

## The Challenges of Online Dating and Digital Relationships during COVID-19

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost every aspect of human lives across the globe. Digital technology plays a critical role in our renewed essence to relationships - romantic and otherwise because of accessibility, anonymity and less emotional burden due to perceived control on relationships in the digital space. Online dating platforms have changed the way we build and sustain relationships. Online dating received an upsurge following the COVID-19 pandemic as people squared in quarantined spaces. While online dating can be one way to maintain social connection, finding potential partners, and / or romantic or sexual interaction to cope with the stress imposed by the pandemic, several consequences of online dating need to understand and promote sexual and mental health. This paper explores challenges and consequences of online dating and its public health significance. Online dating has evolved digital relationships as potential coping mechanisms to deal with a sense of insecurities and threat on safety and belongingness. It has changed the dynamics of relationship, emotional expression, trust and fidelity. It has created negative consequences

**Keywords:** online dating, digital relationships, challenges, COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine.

### Introduction

The advent of digital technology, especially smart devices, has modified many aspects of our society, which also constitutes our interactions: how we meet people and establish relationships with them. This rapidly evolving technology plays a critical role in our renewed essence to relationships- romantic and otherwise. When sifted through, it becomes evident that certain interpersonal relationships have transformed during the last decade of the twentieth century with the advancing trends of cyber-relationships. Traditional face-to-face interactions have now come to be complemented by social technology that gives rise to a new genre of interpersonal relations [1]. Research literature has delineated for long upon the differences between online and offline communication along with having outlined the particular characteristic communication styles of online communication (that vividly differ from that of offline relationships) [2]. Online communication is not the best suitable for social relationships due to the fragility of online interpersonal ties that are easily formed as well as abandoned. However, the several advantages, such as, asynchronous communication and a lack of non-verbal cues allow better control of one's self-presentation- also make the online environment appealing [3]. As people are taking increasingly to social media platforms, we have seen the divide and distance among people and their face to face relationships grow. With an enthusiastically growing work culture, not many are left with time possibilities to grow their circle of interpersonal relationships. As life is getting busier and individuals are experiencing more stress, relationships are becoming more temporal. The internet then becomes a provider of opportunities to create and develop public relationships

through various dialogic components, including e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, among others [4]. Diane Wysocki stated two decades back that the introduction of the internet into modern society would have a more significant impact on social life than anyone could have foreseen.

With the limitless possibilities of what we can do with the help of the internet, it is no surprise to see the intrusion of science in the form of artificial intelligence into matters of love- whether it is the period of courtship, getting married or casual dating. Dating online is not role-playing and whether in a game, forum or other social network the interactions between these people are not fantasy; these are people who are developing real romantic relationships with real feelings. The presence of a screen and the 'freedom' of socializing, provided through the networks' various public and private channels of communication, allow relationships to foster in a distinct manner. Particularly, the pandemic and consequent lockdown have changed the way technology is playing a role in not just courtship, but also in facilitating marriage and divorces (that are being aided with internet based social media platforms). With only an internet connection and a compatible device, we can find prospective partners in today's time. One in three people now use online platforms as a medium for dating [5]. The usage of online dating platforms has risen during the pandemic as a result of quarantining and everyone following physical distancing norms. However, this does not necessarily imply socio-emotional distancing. People have found diverse platforms to connect with people in order to connect and make love. In coronavirus times, dinner dates have shifted to Zoom, watching movies together from their respective houses has become possible on Netflix Party and online wine is a part of the new dating norms.

Dating applications have made several changes in the way people can date online, ensuring they stay indoors during the pandemic [6]. The features of video calling / video chatting, passport to meet people overseas, adding the ideas of 'ideal virtual date' to user profiles as well as playing games online. Some unusual human trends that are aspects of online dating have also seen a surge, such as, "breadcrumbing," that refers to someone sending endless flirtatious messages without ever intending to meet up, and "oblige-swiping" which is when someone swipes to get matches on an app just for a buzz. Some anthropologists believe that the crisis of times could make people consider dating more seriously as a result of the fear of being alone [6].

