ABSTRACT

The dating market (searching, matching and/or interacting services, whether internet based or real-life) is fast evolving because of ICT developments on the one hand and increasing demand on the other hand. This study aims to point at future possibilities in the dating market. Participants in this research are Australians or New Zealanders providing dating services. The elicitation strategy is to present information conducive to conjecturing opportunities. This information concerns social psychological research outcomes on what factors contribute to attraction and forming bonds, and specific issues relevant to the dating market, e.g., gender imbalances in enrollment. Apart from reporting opportunities this paper also presents a range of implications for opportunity recognition research and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Opportunity recognition (OR), after the publication of Shane and Venkataraman’s (2000) article that declared OR an essential part of entrepreneurship, has been increasingly researched as well as exercised in the classroom. Methods for the practice of OR have increasingly been published and applied (e.g., DeTienne and Chandler, 2004; Fiet, 2002; Van Gelderen, 2004; 2007). When the aim is to generate ideas that are novel and useful, as we will do in this study, OR can be seen as a creative process (Couger, 1995). In this research a workshop format is used to generate ideas for opportunities in the dating market. Our strategy is to present information with heuristic value: information that may inspire to brainstorm about future possibilities (Busenitz and Arthurs, 2007; Van Gelderen, 2004). Two types of information are offered: social psychology research outcomes on attraction and bonding, and issues specific to the dating industry. Participants are asked to reflect on those outcomes and issues and to brainstorm about applications in new products and services.

The research is not concerned with variation in individual or firm level OR performance – the report is written on the industry level. This study of dating market opportunities is forward looking and points at future possibilities for new products or services, a practice regarded by Davidsson (2002) as the highest possible calling for entrepreneurship researchers. While this study reports on the dating industry, the discussion will present a range of implications for OR theory and practice. There, thought will be given to the entrepreneurship researcher as part of the OR process, the importance of knowledge spillovers, the usefulness of old versus new information in OR, under-exploited opportunities, the debate about pre-existing versus created opportunities, legitimacy aspects, and entrepreneurship education. But preceding that, the dating industry and the reasons for its emergence are introduced, the method outlined, and the results presented.
The Importance of Friendship and Intimacy

Human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong. They seek frequent interactions within the context of long-term, caring relationships. This was concluded by Baumeister and Leary (1995) after a lengthy review of empirical evidence. They showed multiple links between the need to belong and cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behavioral responses, and health and well-being. Their empirical evidence indicates that people generally form bonds readily, resist the dissolution of existing bonds, spend considerable cognitive energy on the implications of situations and events for their relationships, experience strong positive emotions when accepted, and strong negative emotions when rejected. Deprivation of stable, good relationships has been linked to higher levels of mental (e.g., depression) and physical illness, and a proneness to behavioral problems.

Bonds and relationship do not just provide a sense of belonging. They also provide emotional integration and stability, as they provide anchor points for opinions, beliefs, and emotional responses. They provide opportunities to communicate about ourselves. They provide us with social and physical support, and reassure us of our worth and value. All of the above services to support and integrate the person’s personality (Duck, 1981).

Research on loneliness has shown people to need a social group as well as an intimate partner (McWither, 1990; Weis, 1982). Loneliness can be caused by the absence of one or the other, but without both, people definitely feel lonely. Western societies place a high value on friendship and romantic love. To be successful in both is part of cultural norms. Relationships are also a major source of meaning and purpose (O’Conner and Chamberlain, 1996). Thus, without friends or an intimate partner, people can easily experience a sense of failure (Adelman and Ahuvia, 1995; Gordon, 1976).

All of the above shows the importance of having a group of friends and an intimate partner. But this is no new information. Why is it that a large dating industry has sprung up in recent decades to serve the need for belonging? The next paragraph lists a number of causes.

