technologies has been a familiar and sensationalized topic since the dawning of the telegraph (Standage 1998), society's perception of those who "meet online" still remains judgmental and disapproving. When an emerging technology increases in popularity, society begins to analyze and understand the nuances of the new method of communication. More often than not, the evolving acceptance of this technology is questioned and reflected by the media. Stanley Cohen (2011) created the term “moral panic” that describes this phenomenon, and noted the resulting vilification of a particular subculture; although his writings were about “Mods and Rockers”, this concept applies to online daters, too. Through both journalism and entertainment media, a widespread public apprehension surrounding online dating applications has become a cultural norm. Whether or not this is true, mass media projects a moral panic through its depiction of a certain occurrence.

When consulting these mass media sources, anxiety often permeates into most, if not all of a particular society. This manifestation of apprehensions, media moral panic, becomes constructed by mass media, often inducing disapproving societal norms (McRobbie 1995). Since online dating is popularized, media is given the agency to control perceptions disseminated

through newsworthy narratives. Manipulation of rhetoric, timeliness, and audience helps fashion a societal ideology, particularly one that questions our safety as humans. In the past decade, online dating has become a topic that induces anxiety, especially when considering digital natives internet habits.

Even with the harsh possibilities the media associates with online communications, the universe of social media has created a world of limitless socialization. We can chat with friends and family around the world, as well as strangers across the globe. Computer mediated communication makes new relationships possible, yet it also has the potential to strengthen existing connections. Emailing and social media sites are spaces for deception, but also produce an environment for, “positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks” (Houser 2012). Technology, as relational maintenance, can be positively utilized between family, friends, and significant others. Communication enabled by technology can fortify existing relationships, as well as create them in a way “real” life cannot.

This ever-growing universe of social media branches to online romance as well. Almost half of Americans know someone who uses online dating, and nearly thirty percent know someone who used these services to find more serious relationships (Smith 2013). Now that online dating is more widely accepted, and not only for “the desperate” (Bercovici 2014), downcast, judgmental views of online dating certainly do not always apply. It’s been found, too, that those who use the internet for more tasks are more likely to use online dating (Hoffman 2011). So, it should come as no surprise that a large demographic of people use online relationship establishment. Although people of just about any age use online dating, there is a large population of young, college aged students that use online dating "apps" (Rudder 2014). Perceived reliability of the internet, along with age, sex, and education, are not determining

factors in online dating usage. In fact, those that do not use online dating are typically more trusting of others (Hoffman 2011). Since younger generations are more or less digital natives, why does the shame, judgment, and hackneyed acceptance of online romance remain?

While this imbalance of acceptance can be greatly attributed to exaggerated media models, the depictions of romance online from the dating sites themselves offer an opposition to society's picture. Images of happy couples perpetuated by online dating commercials, advertisements, and testimonials often promote an unrealistic illustration of an online relationship. Blackwell (2011) found that this stark contrast to what mass media projects causes certain stigmas about particular online dating sites to develop. For example, some dating applications become infamous for generating "hook-ups" while others lead users to believe they offer more serious relationships. Even if these interpretations of love online happen for profit or not, the result is unrealistic expectations of the website, people, conversation, and the potential outcomes. This binary created by two extreme and widely curated depictions of online dating engenders a widening gap of belief and trust; thus, pressure from the mass media as well as the dating sites themselves can foster embarrassment or resentment towards their usage.

Online identity deception typically adds to society's chagrin with online dating; however, this form of dishonesty is present in social media, too. Yet, these profiles become a source to protect oneself online. Since people are more likely to be truthful about their appearance and personality when their accountability is at stake (DeAndrea 2012), one could assume that social networking can be a reliable way to "double check" a potential match's credibility. Similarly, Ellison (2012) found that, just like in real life, we may "fudge" a few details while generally avoiding complex and blatant deception. Internet users, not just online daters, can experience some white lies in profiles, while bigger lies in profiles are not as common. Interestingly enough,

one's actual profile can sometimes be overshadowed by the network of friends associated with it; that's right, who you are on social media is just as important as who your friends are on social media (Donath and Boyd 2015). Even some online dating sites understand this, since a handful of them require a pre-existing social media account in order to complete a profile. Applications such as Tinder and Hinge require “social authentication” through a Facebook account with pictures, a seemingly real friend list, a location-based social network, and likes and interests (Bercovici 2014). This “double opt-in” sets an online dater’s mind at ease, since it lowers the chance of a catfish. Even with this in mind, online daters seem to face judgement from those who do not use these websites.

Through these academic works, it is apparent that a simple Facebook friends scan or Google search can help in uncertainty management; these "uncertainty management skills" often allow a user to be more comfortable with disclosing his or her own information as well (Gibbs 2011). Obviously, an internet user is more likely to reveal personal information when they are assured by the “realness” of the person on the other side of the computer screen. But does the framed reality of online dating deception increase awareness that has the potential to stunt the growth of an internet-born relationship? Surely, hyper-personal communication and early idealization are common attributes to these kinds of interactions (Baym 2010); yet, it seems more and more individuals are affected by online deception. This, again, connotes the reach of popular media.

Although most young internet users are aware of the sensationalized nature of news programs, the strong grip mass media has on society’s perceptions are still present. In danah boyd’s book *It’s Complicated*, teenagers across America still use the internet in spite of this idea that predators are present throughout the internet (2014). While most feel that this fear is

perpetuated by parental figures, the dangers that the internet can harbor often become the predominant topic of discussion. While other scholars (Baym 2010, DeAndrea 2012, Gibbs 2011, Houser 2012, Manning 2014) describe the “affordances” the internet has (like identity dishonesty), Boyd draws on examples of cyberbullying and other harms that teenagers face online. Affordances can allow users to achieve a goal through technology that is not necessarily a part of its initial design. Social media in the lives of teenagers provides potential reasoning for online deception (fear, addiction, fantasy), but also displays the inequalities minorities face on the internet. Some limitations are the result of affordances, while others are actually built into the technology.

While these affordances allow internet users to virtually build any online identity, there is a notable amount of pressure and anxiety associated with making a proper representation of oneself on social media (Turkle's 2011, Manning 2014). Most of this tension stems from the pressure to fit our intended impressions and actual impressions given off all into one representative profile. This often results in "modality switching" (Ramirez 2015), which is the switching between an online self and an offline self. While both are carefully selected identities that the user projects, there are different social norms observed when communicating with a person online and then eventually meeting them offline. This undulating presentation of selves is present in the physical world, since most people feel they are one person when with friends and another at work (Goffman 1959).

Nevertheless, it is widely known that an online profile can either misrepresent an identity, or even be completely faked. Deception can be detected within profiles in other ways; linguistic habits can cue online daters to deception (Toma 2012). Longer posts that utilize more articles are perceived as more trustworthy, while shorter posts with less second-person pronouns seem less

trustworthy. Nev Shulman additionally gives his readers and viewers more skills to keep themselves safe, such as reverse Google image search and Spokeo.com phone number search. Unfortunately, those who are the victims of catfish typically do not employ these strategies. As digital natives, how does internet safety that is repeatedly introduced manage to go unutilized in situations as seemingly dangerous as these? Is this internet danger with romance a commonly experienced apprehension, or just an extension of media moral panic?

Relations can be enhanced by the internet through reduced social cues, developing a richer connection through anticipation and excitement (Baym 2010). But online romance is more than just an extension of the communication imperative. Dating online goes farther than a simple understanding of assumed similarity and reduced social risk. Constantly being connected would lead us to believe we're better at making and keeping friendships, romantic relationships, and identifying deceit "in real life", but this is not the case. Online dating applications and websites do make potential matches and hook-ups as easy as a swipe on a screen; it has also complicated the process of dating in "real" life. Keeping yourself safe online often becomes obsessing over numerous internet searches or staying off of online dating sites altogether. While online dating is not for everyone, I think a developed societal perception can not only help online daters, but non-online daters, alike.

Research question

This study's main research question asks if perceptions about online dating differ between users and non-users; furthermore, these differences will be taken into account when regarding the prominence of mass media in shaping these impressions.

Popular Media

In order to better grasp the opinions and stereotypes about online dating, one should assess the depictions of online dating circulated by mass media. Due to the availability of media, those who have never used online dating can gather a sense of what it entails. Similar to journalistic publications, mass media images of online dating intend to educate but can often provide a distorted picture of reality. Sensationalized scenarios, which are often extreme and rare cases, become more commonplace in the broad representation of online deception. Media moral panic (McRobbie 1995) has the potential to integrate into societal and cultural norms, and thus creating a maintained, judgmental, and inaccurate view of communicating with others.