### **Method of Conducting the Review**

References for this review were identified through searches of PubMed and Google Scholar with the search terms "online dating," "romantic relationships during pandemic," "online dating during COVID," and "COVID-19". These keywords were combined with Boolean operators to narrow down the search results. Manual searches were executed to identify grey literature and additional articles based on the references mentioned in the articles selected for full-text review. Only records published in English those that were available as full texts were reviewed.

### **Increased use of online platforms during the pandemic**

According to OpenVault's first quarterly report on Broadband Insights [7], the average broadband consumption has rocketed from 273.5GB to 402.5GB. One can infer from this that the overall internet surged in the first quarter of 2020, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in a matter of weeks, reshaped and transformed intimate relationships in unprecedented ways, constraining some to either live closer together or further apart from each other. It has had a colossal impact on relationships and dating –

- Divorce rates are soaring.
- There is an increase in the rates of postponing weddings.
- Individuals have been forced to isolate themselves from their lovers.

And on the other hand [6],

- People have used Netflix 70% more
- The discussion around coronavirus jumped 800% after the lockdown
- 25% more users of dating applications wanted to video chat

With these profound changes in one's lifestyle consolidated with the Internet's advancement, online dating has attained tremendous popularity among aspiring lovers, irrespective of their age. Being a more efficient and prompt replacement to traditional modes of dating, people have begun using chat rooms and dating websites or applications to find partners at an increasing rate. Since going on dates in real-time now goes against the rules of social distancing set by numerous countries, people are noticing more innovative ways to communicate with their current and potential partners. From virtual dates on platforms like Skype or Zoom to watching movies together- in their own separate homes, the usage of activity on dating apps like Bumble and Tinder has seen a stark rise from the 8th of March, 2020. With about 43% of 25-34-year-olds using online dating services, the masses are embracing online dating as a medium to meet new and exciting people.

### **The changing face of online dating and casual relationships amidst the lockdown**

The world has gone online with shopping, banking, reading, writing, playing and working, so why not dating online? It's no more a taboo to have met online or even dated online. With more than 1500 dating applications in existence [8], dating online is growing and being accepted as well. However, dating has taken a turn as a result of the COVID-19 induced lockdown on a global level. Earlier dating application use was more about texting and exchanging (photoshopped / filtered) photographs of another in order to maintain the steam of dating- which would not necessarily translate into a physical meeting (which is ideally the purpose of dating). Video calls before a physical meeting were not healthy but rather 'creepy'. With the physical distancing norms and millions of people self-quarantining for the safety of everyone, dating apps have pushed the video calling feature. This has brought about change in online dating which has allowed people to connect via video call, unveiling the filters and showing themselves as they are. This has allowed people to authentically express themselves. Along with dating, sex at distance is also growing, with people resorting to sex tech and novel sex gadgets like Zoom sex parties and virtual reality strip clubs [9]. The pandemic and quarantine have brought along a shift in the dating culture, making it virtual and in a way bringing comfort at distance too. What is challenging to ponder is how will this shift concretize with the prolonged duration of the pandemic and the consequent quarantining period.

### **Online dating as a coping mechanism: A new norm**

The pandemic has given rise to a digital infodemic where the news of updates on coronavirus spreads faster than the virus itself. The lockdown has kept people at home, pushing them to increase digital screen times on laptops, televisions, tablets and smartphones. Many people have switched to working online which inevitably keeps them glued to the screens (for longer time with workload and work timings increased for many). This has left many individuals overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted. Several individuals opted to get off social media platforms to take a break from the continuous news updates and information blast. On the other hand, dating applications saw a rise in sign-ups from anywhere between 20%-30% on various platforms [10]. Virtual dating has become the new buzz with video chatting features more convenient and comforting. Where on one hand users have the concern of security for themselves on online dating apps, almost 57% people are found to lie on online dating platforms [5], the coronavirus pandemic has left little option but to trust people online. Another worry with online dating is also to reveal the 'status' of a relationship where sharing too much may wean away intimacy and sharing too little may seem the person is unsure or not comfortable revealing about the partner / relationship for others to (digitally) know. With romantic relationships going digital, people are pushing the small talk out and taking it slow, focusing on what is real and really important to them- as they are realizing that physical distancing is here to stay for a while.