The Emergence of the Dating Market

The development of a market means that the share of formal, professional, third parties increases in comparison with the share of informal or institutional provision, and that people can choose from various alternatives. Whether these third parties are profit or non-profit is not important for the present discussion. What is important is that consumers can choose from competing offerings. Formal, third parties providing services on the dating market have come into existence only because for various reasons previous, informal provision failed. When people lived in tight-knit communities, where everybody knew everybody, there would be less need for a dating market. Various causes of change are outlined below. We limit ourselves to Western culture.

Increase in the number of singles. Throughout the Western world there’s a strong demographic trend towards more singles. This is caused by broad factors that differ per age group. For the younger people, many people switch relationships a number of times before they cohabit or marry, and if they cohabit or marry, they do so at a later age. However, when older the opportunities to meet people may be limited. Institutions in the late teens and early twenties, such as high school and university, provide for great opportunities for contact. Nowadays, many young people will still be looking for a partner in their late twenties or early or late thirties. For medium aged people, the number of divorces and relationship breakups has strongly increased. For older people, the average length of life has increased, one consequence of which is an increase in the number of widows and widowers.

Lack of role models. The demographic trends above are relatively new. This means that people have had little role models to learn from. For example, someone who divorces at the age of 48, and who is looking for a new partner, has to learn appropriate courtship behavior for a person of 48. But what is appropriate? At the moment there’s little to learn from previous generations.

Individualism. The length of relationships has shortened as part of an individualizing culture. People have high expectations for romantic relationships which may easily be disappointed. At the same time, an individual growth and happiness ethic leads people to put their own interest first. This has come at the expense of previous moral obligations to stay together even though the relationship may have deteriorated in quality. Another aspect of individualization is less community involvement, implying less interaction (Putnam, 2000).
Urbanization life. Most people nowadays live in cities. Cities provide more anonymity than life in the countryside, where people tend to know each other. It may be more difficult to meet people because people living in cities tend to be more avoidant. In cities, people feel less trustful towards each other and feel less safe. Thus, if people make contact, the other party may avoid that out of fear.

Increased mobility. With the increased possibilities for transportation it has become more common that people live far away from their relatives, and move around. In the U.S., it has become increasingly common that e.g., father and mother live in the northeast, grandparents in the southeast, son in the Midwest, and daughter on the west coast. Even in the EU mobility is on the rise. Once moved, settling in can be a demanding task, which is sometimes avoided to a certain extent as one expects to move again within a short period. Mobility puts pressure on the existing relationship with the partner as that now has to fulfill a broad range of needs.

Increased hours of watching television. The average American watches four hours of television per day (Putnam, 2000). This means that these four hours are not spent in another way, for example, visiting other people, or taking part in community activities. With so many people spending so much time in front of the television the pool of people from which one can make new bonds is reduced (Putnam, 2000). Also, television provides people with a substitute for contact, e.g., when they feel connected to the characters of a daily soap series (Gordon, 1976). Similar substitutes can be observed for younger people, such as fantasy and videogames.

A different role for older people. Not so long ago older people had more standing and authority in the community than nowadays. With technological advancements and societal changes going so fast, there is less demand for their expertise. Many old people live physically removed from the rest of the community in old people’s homes. This limits their possibilities for interaction to their own age group. The network of older people tends to become smaller as people pass away.

The above lists changes in society that potentially make people lonelier. However, if so many people are lonely, the problem seems to be more one of coordination than of scarcity. There are certainly scarcity arguments to be made. Men die earlier than women, which means that for older women, there is a scarcity of similarly aged men. Divorced middle aged men have a preference for younger women, which causes scarcity for middle aged women who are looking for similarly aged men. Still, with the prevalence of people looking for friendship and partners throughout every age group, there is a coordination problem, if alongside scarcity problems. As a consequence, there is increased demand for services that help to search, match and interact.

Solutions to this coordination problem are hugely helped by ICT developments (Information Communication Technology). The emergence of the dating market is not only demand driven, it is also supply driven. Developments in ICT have opened up huge possibilities for connecting people, matching people, and providing interaction. Some of these services are described in the next paragraph.