One of the most popular programs on MTV, *Catfish: the TV Show*, follows deception in online relationships. Originally beginning as a film, Nev Shulman created a spin-off television series that grew into a fundamental talking point about internet identity and various relationships built around honest and dishonest representations. Since the term “catfish” has become a staple in conversations about online relationships, it should come as no surprise that 2.5 million viewers tuned in to watch the season two premiere of *Catfish: the TV Show* (O’Connell 2013). The overwhelming viewership of Shulman’s show reached a demographic of ages twelve to thirty-four, meaning a noteworthy chunk of American youth consume this show.

With four seasons and almost fifty episodes, *Catfish: the TV Show* has provided viewers with an assortment of deceptive situations. In one of the most popular episodes, a homosexual man, Rod, admits to his internet friend of four years that he has lied about his name and appearance; “Ebony”, the transgendered woman he has been communicating with, turns out to be a biologically female lesbian that has an 11 year old daughter. Another episode follows Mike, a young man from New Jersey who has feelings for Felicia. Although Felicia claims to live close to Mike, she can never meet him since she constantly travels to her newly opened hair salon in

Orlando. After some investigation, it is uncovered that Felicia was truthful about her appearance, but not her occupation, living situation, or past actions (Jarercki 2013). These extreme cases of fraud online depict the dark prospects and risks anyone can face while chatting with a stranger. However, not everything featured on *Catfish: the TV Show* is entirely deceptive; some episodes feature couples who have been truthful to one another.

While some programs focus on the lies people tell on another in an online relationship, other productions display cases of misfortune. On the Investigation Discovery channel, “Dates from Hell” provide audiences with dramatized reenactments of true events; a handful of these stories come from internet initiated relationships that went unexpectedly and exceptionally awry. Also, this particular television channel produces “Who the (Bleep) Did I Marry?”, a series dedicated to the outrageous and dangerous scenarios a few singles encounter after tying the knot with their supposed “soulmate”. Only a few of the narratives involve online daters, yet, the general sensitivity to trust issues is exaggerated with these shows. Consequently, movie channels, such as *Lifetime*, generate fright in their viewers with movies about online dating that result in homicide and heartache. “Fatal Desire”, “Tallhotblond”, “The Wife He Met Online”, and “The Craigslist Killer” are just some of the sensationalized films consumed by audiences; again, these amplify our awareness of dishonesty and internet safety when developing relations online.

Aside from television and film, publications online have an impact with internet users as well. In the summer of 2014, OkCupid founder Christian Rudder posted a confession to the site’s blog that they “experiment on human beings” (2014), purposefully playing with match statistics to ignite conversations and connections. In the wake of Facebook admitting their unconsented usage of users’ content (Kerr 2014), internet users were shocked, reacting in a strong,

disapproving manner. Regardless of the righteousness of the site's behavior, netizens established an understanding of their exposure online, developing a visceral anxiety to dating and relationship development. Internet safety remains a primary concern of internet users often covered and overemphasized by journalistic media. By treating online daters as free, involuntary participants in an experiments, more sensationalized media is consumed by online daters and non-online daters alike. This experiment was covered by numerous online publications, throwing reader further into a societal media trap. While Rudder and other netizens are aware that, "people online are free to act out their worst impulses with very little incentive to act out their best" (Leonard 2014), this usually explains specific and extreme cases rather than mutual experiences. Even with increasing reception, online dating mishaps such as these have a tendency to be embellished and repeated by popular news media.

Increasing amounts of time spent on the internet would lead one to assume that society has a better understanding of online relationships; however, this is not the case. It appears that this gap between "real life" and our lives online remains. Understandably, the emergence of each new technology brings a great deal of fear, anxiety, judgment, and curiosity. In the case of online dating, a media moral panic arises from the sources netizens use to educate themselves about online romance. Whether an online dater or not, the popular images embedded into media help to create the stigma against online dating. Even as a rapidly expanding method of connection, online daters can continue to experience prejudice if moral panic perpetuated by media continues.

Methodology

While this study focuses on online dating, a better understanding of its stigmas is possible through an analysis of the general perceptions of the users and non-users. Pace students were

selected as subjects due to their familiarity with social media. As digital natives, undergraduates of Pace University mostly have an understanding of media like online dating, even when they have never experienced it. Even if a student does not use online dating, they are very likely to be familiar with the spectrum of experiences an online dater can encounter; stories of online dating are extensively disseminated, from both peers, acquaintances, and mass mediums alike. This commonality with the internet is why the survey was hosted online; this would maximize the preexisting comfort level users already have with the computer.

Fortunately, online dating seems to be prevalent on campus. Distributing the survey via a Pace University listserv helped me find the online daters and non-online daters on campus. Another reason that made Pace a good choice for research was its societal dynamics. Pace University is a private institution; its location in a bustling city allows for an extremely diverse and ever-changing web of connections. While this pool of individuals serves as a convenience sample, the vast assortment of upbringings provided an expanded selection of respondents. The networks available to Pace students can range from a handful of floormates to pretty much the entire city. This adaptability is innate to the Pace community, permitting a large spectrum of participants.

Previous studies distributed surveys as well as personal interviews in order to better recognize and distinguish patterns of deception, especially with respect to relationship development. Even outside of romantic relationships, Western society dedicates a lot of time and effort to online communication. Due to the increasing reliance on internet correspondence, questioning attempted to draw a connection between time spent on the internet and security with online dating. Self-representation, confidence, and esteem were important too, since the impression of catfishing is built upon these personality factors. Moreover, online dating seemed

to have a correlation with social media in general, especially in the sites that required a pre-existing Facebook account.

Both surveys began with general demographic questions, in order to fashion a general awareness of cultural backgrounds. Next, respondents of both surveys were asked to rate their self-confidence, with attention to security in their appearance and their personality. An online dater then had to assert whether or not they believed their online dating accounts accurately represented themselves, and if not, the reason behind it. Non-online daters were posed the same question, just in regards to their social media accounts. Questions about deception online were asked, especially with respects to *Catfish: the TV Show*. A great deal of my perception of online deception had originally been shaped by this show, so I felt that this would be a good source of inspiration. Widely circulated media about online dating seem to address this concept that the pool of daters online are vast, wide, and limitless, just like the “world wide web”. Since these images of online dating are so profoundly consumed, does it create a misunderstanding with those who do not use online dating, if at all?

Social media became an important factor in determining perceptions of online dating, since online dating can be sparked through applications other than those geared toward dating. *Catfish: the TV Show* taught me that people sometimes romantically meet one another on Facebook, Instagram, and even blogs. Due to this, surveys asked participants to include some information about their social media habits. Some online dating applications require prior Facebook profiles, while others don't require social media but encourage users to "link" their profiles. Some of these applications will not work without these profiles (I know this because I tried to create basic social media accounts with minimal information and pictures of myself, and either the application would not allow me to proceed without adding friends or likes, or I would

be restricted from messaging other users). Clearly, catfishing on some of these platforms then become intricate and time-costly. However, there is a possibility that most online deception does not take the form of the stereotypical “catfish”. Maybe there is a populace of daters that display a “better version” of themselves, with carefully chosen pictures at flattering angles or other forms of selective disclosure.

Since non-online daters often critique those who do online date with the phrase "If I was in that situation, I would...", hypothetical questioning was used. From both online daters and online dating skeptics, potential choices in a variety of situations were projected. Of course saying what “I would do in a specific situation” and the actions that occur in reality are most likely be different. Most people who use online dating know that the widest spectrum of unknown variables are present when delving into an online relationship; therefore, even in the most ideal situations, what we *would* do in a certain situation is not always what we *should* do, or end up doing. Similarly, what one believes they present themselves as is not always how they actually are perceived. Regardless, hypotheticals can help us to understand projected and potential choices surrounding online dating and social media.

Impression management was an important factor in question development, since self-representation, censorship, and esteem are relevant in both the online and physical world. Anonymous surveys were the best method of gaining these answers since the pressure of self-presentation would have less of an effect on answers. Respondents were only identified when they provided their email for a follow-up interview. With survey questioning, general statistics can be drawn, but one-on-one interviews would hopefully delineate a trend either with online daters or non-online daters. Follow-up interviews were contingent upon the participants, and their willingness to forgo anonymity. Those that left their email at the end of the survey were

contacted with potential meeting times and the promise of coffee. A broad portrait of an internet user's self-presentation was to be drawn, even if they use online dating or not.

In order to properly prepare for human subject research, I completed the Pace University IRB process, as well as the Protecting Human Subjects Research Participants certification. Through these procedures, an informed consent form, suitable consent waivers, potential risks to the participants, and the necessity of beneficence was developed. Sensitivity was imperative in the surveying and interviewing process, since it was really the only potential risk involved. The capacity to gain the answers, while still respecting an individual's behavior and social and psychological state was important. While most young people seem fairly open to discuss their internet habits, their vulnerability is a matter that should be handled with care. In this particular case, the possibility of jeopardizing a student's vulnerability is significantly low, especially compared to the foreseeable benefit of understanding more about internet communications, this risk is reduced further.