### **Changing dynamics of the Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT)**

Relational Dialectics Theory or RDT is a theory of the meaning-making between relationship parties that emerges from the interplay of competing discourses. The RDT states that romantic partners have to try to balance the effects of forces trying to bring them together and pull them

apart simultaneously [11]. It also helps to understand why do people commit to relationships, what is the reason behind, how do they see the relationship, what they want to commit for one another and several other dynamics of the relationship between the two people. The discourse is what people saw, how they say about relationships and in relationships. It is an interesting dynamic to consider as we see the discourses transforming to digital discourses. The integration-separation in the relationship is challenged with online dating as people find a balance between 'we' and 'I' especially in the face of casual and multiple dating. The extent of change in the relationship can sometimes create uncertainty. When both partners are not in agreement with the balance of stability and change in the relationship then it may cause uncertainty in the relationship [12].

### **Privacy and trust in online relationships: an ethical concern**

When one thinks about dating online, looking at a virtual biodata of a person, pictures along with likes, interests and basic demographic information are inevitable. However, this is not the case when it comes to dating someone face to face or even when one is looking for a potential life partner. The question regarding genuineness of the profile, privacy and trust maintained often surface in the era of digital times. The phenomenon of faking good or appearing socially desirable is a debatable aspect about people's profiles that questions the genuineness of the profile and eventually the nature of virtual relationships [13]. The nature of the platform is such that everyone would like to appear desirable and likable given that there is competition too. Self-disclosure can facilitate the development and maintenance of online relationships with many experiencing intimacy online. However, diffused intimacy is quick to enter while one maintains distinct socially driven internet profiles (on various social media platforms as well as multiple dating forums). The challenges that online relationships bring are that of the inability of the predictability of such relationships, trusting the person without any ad hoc communication / background knowledge as well as the integral aspect of risk and uncertainties that come along in virtual relationships [14]. These pose to have been an added challenge amidst the pandemic where people have been searching for intimacy in the phase of prolonged physical distancing. The Kaspersky Report (2020) reveals that 57% of users lie about themselves on online dating apps. Interesting to note is the different kinds of dating purposes that have arisen amidst the pandemic.

### **Online fidelity or infidelity?**

Technology seems to be outlining the idea that secrecy is good. Infidelity is violation of the marital agreement, a betrayal of one's trust, and a threat to the marital bond- which could be sexual infidelity or emotional infidelity. With the advent of technology, we have online relationships and thus, online fidelity looks like a romantic and/or sexual relationship with someone other than the spouse, which begins with an online contact and is maintained mainly through electronic conversations that occur through e-mail and chat rooms [16]. Most people date for fun and one in ten are looking for sexual relationships however there has also been a rise in variety of daters, such as –

1. The ones who are on a break from their relationship.
2. The ones who just are around for some time and then ghost on the person.
3. The ones who are willing to find a serious relationship.
4. The ones who are casual and reckless

Maintaining online fidelity can be challenging given the virtual nature of dating that allows people to have multiple dates at the same time. The infidelity as a series of random erotic chat room encounters with multiple online users is oft-debated but to also keep in mind is that a cyber affair can be a continuous one with a specific online user- this quizzes the core integrity of the virtual relationship. On the contrary, there are forums like Fidelity Dating which is a dating site aimed specifically at those who have been cheated on or betrayed in the past and are nervous about dating again. The users must first sign a contract in which they promise that they are single, and pledge to be faithful and honest with other members [16].

Online infidelity is as painful as infidelity in offline, face-to-face relationships. There is no clear guarantee of infidelity to be absent in face-to-face relationships however detecting it online becomes far more challenging. The rates of infidelity among couples are likely to increase as a result of the fact that they are living with one another more than ever (which has led to more arguments, confrontations and emotional exhaustion between the married couple). With no conclusive assurance about the fidelity in relationships online, it is understood as a path that many tread, with some amount of risk, chance and caution.

Psychologists from the University of Tennessee Knoxville claim that the stress of coronavirus has driven people to cheat. Married people are contacting ex-lovers and using dating websites to have virtual affairs during the pandemic according to Gordon and Mitchell. They also said that couples are likely to experience disruptions and delays to the affair recovery process during the pandemic, which can negatively impact their ability to heal [17].