The Dating Industry

The dating market offers a plethora of services. There are the classical relationship brokers, who do intake interviews in person. There are single bars, single clubs, single parties, single travel agencies, and single living accommodations. There are social skills, flirting, and seduction trainings. On the internet there are dating websites, friendship communities, and chat boxes. Single advertisements appear on TV, on the Internet, and in the newspaper. This is just a very limited list of services which is by no means exhaustive. And in addition to the dating market in a narrow sense there are many institutions and industries that facilitate contact between people, e.g., bars, churches and trains.

Ahuvia and Adelman (1992) provided a classification of the dating market (they called it the marriage market) by means of the SMI model: Searching Matching Interacting. Searching services are for example singles advertisements, and internet databases in which people have provided descriptions, pictures or videos of themselves. Searching and matching channels go a step further in that the facilitator provides a matching service. For example, a relationship agency may match people on the basis of information gained in an intake interview, an internet friendship community connects people’s networks, and a dating website may match people on the basis of provided characteristics, e.g., age or place of residence. Finally, the interacting services provide for example facilities for people to interact, for example, dinners, parties, theatre visits, speed dating, or dating games. Trainings in dating skills and social skills improvement prepare for interaction.
The majority of people probably meet their friends and partners without using the services of the dating market (Rathus, Nevid, and Fichner-Rathus, 2005). Still, the dating market is booming. It’s especially increasingly common to use the Internet to meet people through chat boxes, dating sites or friendship communities. Supply of services is abundant and easy to start. Firms even offer the software to start your own web based dating service.

There are many ways to segment the dating market, with specialized agencies emerging up for example for co-ethnics, disabled people or any type of common ground that can be imagined. One obvious segmentation is by age group: teenagers, people in their twenties, people in their thirties, divorcees, and older people. Another segmentation, related to age groups, is by communication motives. Westmeyer, DiCicoccio, and Rubin (1998) and Rubin, Perse and Barbato (1988) distinguish inclusion, control, affection, pleasure, relaxation, and escape needs as motives for interpersonal communication. Although this study was not done in the context of the use of dating market services, the results indicate that not all people communicate for the aim of long term relationship: it can also be pleasurable, exciting, or just warding of boredom to use a dating website. Thus, another segmentation is offered by the type of relationship that is sought after. Some people look for romantic love, other for friendship, still others for people who want to join in certain activities, e.g., to go the theater, to play chess, or to jointly cook elaborate meals (Rathus, Nevid, and Fichner-Rathus, 2005).

METHOD

Participants in this research are running a business in the dating market in Australia or New Zealand. Businesses can be event companies, single parties’ organizers, dating websites, speed dating companies, and introduction services. The sample size will be about fifteen, located in Auckland, Christchurch, Melbourne and Sydney. Data collection is currently about halfway.

The elicitation strategy is to present information conducive to conjecturing opportunities. Two types of information are presented. Firstly, social psychological research outcomes on what causes attraction and bonding. Examples, presented in the results section, are proximity, appearance, similarity, arousal and cooperation (for an excellent overview see Pines, 2005). Secondly, issues specific to the dating industry. The issues were identified in newspaper and magazine reports, and especially in online sources about the dating industry (such as the Online Dating Industry Journal, Online Dating Magazine, Online Personals Watch, and various dating blogs and weblogs).

Participants are asked to apply the presented information to possible products or services in their market. They were asked such prompts as “how would a service look like that applies this research outcome ...”, “how could this research outcome be applied in your services ...”, “can you think of a service that would enhance / circumvent factor X ...” All sessions were conducted by the author. The author would not be leading in the discussions, but would also not refrain from taking part in brainstorming. Because not all sessions have yet been held, only a preliminary sample of ideas can be presented.

Confidentiality is discussed and assured. Because direct competitors take part, it is the policy of this research to disclose zero information about other research participants, their firms or their activities. Furthermore, participants are offered the opportunity to keep any idea they particularly like out of the final report.