Given the subject matter of this research, making participants feel as comfortable as possible is a priority to elicit the most honest and candid answers. Through human subject training and the IRB approval process, I gained a better understanding of research ethics. Dating often becomes a delicate subject when encompassing the internet, so the email listserv and anonymous survey allowed for noninvasive questioning without the pressures of consequences for being honest.

Survey Findings

Online daters and non-online daters engaged in the surveys from the middle of March until mid-April. Each user spent an average of ten minutes completing the survey; thirty online daters and thirty five non-online daters participated. These Pace University students reflected on

either experiences with online dating, social media, or both. Through these two surveys, five recurring concepts became important factors to understanding the reach of media moral panic: demographics, account usage (for either dating applications or social media), popular media influence, general sentiments surrounding online dating, and lastly uncertainty management skills. These five motifs became integral to defining the similarities and difference between online daters and non-online daters.

Each questionnaire followed a similar progression, only omitting questions that were applicable to online daters. In some cases, the same question was asked, but tailored to a social media profile, rather than an online dating account. This was integral to comparison, since it became easy to weigh some opinions literally side by side. While most of the statistics are included below, the remaining numbers can be found in the Appendix.

Demographics

Both surveys began with identical demographic questions. For the online daters' survey, almost 60% of respondents were between the ages of 21 and 23, while the majority of non-online daters were under 20. Since this survey was distributed to undergraduates, it was understandable to see little variation in age. Race was scattered throughout the survey for online daters, with Black, Asian, Hispanic, and mixed races represented; 62% identified as white, 12.5% as Black/African American, 12.5% multiracial, 8% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% as Hispanic/Latino. The non-online dating survey saw only three racial representations. An overwhelming bulk of respondents identified as Caucasian (approximately 84%), with less than ten percent each identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander or Multiracial. These demographics are somewhat representative of the student body at Pace, since there was some variation in racial

backgrounds. However, Pace University is slightly less than half White/Non-Hispanic (“Undergraduate Admission” 2015), leaving this sample to be imbalanced.

For the sample’s genders, each survey was over 80% female, with only six male participants over all. While Pace University is over half female (“Undergraduate Admission” 2015), this sample still is disproportionate. On the other hand, sexuality was a category that showed diversity among online daters, but not for non-online daters. Most of the participants were heterosexual, at 66.7%, but other respondents chose homosexual (16.7%), bisexual (12.5%), and one identified as a sexuality that was not listed; there was only one non-heterosexual individual for the entire non-online dating survey. Lastly, income representations showed little variation, since most of its respondents fell under the less than \$10,000 mark. Although there was some variation within the online dating survey, the participants are students and most likely dependent upon their parents’ finances.

Account Usage: Online Dating and Social Media

When online daters were asked their reason for online dating, most of the participants asserted it was for casual dating (almost 88%). “For conversation” was the second most popular answer (about 67%), while “serious dating” was chosen by 45% of respondents. This question had the option of providing a unique, unlisted reason. One male answered honestly by saying he used the applications for sex. One female, who in a follow-up interview revealed that she produces a podcast about online dating, stated her online dating usage is, “to gather crazy stories”. The most interesting, however, was a different female who admitted that she uses online dating, “to find marijuana (people who sell it) when traveling”; this was an unexpected, yet intriguing example of online dating affordances. These affordances provide individuals with the capability of employing technology in a different way from its intended use. Out of all the dating

applications, Tinder was the most prevalent, used by almost 96% of participants¹. Figure 1 below demonstrates the stark popularity of this application in particular.

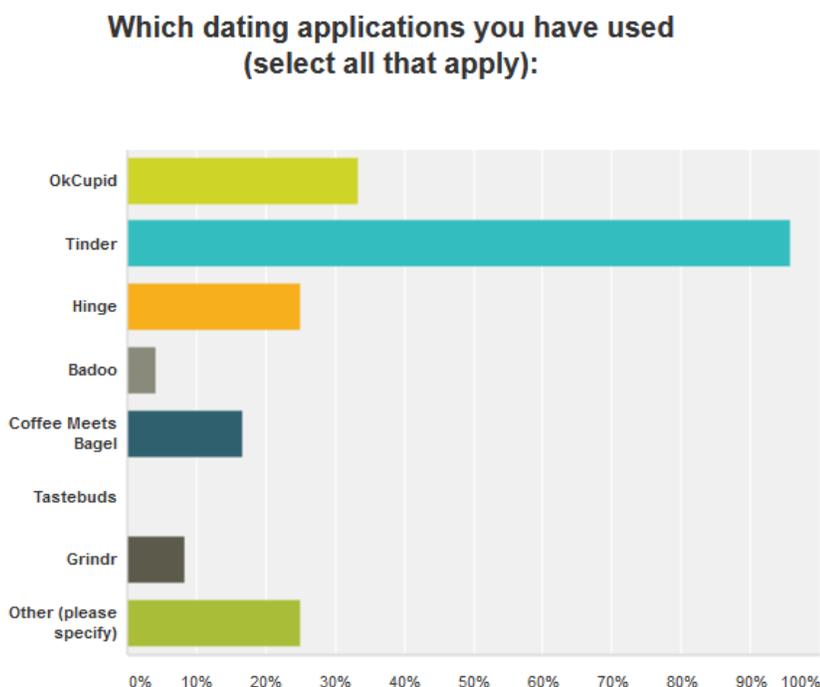


Figure 1

Although users were able to pick multiple answers, the clear popularity of Tinder was established.

Individuals were asked when they last accessed their account, with slightly less than half claiming they checked their application within the past twenty four hours. Almost fifty percent said they accessed their profile within the past month. Students were then asked if they felt their dating account profiles depicted their appearance and personality “in real life”. The most

¹ OkCupid came in second at 33%, with Hinge, Coffee Meets Bagel, Grindr, and Badoo at 25%, 16%, 8%, and 4% respectively. This was another question that included the choice to specify any other applications that were not listed. Plenty of Fish was mentioned twice, Happn and Seeking Arrangements cited once each, and one noted that she meets people on social media websites, like Tumblr, in conjunction with online dating applications.

common answer was “yes”, selected by over 85% of individuals. The following question, geared toward the small percentages that answered no, searched for the reason behind an improper or inaccurate online representation. The two explanations that were selected were “It’s hard to represent my personality in just a profile” and “It’s hard to represent my body in just a few pictures”. It seemed that most responders asserted their self confidence in “real” life, their insecurities became more apparent when translating their identity to an online space.

Online daters were asked how they heard about these applications. “Social media” came in first, with almost 80% identifying it as their main source. “Friends” ranked second; yet, “television” ranked higher than “family”. Online daters were asked if they ever had the desire to depict themselves differently online (“catfishing”), in which 30% admitted to wanting to, but never actually having done so. When asked to rate their satisfaction with online dating on a scale from one to ten (one being not satisfied at all, and ten being very satisfied), these ratings averaged a 6.43. About 35% recognized that they were in the middle, but more or less satisfied. Almost half felt that they were more satisfied, ranking themselves between a seven and a ten.

Since this segment of the questioning was dedicated to online dating profiles, non-online daters were asked similar questions, but in regards to their social media accounts. In some instances, a question was either geared toward his or her predominant social networking platform or entirely omitted. They were asked whether or not their profiles properly depicted their personality and appearance as it is in “real” life. While over 70% of non-online daters felt that it did, the minority of respondents found difficulty of representing one’s personality and physicality online.

Catfish: The TV Show

Since the popular MTV television program *Catfish* often becomes the center of discussion with online dating deception, students were asked if they have seen or heard of this widely-known series. Research indicates that this show is just as popular as anticipated, since the majority of both surveys have seen at least one episode. Most online daters have seen between two and five episodes. Collectively, only four people have never or heard of this show. Then, responders were asked if they felt this television show accurately depicted online dating deception. Most individuals felt that *Catfish* was a dramatized portrayal of deceit in online dating. Surprisingly enough, about one fourth of each survey felt that it was an accurate representation of internet dating deception. Those who felt it was an accurate portrayal all identified themselves as pretty secure in their appearance and personality, but asserted in another survey question that they feel “strange” meeting someone from an online dating account. These individuals also were students who did not consider themselves as “heavy internet users”, spending less than 3 hours online daily.

General Attitudes Toward Online Dating

Reflecting on personal beliefs, students identified how they felt generally about online dating. This was done to draw distinctions between those who experience online dating, and those that have not. Almost 70% of online daters felt that these applications are a “good way to meet people romantically”, and over 90% felt that they were good for meeting people platonically. Non-online daters did not answer as definitively, once again splitting 50/50 when speaking about dating applications, both in the platonic and romantic sense.