### **Online identities and the risk of virtual intimacy and fraudulent profiles**

With love coming on digital platforms, everything is changing- from how we talk about love to how we express our love this means that we are consciously changing our language and vocabulary to communicate about the same. Text communication has not only replaced our personal dialogues but the nature of the text communication itself is transforming with a greater demand for clear communication, subtle nuance of tone and turn of phrase have been replaced by emoticons, brackets and asterisks. Along with clarity, emotionality is also something that is expected to reflect in online communication while online dating requires technological as well social literacy [18].

Kathleen Bogle, an associate professor of sociology and criminal justice at La Salle University, [19] said that current dating behaviors remind her of how people had to navigate decision-making. She also said that if one has to quarantine separately there are virtual ways to stay connected by using platforms like Facetime and Zoom. She also said that it becomes easier when we know that there is an end to this situation and one has a possible date of meeting in person. Online dating in the new normal with this unprecedented time of the Covid-19 pandemic has created a divide in many individuals. Some are completely comfortable with sharing a lot about themselves with another person on the pretext of knowing them better, but there are also many who feel sharing information online can be misused in multiple ways. Many individuals who have taken up online dating as a result of feeling overwhelmed due to break ups and / or frustration with their partners, have landed up in blurry intimate encounters online. A study by Prelorentzos, Heckel and Ring (2020) showed that social anxiety among online daters was predicted by negative world appraisals, low self-efficacy and high recognition concerns [20]. Being virtually intimate with another person without having met them personally, can be scary, creates anxiety as well as doubt. Though most dating platforms are sensitive to take care of most parameters such as age, gender, education, work, relationship status, political views, any particular habits (smoking, drinking, drugs) and so on, the confidence about its validity remains shaky. How much can you trust a person on an online platform to share parts of your life with? When a person shares their innermost feelings, likes, dislikes, fears, expectations, dreams they expect the opposite person to do the same but how does one assure this to those dating for genuine causes? Likewise, the online dating platform raises several questions that don't necessarily have conclusive answers.

### **Expectations from a virtual versus offline relationship: what is better?**

The oft quoted fact that virtual relationships are not a replacement for the face-to-face ones is truly acceptable. The face-to-face relationships, though that come with their set of challenges, are more effective, healthier and conducive to the happiness of partners for it maintains humanness. However, in the times of the pandemic, virtual relationships via online dating apps and forums have been the sole savior. Though cheating, fake profiles, non-genuineness and non-emotive relationships are not appealing, they are the ones that have managed to survive in the growing culture of casual dating. Surprisingly, with online dating becoming the only medium for people to express their love, the dynamics are changing and people are choosing to share their real self

on the virtual dating platforms as well as trying to take things slowly and build real connections as well. While online dating comes with its own set of risks, challenges and experiences, it also offers a number of ways to get to know a potential date before meeting in person. Such computer-mediated communication allows for safe and convenient interaction, without much risk or time commitment. Many dating sites offer various types of personality testing and have set algorithms to help find a potential match. They also offer more matches than a person can maybe find at a cafe/bar. Online dating also benefits people who have social anxiety or are shy in nature as they can connect with their dates on an emotional level first which will help build their confidence too. Couples can set their own pace and not feel awkward about making sure the date continues, as the platform offers a variety of ways one can do virtual dates with time limits. Dating apps also provide one with ways to start a conversation in case someone feels lost or confused about it. Lastly, it can be said that people still ultimately want to find love and romance and are willing to take risks to do so. And liars and scammers, aided by new software and other multiple options available on the internet, will continue to prey upon those vulnerabilities.

### **Conclusion**

The face-to-face relationships, though that come with their set of challenges, are more effective, healthier and conducive to the happiness of partners for it maintains humanness. While online dating comes with its own set of risks, challenges and experiences, it also offers a number of ways to get to know a potential date before meeting in person; some of them being: convenient interaction; lesser risk or time commitment, many dating sites offer various types of personality testing and have set algorithms to find a potential match; benefits people who have social anxiety or are shy; couples can set their own pace; less awkwardness to ensure that the date continues among several others. People ultimately want to find love and romance, and are willing to take risks to do so. Online dating is here to stay and grow, eventually. Thus, regulation of risks on the online dating platforms is key to optimally utilize them for cultivating healthy relationships.

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