Depending on the type of business a choice is made which research outcomes and issues are presented (e.g., an online business or not, a searching, matching or interacting service, whether it purely facilitates the initial contact or also subsequent relationship formation). For example, outer similarity (e.g., looks, dress, physical attractiveness, weight) is important for initiating contact, but inner similarity (e.g., in attitudes, beliefs or personality) is more important for developing the relationship (Murstein, 1976; Rodin, 1987). Interestingly, the Internet makes it possible to change these stages. People can meet first in a chat box, disclose and discover their values, beliefs, attitudes, and have all sorts of exchanges before they meet in real life and see how the other looks.

Research on factors explaining long-term relationship success is not presented. It would be great for service providers in the dating market to match their clients in such a way that chances of long-term stability of the relationship would be supported. Unfortunately, on the whole this research has generated many inconclusive results (Cate, Levin and Richmond, 2002; Surra, Gray, Cottle, and Boettcher, 2004), also because of methodological concerns. There is often a reliance on a single source and many explanatory variables tend to be also outcome variables. E.g., relationship stability is often...
explained from commitment or relationship satisfaction. Also the variables that subsequently explain commitment or satisfaction can be conceived as outcome variables. For example, spending time together, or having an active sex life are two such variables, but the fact that a couple is able to spend so much time together and/or maintain an active sex life over a very long period is an achievement in itself.

OUTCOMES

Social Psychology Research Outcomes

Proximity. Generally speaking, research has concluded that your future partner is most likely not some sort of exotic prince or princess, unless he or she lives in the same block as you, or a few blocks away. Festinger, in his classic 1951 study, showed that of the people living in the same building, those having the apartments facing the inner courtyard knew much more people than those who lived in the apartments facing the street. And Segal (1974) found that many students of the police academy had friends with family names starting with the same letter: the dorm beds were assigned according to last name. One explanation is that the mere fact of being repeatedly exposed to someone creates trust and safety feelings. Various researches have shown that repeated exposure leads to increased ratings of similarity, attractiveness, interestingness, and intelligence (Pines, 2005, p.7). It even works when someone reminds us of somebody else.

Prompts: How to incorporate repeated exposure? How to force people to be in close proximity?

Ideas: Repeat pictures in web based dating; repeated rounds in speed dating; organize event where people meet from previous activities; make the walls in a bar moveable, and adjust for the number of people present, so people have to stand close together

Outer similarity. Emswiller, Deaux and Willits (1971) had students collect dimes for a phone call wearing either hippie or business attire. They would receive significantly more money when they asked people who were similarly dressed. In the same vein, Suedfeld, Bochner and Matas (1971) found that many people marching in anti-war demonstrations would not only sign more often petitions by when the requester was similarly dressed, but they would also do that without actually reading what they signed for (or against). We like people who look like ourselves. This may be a matter of genuine and lived experience, but also of stereotypes.

Prompts: How to circumvent stereotyped perceptions based on appearance? How to enhance outward expression?

Ideas: All wear the same uniform. Blindfolded speed dating.

Beauty. Pretty people are better liked, which is no wonder, as they are assigned such favorable traits as kindness, honesty, talent, and intelligence. They are favored in many ways, for example, they get lower punishments in court, or after naughty behavior in the primary school class (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, and Longo, 1991). Attractiveness of business school graduates even predicts their income (Frieze, Olson, and Russell, 1991). (Casual observation suggests that for academic careers the opposite may be true). Physical appearance is decisive for initial attraction, and people decide in 150 seconds whether people can still be considered candidates for mating (Pines, 2005, p. 29). Worldwide people seem to agree to a large extent on what is physically attractive (Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, and Wu, 1995). But further down the beauty scale, subjectivity increases. Also of interest is that for females an unattractive face on a beautiful body gets higher ratings than vice versa (Alicke, Smith, and Klotz, 1986). Of more importance is that although beauty attracts, people tend to choose partners as pretty as themselves, or a little bit prettier (Kalick, 1988). People even choose partners with the same weight (Schafer and Keith, 1990).

Prompts: How to prevent males stereotypically judging females on their looks? How to enhance matching based on beauty?