Those who do not online date were asked their reason for not utilizing these dating applications. While a substantial amount said they were not single or looking to date, 40% stated that they “feel strange meeting someone online.” The left over twenty percent provided their own

particular reasoning. Understandably, one female noted that, “It’s difficult to trust someone online”. Another female expressed her fears of online dishonesty since she does not, “want to meet a murderer online and get attacked by them. It’s true that you could also meet a murderer in real life, but I think that it’s easier to end up on a date with them if you meet them online.” Two others articulated concerns relating to the detached nature of online dating; one compared it to a judgmental form of shopping, while the other asserted that, “people need not be afraid of face to face social interaction.” These answers indicate some sort of influence from mass media.

Uncertainty Management

Participants were told to imagine that they were enjoying a conversation with someone from an online dating application. Over 65% of online daters said that they have use uncertainty reduction strategies, while almost 20% said that they would use these skills. Surprisingly, 17% of online daters said that they would not try to track them down. The most used technique was a Facebook search, while a general Google search came next. Only two online daters said they’ve used reverse Google image searches², while nobody claimed to have used IP address searches or Spokeo phone number searches. Other responders said that Instagram and LinkedIn searches were helpful methods as well. Below is Figure 2, which depicts the uncertainty management skills the respondents have used.

Participants were given the same hypothetical situation again, this time the person on the other end of the conversation claimed that they did not have any social media; a situation like this eliminates most of the uncertainty managements skills listed above, yet Nev Shulman (2014)

² A reverse Google image search is when a user drags an image, rather than a word or phrase, into the Google search bar. This technique garners results of similar images and websites that include the image that is searched. In the world of online dating, this method of double checking someone’s picture can help determine if the person on the other end of the screen is a “catfish”.

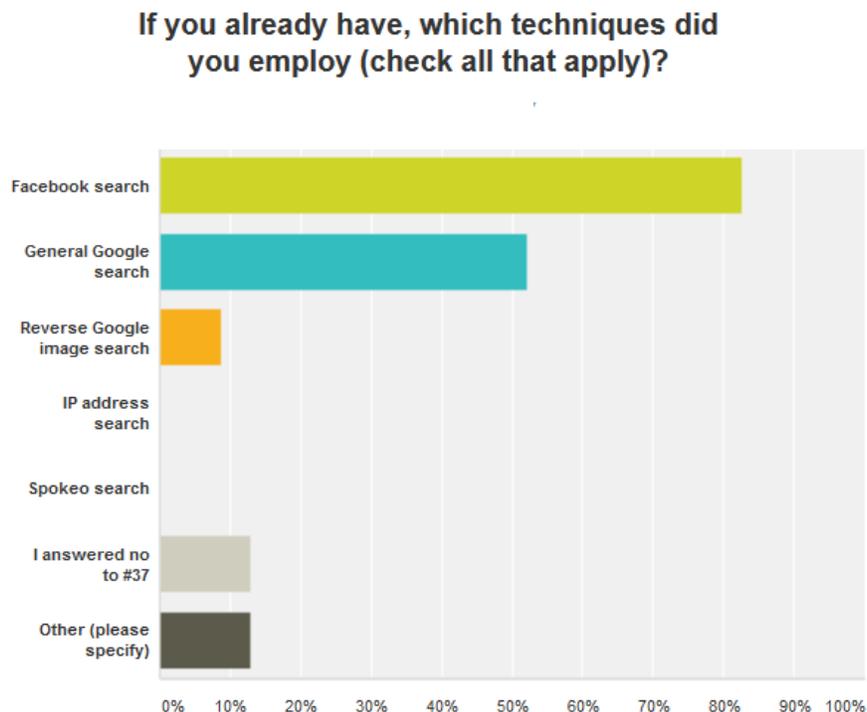


Figure2

notes that this is usually the first sign that dishonesty may be afoot. Almost half of online daters claimed that they would be “neither less nor more likely” to talk to someone if they had no social media, while 35% said that they would be a lot less likely. This situation was taken one step further and asked students overall how likely they would be to meet someone if they claimed to have no social media. Online daters asserted that they mostly would not be less nor more likely, while a small minority said they would be somewhat less likely. One respondent claimed that she would be more likely to speak with that person; this multiracial female who has met between six and ten people from her online dating accounts; she also noted that she would be more likely to meet him or her, too.

More than half of non-online daters, however, stated they would be a lot less likely to talk someone without a social media presence. Almost 80% claimed they would be much less likely to meet them. This indicates the integral role of social media in confirming a person’s identity. This aligns with Donah and Boyd’s research on social networking and credibility; pre-existing

social connections establish credibility among internet users, especially in the realm of online dating.

Interview Findings

Follow-up interviews were conducted two weeks after the initial release of the surveys. Four online daters and two non-online daters clarified some of their answers in 15-30 minute meetings on Pace's main campus. Rachel and Amanda³ were two young females that never experienced online dating, while Stephanie, Sarah, Victoria, and Erin⁴ were all females that are active on dating applications. Rachel, a biracial heterosexual female, was active member of Twitter whose perception of online dating was heavily influenced by *Lifetime* films and television shows. Amanda, a white heterosexual female, constantly chats on Facebook, yet gauges her trust in online dating through her high school memories of sensationalized media, too. On the other hand, Stephanie is a white lesbian in an open relationship with a partner she met online. Actively social on Instagram, Sarah was another white lesbian who chose to expand her dating life through Tinder. Victoria, a heterosexual Asian female, is active across many social media profiles and currently is developing a podcast about online dating. Lastly, Erin, a black female with a sexuality she identified as "not listed" explicitly draws a parallel to online dating and social media.

The most notable finding through the interviews was the place of media in the shaping of one's perception of online dating. While all six young women had seen popular programs like *Catfish* and *The Craigslist Killer*, it was the two non-online daters who seemed to use these items as reference points in their online lives. After mentioning a few television shows about online dating deception, Rachel revealed that it was these images of deception that were "pretty much

³ Pseudonyms were used.

⁴ Pseudonyms were used.

the reason why I would never do online dating.” She was convinced that the World Wide Web was teeming with “wack-jobs”, murderers, and other criminals that were preying on her.

Similarly, Amanda noted that a great deal of her education about online dating came from “public service announcement”-like assemblies at her high school that warned students about internet safety.

For the online daters, many of the students discredited programs like *Catfish*, due to their highly dramatized and “made for TV” nature. All four female online daters felt that these widely known publications about dishonesty and online dating were a very rare, extreme, and unlikely image of what could happen if one is “stupid”. Both Stephanie and Sarah called the featured online daters on *Catfish* “stupid”, while Victoria and Erin chalked it up to the need to draw in an audience.

Reduced social cues were both concerns for online daters and non-online daters. All four online daters insisted that meeting someone offline for the first time was the most important step in the relationship. Erin lamented that much of her encounters turned into a slew of first dates, even though none of her partners, “stuck out as not being what they advertised.” It was clear that after meeting them in person, many more social cues arose and indicated they were not a good match, regardless of what was “advertised”. Rachel said that meeting physically is the best way to,

“kinda judge someone better. ‘Cause when you have to see their face, and you can still meet a wack-o that way, but you have a better chance of like, discerning if something is right or wrong by looking at someone. “

The stigma surrounding online dating may come from that “weird feeling” some respondents felt when imagining physically meeting someone for the first time. Surely, this sentiment can be

experienced “in real life” through universal dating anxiety. Maybe this question of discernment, influenced by popular media, increases when pressured by general fears of starting a relationship with another individual. While it was not as prominent as expected, it was clear to see that some non-online daters had an air of disapproval toward those who do online date. Over 80% of non-online daters felt that using Tinder or OkCupid was not only for the desperate; yet, through the personal interviews, a judgmental opinion of online dating was apparent. Rachel said an online dating profile is,

“Like screaming like, ‘I’M ACTIVELY LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO like GO OUT WITH’ or something like that I just feel like it’s kind of weird. If you’re just going out, looking, I guess you can kind of do it, like secretly, like, ‘Oh yeah, I’m looking for someone, but whatever’...I feel like it’s more natural if you’re just out, in real life than out online.”

Through another non-online dater, it was apparent that “actively looking” for a partner should be a source of shame. While it was okay to search for someone through social scenes, like at school, work, or a bar, taking one’s search for love online became much more embarrassing. Amanda, a freshman at Pace University, branded the creation of a dating profile as, “a sign of failure.” She pointed out the myriad of social and networking opportunities college students are given, especially as a freshman in a big city. Since college students are, “around new people *all the time*, there’s so much potential for...something.” Although both of these girls comparing the usage of online dating to their own lives, it is hard to assume their opinions do not impede on how they view their peers’ online relationships. Both said they have friends and acquaintances whom successfully used online dating, yet, their hesitation caused by embarrassment was still evident.

Where does this embarrassment come from? Although it would be normal to assume this shame and anticipation of humiliation comes from a place of insecurity, most survey respondents stated their security in their appearance and personality. Media moral panic could explain the uncertainty and hesitation to accept online dating as a safe, legitimate method of meeting people. Sarah, a lesbian online dater, defined it best when she spoke about her initial reluctance to create an online dating profile. While she was concerned about a potential partner being “crazy” or a “scumbag”, her, “biggest fear is rejection, at most.” While she understood the risks involved when moving an online relationship to an offline reality, meeting murderers are not as big of a worry as initiating relationships with “scumbags”. This fear is magnified when taken into the context of online dating, rather than in “real life”. Initiating in offline dating brings the fear of meeting a “scumbag”, too.

Regardless of online dating experience, each female stressed the prominent role social media has in all of this. Obviously, social media has become a staple in any young person’s life; but, when it comes to the realm of meeting others online, social networking sites become a source of verification, credibility, and security. While some of the responders said that they would be less likely to talk to someone without social media accounts, there are a few that said they would be neither less nor more likely. For those who do not use online dating, it seems as if an absence on social media was an important red flag. It serves as a basis for confirming another’s identity, sort of fact-checking a personal narrative. For Amanda, the help of “mutual friends” allows her to discern if someone is acceptable to talk to or not; these latent ties, or the lack thereof, indicates already the type of person with which she is chatting. Her pre-established connections serve as her biggest tool for deciding whether or not the person on the other end is a, “good person”. The idea of online dating seems unsafe to her since she does not have this same

confirmation Facebook gives her, dating applications create a margin for mishaps. Rather than chatting with a complete stranger, if a friend's friend wants to communicate Amanda feels, "it's better."

For Rachel, not having a Facebook or Twitter to "double-check" someone's story heightened her fear of meeting a criminal online. By not having a body of work to compare against, Rachel doubts and reservations of meeting someone online confirms her worst case scenario fears of serial killers and other harmful people.

"If there's nothing to compare, I'd be like, 'ooh, that's sketchy,' 'cause who doesn't have any type of anything, especially nowadays? Especially if it's like a young person! That would spark a lot of flags for me. I would be like, 'oh no.'"

Unlike Amanda, a mutual friend on Facebook is not as telling as the absences on someone's social media profile. To her, complete absenteeism of a social media profile is bad, but a profile with inaccuracies is worse. With regards to personal details, Rachel noted that she would, "probably look that up first before I started talking to them online...I'd like, stalk them online and check them out and see, like, how they are." Since social media sites like Facebook encourages specific information about education, friend groups, events, interests, and work history, it provides an authorization of who actually is on the other end. The creator of the *Catfish* empire notes himself the importance of uncertainty reduction strategies (Leary 1990).

Yet, in that same conversation, Rachel asserted that Facebook often depicts a person's light in the most favorable way possible. She told me that her favorite social media platform is Twitter, since a user's anonymity can remain intact. Nevertheless, Facebook updates and profiles force users, "to put up this fake front. And it's like, 'oh, whose life is better?'" She says that this game-like scenario is "annoying" and derives from the nature of Facebook to ask for personal

details. This tendency to project a picture-perfect image of oneself on Facebook was notable for online daters too. Stephanie, for example, proclaimed that on this particular social networking site she is “America’s sweet heart...like, *the* good girl of good girls.” Stephanie, along with the other survey respondents, asserted that Facebook was a platform for keeping up with friends from her hometown and relatives, but there seems to be a need to perform. As Goffman (1959) noted, the sheer opportunity to perform is a chance to influence another’s perception of oneself. Therefore, the world of social media is a limitless occasion to manage what others may perceive you as, and produce a positive an image as possible.

Obviously, this need to advertise the self on online dating is simply to entice potential partners. When describing presentation for an online dating profile, Erin stated it best when she asked, “How else are you gonna get people to go out with you?” While online dating is dependent upon the truthful advertising of the self, accuracy sometimes is overshadowed by the desire to be interesting enough for another’s attention. For example, an online dater may put a picture of themselves windsurfing to indicate his or her adventurous side, when in reality, he or she has only done that activity once. This front seems to bleed into social networking, too. Social media sites convey the need to highlight one’s assets in order to be more interpersonally active, gain popularity, or maintain relationships strained by distance. And since social networking sites like Facebook often become a point of authorization, this awareness of positive and accurate representation of oneself becomes the crux of a person’s online social life.

Compartmentalization often becomes a feature of online life, since different acquaintances, friends, peers, colleagues, and relatives could be looking at what you post. Stephanie, both active on Facebook and Tumblr, noted that certain material is more appropriate for one platform. This differentiation in placing her content originates from her need to perform

for specific sects of people in her life. Even for her online dating profiles, she feels the need to execute her self-presentation in manner that elicits particular responses from its viewers.

“I think it’s all me. It’s just more different parts of me... They’re all true things, but just some things people wanna see more and things people don’t wanna see more. I try to look at it like, if my grandma is gonna look at this or if an employer is gonna look at this.”

While this may seem like pure manipulation, this self-presentation management is a staple in anyone’s online life today. Realizing the gap between these separate versions of oneself creates the capacity to develop a “true” representation of an “internet” self. With self-security, any anxiety surrounding online romance can be better eradicated, thus eliminating the great potential for a media moral panic.

Discussion

While some of the information gathered in the surveys seemed commonplace, the reiteration of certain issues in internet culture can help society better understand media moral panic, as well as fight against it. Demographic trends, media moral panic, “gamification” of dating, and presence of social media and self-representation emerged as key points in understanding the differences between online daters and non-online daters. Understanding these dissimilarities can tackle media moral panic, while helping media developers, content producers, and consumers to better understand the social fabrics within internet communities. Even if these occurrences are online, communication in “real” life can be improved too; since anxiety is removed and acceptance is increased, more honesty and openness can be achieved in conversations about how we connect with one another. Through these five integral concepts, the discussion about our lives online can flourish.

Demographic Trends

As mentioned in the previous section, survey demographic breakdowns were, to an extent, representative of Pace's overall demographic makeup. About half of Pace University is Caucasian, and almost 60% of students are female. Additionally, there were different sexual orientations represented for online daters; this aligns with the strong presence of LGBTQA organizations on campus. Although this survey saw a great deal of white, heterosexual females, the surveys maintained some accuracy in expressing the nuances of Pace University's identity. Though this was a limited pool of students, the great difference between Pace's online daters and Pace's non-online daters initiates some new questions; why do more ethnic minorities and non-heterosexual respondents turn to online dating, while straight, white, heterosexual females do not? Surely this question is not easily answered, yet it does validate a public conversation about racial tendencies and how we date.

In her publication *It's Complicated*, danah boyd describes that bias is innate within technology. Since our education about one another is possible through social media accounts, this correlation between race and online dating usage signifies continuing prejudice. Internet partiality creates an imbalanced system of communication because like-minded people are grouped together. Although this seems to be present within the dating world, occurrences similar to the ones in this survey typically bleed into conversations in reality. Because we are living, "in a technological era defined by social media, where information flows through networks and where people curate information for their peers, who you know shapes what you know. When social divisions get reinforced online, information inequities also get reproduced" (p. 172). Naturally embedded prejudice can indistinctly create worlds that strengthen disapproval of diverse ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. While users may be aware of racism, sexism, or

heteronormative oppression “in real life”, these circumstances migrate to an online environment, further perpetuating discrimination, condemnation, and hate. It is widely held that the internet serves as a social setting in which one could be whomever he or she is, troubling concepts such as these prevent a true freedom to express identity.

Aside from identity, the social fabrics woven into technology create more challenges. Rather than racial, gender, sexual, or economic identity, internet users can become categorized further by being an online dater. For example, how can a portion of society (who have never experienced online dating) look past a dating application’s affordances and view it as a legitimate way to meet others, both romantically and platonically? This is not easily answered, especially when considering respondents like the one who claimed she uses online dating applications to find marijuana. Online daters who do misuse the internet’s affordances become the universally circulated image of an online dater’s appearance; the “darkness” of the internet is projected into this image, promoting a negative, downcast, and judgmental view of online dating. Especially when considering some of the non-online daters who “feel weird meeting someone online”, the stigma against online dating is still visible.

Media Moral Panic

Although society is moving away from a media moral panic about online dating, there are residual effects on general attitudes toward online relationship forming. Media moral panic, as described by McRobbie (1995), is constructed by mass media’s increasing authority, in conjunction with socially developed perceptions. While this term is mainly used alongside journalistic publications, this panic certainly applies to the rapidly expanding world of online dating. Since nearly one half of Americans personally know an online dater (Smith 2013), television programs, popular blogs, films, and other media broadcasts can undoubtedly effect an

individual's sentiment toward online dating. These sensationalized depictions of online dating experiences may intend to educate viewers on potential harms, positive and successful narratives of online dating are often excluded.

While there are positive examples of success stories available on an online dating website, circulated images of deception with little positive juxtaposition creates an imbalanced, uncomfortable internet landscape. Although a great deal of online daters and non-online daters asserted in their surveys that they do not believe shows like *Catfish: the TV Show* are accurate representations of online dating deception, there was still a substantial amount that felt it did. Rachel, for instance, knows the dangers of meeting a murderer or predator online, as well as the possibility of meeting one "in real life". She shrugs off her high consumption of television and movies, while echoing the extreme hazards that lurk online.

Convinced she will be attacked, Rachel claims to have no bias against online dating, yet is vehemently against even trying online dating. She feels that since these interactions are through a screen, a great deal of social cues can be missed, thus increasing the prospect of harm. "I think there's a substantial risk. I don't know, maybe I'm just weird but I would be like, afraid something would happen to me. Especially you always hear about young kids online and who get lured by a predator, like I don't want that happening. Like all my stuff online is like, private, I don't play games.... I feel like it's much easier to lie and not be able to perceive it online." Yes, generally society is becoming more accepting of relationships that start online; but why is it that some are still afraid of what is on the other side of the screen? Although there are reduced social cues (Baym 2010), it seems that when a screen is put between two people there is a vast web of possibilities that lie between; this immense window of opportunity seems to be denounced by media moral panic to instill fear within society. This, again, hints at a much

needed conversation about awareness of online dating affordances, and how fear of reduced social cues can influence an entire sect of netizens.

As mentioned earlier, not many students felt that this popular MTV program displayed a true image of online dating, especially with regards to deception. Yet, even in identifying that many students felt this show was “fake”, some still included material from this show as arguments against online dating. When asked why popular publications like *Catfish: the TV Show* incorrectly depict the face of online dating, Stephanie, an online dater, described the particular lens the show operates through. Online dating works when one is aware of its affordances, especially the ones that involve risks. *Catfish* only tells half the story about deception because,

“You have to be smart about it. If you’re dating someone for a year and they don’t want to video chat you, they’re not them...If you like Google stalk image [reverse Google image search] of the girl and they come up it’s not them, you just gotta be smarter about it and everyone on *Catfish* is just...not. “

Uncertainty reduction strategies, such as reverse Google image searches, allow internet users to double check someone’s pictures; this is helpful in determining exactly who is sending this particular image. In the quote above, Stephanie is highlighting a system of safety an online dater *can* use, but often is not used in programs like *Catfish*. The show itself is promoting a very particular type of online dater, one that seems to be few and far between.

Gamification of Dating

Additional interview conversation solidified the fact that deception online is not exactly what is seen on television. It is widely projected that deception online is luring someone with a fake persona in an attempt to start a relationship or seek revenge. However, Stephanie, as a

lesbian college student in an open relationship with her girlfriend, proves that dishonesty can take an ambiguous, fluid form.

“I sext-fish, where I’m like, I wouldn’t do any of this, but this one guy was like come over...Un-match you for laughs...I do it in class too, where like I’ll be like how fast, how long will it take to get this guy hard? ...I don’t know, I think it’s very game-like. And then for girls, it’s different. But I don’t date girls now, ‘cause I’m in an open relationship with my girlfriend... But we’re only open with boys. Cause I won’t ever like, fall for a boy.”

Stephanie’s quasi-catfishing experience alludes to the fact that deceit does not always support society’s accepted vision of online dating dishonesty. Rather than explicitly changing her identity, Stephanie participated in online dating with the intention of treating it like a game. For her, she “sext-fishes” boys for entertainment, rather than sexual approval. Much like deception “in real life”, there are plenty of loopholes and methods available to mislead one another. The distance that a screen provides the “wobble room” to take a social and sexual environment and turn it into recreation. People like Stephanie engage in this sport-like pursuit of laughs online in a deceptive manner that does not necessarily equate with “catfishing”.

This concept, however, is not new to daters, whether offline or online. Americans are culturally aware of the gamification of relationships and sex. One can easily picture the overly masculine man who describes himself a man “who has game” or is a “pick up artist”. Some may argue that online dating applications can encourage this “gamification” of dating, especially since a great deal of success can come from ridiculously large friend lists, always “swiping right”, or other social media manipulation, Hakala (2013) notes. Since these applications draw from American dating culture, deception no longer becomes an issue of identity, but intent.

Over-simplifying and gaming the algorithms for online dating has the potential to downgrade people's actual matches.

Presence of Social Media and Self-Representation

With regard to social media usage, it was surprising to see that Instagram was more prevalent among online daters than Facebook. Likewise, Facebook was more widely used than Instagram among non-online daters. Dating applications like Tinder require a pre-existing Facebook account with a legitimate friend network, list of "likes", along with profile pictures. This concept of "social authentication" (Bercovici 2014) was the driving force behind a lot of the questions about the connection between social media and online dating identity confirmation. Since over 95% of online daters from the survey said they use Tinder, it was surprising to see Facebook fall second to Instagram in primary usage; obviously if 95% of respondents use Tinder, that same amount of participants must have an active Facebook account. One would expect Facebook to be more popular than Instagram among online daters. This could point to the importance of uncertainty reduction strategies (mostly the utilization of social media searches), and how different social media platforms may provide greater relief for different users.

Apart from catfishing and general stigmas, this study expanded the connection between identity and self-representation. Interestingly enough, a resounding notion of accurate self-depiction online is held by online daters and non-online daters alike. Both groups felt that on social media and dating profiles, their personality and appearance were truthful representations of their "real life" persona. However, when compared to the writing of Erving Goffman, this aligns with the concept that impressions given and impressions given off can be very different from one another. While these students felt that their pictures, "likes", and even self-descriptions provide onlookers with a "real" image of them, it is important to remember that these images

may not be perceived as such. Stephanie called herself “America’s sweetheart” on Facebook, while Rachel compared the social platform to an annoying contest of who has the better life. Even between these two girls, a stark difference in awareness of one’s social media presence is noticeable. Stephanie, as an online dater, seems to better understand the gamification of social media representation, while Rachel views it as a source of frustration. Either way, this finding could be the onset to a bigger, more complex discussion about our online personas in general. Online social representations have an impact on not just our social existence, but our professional and romantic lives as well.

Similarly, when the respondents were asked to assert if they self-identified as “heavy internet users”, a gap between what we think happens and what actually happens can be vastly different. For example, throughout the day, constant connection through online networks is inevitable; the sheer amount of emails, texts, social media involvement, and the like are essentially uncountable. With this in mind, it becomes difficult to gauge exactly how much time one spends connected online, as well as how much of that time is communicating with others. Again, a broad awareness of this gap between what we *think* our online lives are and what they actually are seems to widen.

Limitations

With any study, there are internal and external factors that have the possibility of skewing results. The main sources of restrictions came from the imbalance of representation within the survey sample, the actual size and specificity of the sample, and the societal norm of the “gamification” of online dating. Further studies can improve on these areas and potentially expand on this study with more direct and accurate findings.

The actual survey sample, although somewhat representative of the Pace community, was extremely limited in gender. With more male respondents, a true essence of personality factors, uncertainty reduction skills, and the role of popular media can be determined. Similarly, a more equal distribution of race, income, and sexuality could have yielded more precise results. Since a convenience sample was chosen for this study, a wider range of students, backgrounds, and locations would produce more nationally representative findings. Pace University's location allows for cultural diversity, yet it can provide unsound results since most of America is not like Manhattan.

These research results indicate there is a noticeable influence of popular media on college-aged students. While the understanding of a socio-economic standing was not well-defined, more exploration can potentially draw a connection between class status and mass media impact. Future studies can also discover the power of mass media within other age groups, both older and younger. While it was valuable to survey a younger demographic, there is a presence of middle-aged users on internet dating sites. While some may not necessarily use "apps" to date, research within dating websites could be beneficial to understanding online dating stigmas. Lastly, since the sample size of this survey was concentrated, the follow-up interviews were also small in number. The ideas presented in this study could be better supported with supplementary interviewing.

Conclusion

On the surface, this study could be seen as a glimpse into some of the different perceptions of college-age online daters and non-online daters have in respect to popular media. However, research findings solidified the significant influence of mass media in shaping

perceptions about online dating. For non-users, a media moral panic continues, while online daters use popular media as a source of entertainment.

Further research can not only explore this idea of a media moral panic for online dating, they can also apply these concepts to other forms of computer mediated communication, like social networking. Since there was a connection drawn between online dating and social media representations, one could argue that social authentication is an invaluable resource in the world of communication today. As society builds more profiles about themselves online, accuracy and truthfulness will prove to be necessary components of self-representation. By understanding mass media's messages in conjunction with dating and social media profile representations, communication both online and off can be improved for future generations.

Media and Self Representative Perceptions: Deception in Online Dating

The following are all the statistical findings from both the non-online dating survey and online dating surveys

*Non-Online Daters***Q2 What is your age?**

Answer Choices	Responses
Under 18	0.00% 0
18-20	67.74% 21
21-23	32.26% 10
24-25	0.00% 0
Over 25	0.00% 0
Total	31

Q3 What race do you identify with?

Answer Choices	Responses
Black or African American	0.00% 0
Hispanic or Latino	0.00% 0
Native American or American Indian	0.00% 0
Asian or Pacific Islander	9.68% 3
White	83.87% 26
Other (please specify)	6.45% 2
Total	31

Q4 What is your gender?

Answer Choices	Responses
Female	93.55% 29
Male	6.45% 2
Transgender	0.00% 0
Other (please specify)	0.00% 0
Total	31

Q5 Which sexuality do you most closely identify with?

Media and Self Representative Perceptions: Deception in Online Dating

Answer Choices	Responses
Gay	3.23% 1
Straight	96.77% 30
Bisexual	0.00% 0
Other (please specify)	0.00% 0
Total	31

Q6 What is your income?

Answer Choices	Responses
Less than \$10,000	64.52% 20
Between \$10,000 and \$25,000	19.35% 6
Between \$25,000 and \$50,000	6.45% 2
Between \$50,000 and \$100,000	9.68% 3
More than \$100,000	0.00% 0
Total	31

Q7 Generally, do you feel confident with your appearance?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	77.42% 24
No	22.58% 7
Total	31

Q8 Generally, do you feel confident with your personality?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	96.77% 30
No	3.23% 1
Total	31

Q9 Generally, would you consider yourself outgoing?

Answer Choices	Responses
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Yes	61.29%	19
No	38.71%	12
Total		31

Q10 On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your general self-confidence (1=highly insecure, 10= highly secure)

	Highly insecure	Somewhat insecure	Pretty insecure	A little insecure	In the middle, but more insecure	In the middle, but more secure	A little secure	Pretty secure	Somewhat secure	Highly secure	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	0.00% 0	3.23% 1	6.45% 2	3.23% 1	9.68% 3	12.90% 4	9.68% 3	32.26% 10	6.45% 2	16.13% 5	31	7.10

Q11 Do you feel your online social media accounts properly depict your appearance/personality in real life?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	73.33% 22
No	26.67% 8
Total	30

Q12 If you answered no to #11, what do you think is the reason behind it (please chose the best answer)?

Answer Choices	Responses
It's hard to represent my personality in just a profile	20.00% 6
It's hard to represent my body in just a few pictures	3.33% 1
I am not as outgoing in real life	0.00% 0
I am not as shy in real life	3.33% 1
I answered yes to #11	73.33% 22
Total	30

Q13 Out of all of the social media platforms, pick the one application you use the most frequently:

Answer Choices	Responses
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Facebook	46.67%	14
Instagram	36.67%	11
Twitter	10.00%	3
Tumblr	3.33%	1
LinkedIn	0.00%	0
Pinterest	3.33%	1
I am not on any social media	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	0.00%	0
Total		30

**Q14 Would you consider yourself a
“heavy internet user”?**

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	73.33%	22
No	26.67%	8
Total		30

**Q15 On an average day, how much
time do you spend online a day?**

Answer Choices	Responses	
Less than an hour a day	6.67%	2
1-3 hours a day	36.67%	11
3-7 hours a day	46.67%	14
More than 7 hours a day	10.00%	3
Total		30

**Q16 Out of the time you spend
online, how much of that is spent
communicating with others (i.e.
instant messaging, social
networking, etc)?**

Answer Choices	Responses	
Less than an hour a day	53.33%	16
1-3 hours a day	36.67%	11
3-7 hours a day	3.33%	1

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More than 7 hour a day	6.67%	2
Total		30

Q17 Generally speaking, do you distrust others?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	50.00%	15
No	50.00%	15
Total		30

Q18 Have you seen the MTV show Catfish?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, but only one episode	6.67%	2
Yes, 2-5 episodes	33.33%	10
Yes, more than 5 episodes	26.67%	8
Never seen an episode, but heard of the show	26.67%	8
Never seen or heard of the show	6.67%	2
Total		30

Q19 If you answered yes to #20, do you feel that the episode(s) you have watched are an accurate representation of online dating deception?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	26.67%	8
No	40.00%	12
I answered no to #18	33.33%	10
Total		30

Q20 According to your own beliefs, do you think online dating is a good way to meet people in general, even for platonic reasons

Answer Choices	Responses	
I agree	50.00%	15
I disagree	50.00%	15
Total		30

Q21 According to your own beliefs,

do you think people who use online dating are “desperate”?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	17.24% 5
No	82.76% 24
Total	29

Q22 According to your own beliefs, do you think online dating keeps people from settling down?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	13.79% 4
No	86.21% 25
Total	29

Q23 You personally do not use online dating because:

Answer Choices	Responses
I am not single	41.38% 12
I feel strange meeting someone online	41.38% 12
It's too much effort to create a profile	0.00% 0
No reason in particular	0.00% 0
Other (please specify)	17.24% 5
Total	29

Q24 Answer according to this hypothetical situation: If you were chatting with someone from an online dating application (and enjoying the conversation), would you attempt to Google them or track them down via social media or other internet sites?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes, I would	96.55% 28
No, I would not	3.45% 1
Total	29

Q25 Answer according to this hypothetical situation: If you were

chatting with someone from an online dating application (and enjoying the conversation), how likely to talk to someone if they claim to not have social media (i.e. does not have Facebook or Instagram?)

Answer Choices	Responses	
A lot less likely	58.62%	17
A little less likely	34.48%	10
More likely	0.00%	0
Neither less or more likely	6.90%	2
Total		29

Q26 Answer according to this hypothetical situation: If you were chatting with someone from an online dating application (and enjoying the conversation), how likely to meet someone if they claim to not have social media (i.e. does not have Facebook or Instagram?)

Answer Choices	Responses	
A lot less likely	79.31%	23
A little less likely	10.34%	3
More likely	3.45%	1
Neither less or more likely	6.90%	2
Total		29

Online Daters

Q2 What is your age?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Under 18	0.00%	0
18-20	33.33%	8
21-23	58.33%	14

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24-25	0.00%	0
Over 25	8.33%	2
Total		24

Q3 What race do you identify with ?

Black or African American	12.50%	3
Hispanic or Latino	4.17%	1
Native American or American Indian	0.00%	0
Asian or Pacific Islander	8.33%	2
White	62.50%	15
Other (please specify)	12.50%	3
Total		24

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	Filipino and African American	3/27/2015 12:11 AM
2	Mixed	3/26/2015 8:21 PM
3	2 or more races	3/26/2015 10:28 AM

Q4 What is your gender?

Answer Choices	Responses
Female	83.33% 20
Male	16.67% 4
Transgender	0.00% 0
Not listed	0.00% 0
Total	24

Which sexuality do you most closely identify with?

Answer Choices	Responses
Gay/Lesbian	16.67% 4
Straight	66.67% 16
Bisexual	12.50% 3
Not listed	4.17% 1
Total	24

Q6 What is your income?

Answer Choices	Responses
Less than \$10,000	62.50% 15

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Between \$10,000 and \$25,000	8.33%	2
Between \$25,000 and \$50,000	16.67%	4
Between \$50,000 and \$100,000	4.17%	1
More than \$100,000	8.33%	2
Total	24	

Q7 I use my online dating account(s) for (Select all that apply):

Answer Choices	Responses	
Casual dating	87.50%	21
Serious dating	45.83%	11
Conversation	66.67%	16
Other (please specify)	12.50%	3
Total Respondents:24		

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	Sex	3/26/2015 8:11 PM
2	To gather crazy stories	3/26/2015 11:53 AM
3	to find marijuana (people who sell it) when traveling	3/26/2015 11:03 AM

Q8 Which dating applications you have used (select all that apply):

Answer Choices	Responses	
OkCupid	33.33%	8
Tinder	95.83%	23
Hinge	25.00%	6
Badoo	4.17%	1
Coffee Meets Bagel	16.67%	4
Tastebuds	0.00%	0
Grindr	8.33%	2
Other (please specify)	25.00%	6
Total Respondents:24		

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	Plenty of Fish	3/27/2015 10:34 PM
2	I have just met people online via social media like tumblr	3/27/2015 12:28 PM
3	Seeking Arrangements	3/26/2015 10:35 PM
4	Like, all of them. They're so interesting.	3/26/2015 11:53 AM
5	Happn	3/26/2015 11:17 AM
6	Plenty of fish	3/26/2015 10:28 AM

When did you establish your account (please base this answer off of the application you use most frequently)?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Over a year ago	25.00%	6
About a year ago	33.33%	8
In the past 6 months	33.33%	8
In the past 2 months	4.17%	1
In the past month	4.17%	1
Total		24

Q10 When was the last time you accessed your account (please answer this according to the application you use the most)?

In the past month	20.83%	5
In the past two weeks	20.83%	5
In the past week	8.33%	2
In the past 24 hours	41.67%	10
None of these	8.33%	2
Total		24

Q11 Generally, do you feel confident with your appearance?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	87.50%	21
No	12.50%	3
Total		24

Q12 Generally, do you feel

**confident with your
personality?**

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	95.65%	22
No	4.35%	1
Total		23

**Q13 Generally, would you
consider yourself outgoing?**

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	73.91%	17
No	26.09%	6
Total		23

**Q14 On a scale of 1 to 10, rate
your general self-confidence
(1=highly insecure, 10= highly
secure)**

	Highly insecure	Pretty insecure	Somewha t insecure	A little insecure	In the middle, but more insecure	In the middle, but more secure	A little secure	Somewha t secure	Pretty secure	Highly secure	Total	Weighte d Average
(no label)	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	13.04% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	4.35% 1	13.04% 3	13.04% 3	52.17% 12	4.35% 1	23	7.48

**Q15 Do feel your online dating accounts properly depict your
appearance/personality in real life?**

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	86.96%	20
No	13.04%	3
Total		23

**Q16 If you answered no to #15,
what do you think is the reason
behind it (please chose the best
answer)?**

Answer Choices	Responses	
It's hard to represent my personality in just a few sentences	8.70%	2
It's hard to represent my body in just a few pictures	4.35%	1
I am not as outgoing in real life	0.00%	0
I am not as shy in real life	0.00%	0

I answered yes to #15	86.96%	20
Total		23

Q17 Have you ever met someone from your online dating accounts?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, but only once	13.04%	3
Yes, 2-5 times	43.48%	10
Yes, 6-10 times	17.39%	4
Yes, more than 10times	13.04%	3
No, but I want to	13.04%	3
No, but I don't want to	0.00%	0
Total		23

Q18 Would you describe the majority of your offline encounters with them as positive?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	82.61%	19
No	4.35%	1
Never met them offline	13.04%	3
Total		23

Q19 For the most part, did you anticipate them to be positive? (If you've never met them offline, please choose the last response)

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	82.61%	19
No	4.35%	1
Last response	13.04%	3
Total		23

Q20 Do you tell your family or friends about your online dating usage?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	60.87%	14
No	39.13%	9

Total	23
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Q21 How did you hear about these online dating applications? Select all that apply:

Answer Choices	Responses	
Friends	69.57%	16
Family	8.70%	2
Social media	78.26%	18
Television	21.74%	5
Other (please specify)	4.35%	1
Total Respondents: 23		

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	recommended apps in appstore	3/26/2015 10:35 PM

Q22 Out of all of the social media platforms, pick the one application you use the most frequently:

Answer Choices	Responses	
Facebook	34.78%	8
Instagram	47.83%	11
Twitter	13.04%	3
Tumblr	4.35%	1
LinkedIn	0.00%	0
Pinterest	0.00%	0
I do not use social media	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	0.00%	0
Total		23

#	Other (please specify)	Date
	There are no responses.	

Q23 Would you consider yourself a

“heavyinternet user”?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	78.26% 18
No	21.74% 5
Total	23

Q24 On an average day, how much time do you spend online a day?

Answer Choices	Responses
Less than an hour	4.35% 1
1-3 hours a day	26.09% 6
3-7 hours a day	56.52% 13
More than 7 hours a day	13.04% 3
Total	23

Q25 Out of the time you spend online, how much of that is spent communicating with others (i.e. instant messaging, social networking, etc)

Answer Choices	Responses
Less than an hour	21.74% 5
1-3 hours a day	47.83% 11
3-7 hours a day	26.09% 6
More than 7 hours a day	4.35% 1
Total	23

Q26 Do you distrust others?

Answer	Resp
Yes	34.78% 8
No	65.22% 15
Total	23

Q27 Have you seen the MTV show Catfish?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes, but only one episode	13.04% 3
Yes, 2-5 episodes	39.13% 9
Yes, more than 5 episodes	21.74% 5
Never seen an episode, but heard of it	17.39% 4

Never seen or heard of this show	8.70%	2
Total		23

Q28 If you answered yes to #20, do you feel that the episode or most of the episodes you have watched accurately represent online dating deception? (if you answered no, please select the choice that says "does not apply")

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	26.09%	6
No	47.83%	11
Does not apply	26.09%	6
Total		23

Q29 Have you ever wanted to depict yourself differently on your online dating profile? (I.e. different body type, different height, personality traits, incorrect age, etc)

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	30.43%	7
No	69.57%	16
Total		23

Q30 Have you ever depicted yourself as someone else or a better version of yourself on your online dating profile? (I.e. I used someone else's picture, I used a completely different name, age, personality, etc)

Answer Choices	Responses	
I portrayed myself as someoneelse	0.00%	0
I portrayed a better version of myself	4.35%	1
No, I did neither	95.65%	22
Total		23

Q31 On a scale of 1 to

10, rate your satisfaction with online dating (1=not satisfied, 10=very satisfied)

	Not satisfied at all	Pretty unsatisfied	Somewhat unsatisfied	A little unsatisfied	In the middle, but less satisfied	In the middle, but more satisfied	A little satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Pretty satisfied	Very satisfied	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	4.35% 1	8.70% 2	4.35% 1	0.00% 0	13.04% 3	21.74% 5	8.70% 2	13.04% 3	13.04% 3	13.04% 3	23	6.43

Q32 If you were even a little unsatisfied, please indicate what you think was the main reason:

Answer Choices	Responses
I didn't like the people on the application	21.74% 5
The people on the application didn't like me	4.35% 1
I didn't understand how to use the application	0.00% 0
There is no particular reason	30.43% 7
I was satisfied	43.48% 10
Total	23

Q33 According to your beliefs, do you think online dating is a good way to meet people romantically?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes, I agree	69.57% 16
No, I disagree	30.43% 7
Total	23

Q34 According to your beliefs, do you think online dating is a good way to meet people in general, even for platonic reasons?

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes, I agree	91.30% 21
No, I disagree	8.70% 2
Total	23

Q35 According to your own beliefs, do you think online dating allows people to find a

better match?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, I agree	52.17%	12
No, I disagree	47.83%	11
Total		23

Q36 According to your own beliefs, do you think people who use online dating are “desperate”?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, I do.	4.35%	1
No, I do not.	95.65%	22
Total		23

Q37 According to your own beliefs, do you think online dating keeps people from settling down?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, I do.	34.78%	8
No, I do not.	65.22%	15
Total		23

Q38 Answer according to this hypothetical situation: If you were chatting with someone from an online dating application (and enjoying the conversation), would you attempt to Google them or track them down via social media or other internet sites?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, I would	17.39%	4
Yes, and I have	65.22%	15
No, I would not	17.39%	4
Total		23

Q39 If you already have, which techniques did you employ (check all that apply)?

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Answer Choices	Responses
Facebook search	82.61% 19
General Google search	52.17% 12
Reverse Google imagesearch	8.70% 2
IP address search	0.00% 0
Spokeo search	0.00% 0
I answered no to #37	13.04% 3
Other (please specify)	13.04% 3
Total Respondents:23	

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	linkedin	3/27/2015 12:16 AM
2	instagram, linkedin	3/26/2015 10:48 PM
3	instagram search	3/26/2015 11:07 AM

Q40 Answer according to this hypothetical situation: If you were chatting with someone from an online dating application (and enjoying the conversation), how likely to talk to someone if they claim to not have social media (i.e. does not have Facebook or Instagram?)

Answer Choices	Responses
A lot less likely	34.78% 8
Somewhat less likely	13.04% 3
More likely	4.35% 1
Neither less or more likely	47.83% 11
Total	23

Q41 Answer according to this hypothetical situation: If you were chatting with someone from an online dating application (and enjoying the conversation), how likely to meet someone if they claim to not have social media (i.e. does

**not have Facebook or
Instagram?)**

Answer Choices	Responses	
A lot less likely	43.48%	10
Somewhat less likely	30.43%	7
More likely	4.35%	1
Neither less or more likely	21.74%	5
Total		23

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