Ideas: Combine a weight loss clinic with a dating agency, given that daters will do their best to look more attractive (weight loss dating). Dating agency for beautiful people only. Blindfolded speed dating.

Economic/Utility Value. Employing an evolutionary perspective, Buss (1994) and colleagues did a grand scale cross-cultural study involving 10000 people in 37 different cultures all over the world. Men gave more importance to physical attractiveness (from an evolutionary viewpoint
signifying fertility), while women preferred men with money, status, and ambition (from an evolutionary viewpoint signifying the ability to take care of offspring).

**Prompts**: How to prevent females stereotypically judging males on their economic/utility value? How to enhance matching based on material possessions?

**Ideas**: Match on the basis of pictures of houses, boats and other belongings; Rate economic position

**Triggers**. People sit silently next to each other in a bus, and when they pass a car accident with several crashed cars, or a fire, or anything else that is striking, they may start a conversation. Another trigger can be an authority who gives permission. When someone gives a speech, and asks everybody to ask the name of the person sitting on their left side, people will do that, even though they wouldn’t normally do so. Many people may be willing to initiate contact but do not do so, and a trigger can help them to get to get going.

**Prompts**: Think of situations where perhaps unconventional ways of contacting and relating take place because they are authorized; Provide triggers for people to initiate contact.

**Ideas**: Cities can hire actors and actresses to perform all sorts of behaviors that get people to talk. This would be a good way to promote city tourism.

**Arousal**. About 20% of romantic relationships start in stormy circumstances (Pines, 2005). Apparently, the chances to fall in love are higher when in a state of excitement. It can be a major life change that causes turmoil: moving to a new job, a new country, a new house, getting divorced, getting sick, getting better, etc. Arousal can also be caused by a particular situation or circumstances, e.g., being on holiday (on a beautiful tropical island, preferably), being drunk, having graduated (spring break), when spring arrives, or when in danger (see the movie “A life less ordinary”, where two angels bring two characters, highly unlikely to fall in love with each other, together by forcing them to cooperate in threatening circumstances).

Dutton and Aron (1974) conducted a piece of research using the Capilano Canyon suspension bridge in Vancouver, BC. This bridge is a high arousal setting as it’s 5 feet wide and 450 feet long, has low handrails, tilts and sways, and gives the impression that one is about to fall over the side making a 230 foot drop to the rocks and rapids below. Males who crossed the bridge were approached by an attractive female researcher who asked them to participate in a research project. After they had to write a short story, she gave them her phone number in case they wanted to know more about the project. Eight times more males using this bridge gave Gloria a call (her name in the suspension bridge condition) than Donna (the same researcher’s name in the control condition using a solid bridge further upriver only 10 feet above the river with high handrails). A selection effect can not be ruled out though with more daring persons both walking the suspension bridge and making a phone call.

This phenomenon can be explained by Walster and Berscheid’s (1971) two factor theory of love. This theory states that there are two components to falling in love: arousal and a label. The emotional label explains the arousal. Emotional labels can be fear, jealousy, anger etc., but also: love. So arousal can in sometimes be interpreted as being in love.

**Prompts**: How to induce arousal? Which settings are conducive to arousal?

**Ideas**: Dating settings that induce arousal: E.g., tango, salsa, or folk dancing; holiday travel dating services; dating services in which candidates come over from abroad.

**Inner similarity**. Having friends or partners with similar attitudes validates our own and gives us the pleasant feeling that we are right. Even more important, we feel connected with those who share our values, have the same opinions on issues, and find the same things important (Byrne, 1997). We do not only feel attracted to similar people, we also assume that we’re similar, and we also pretend to be similar. Several studies have shown that husbands and wives tend to assume that they are far more similar than they actually are (e.g., Levinger and Breedlove, 1966; Dawes, 1989). We pretend to be similar, for example, by postponing the discussion of issues that we anticipate to be sensitive, e.g., when a religious Jew and a Catholic feel attracted towards each other, they may both want to discuss their difference in belief at a later stage (Rathus, Nevid, and Fichner-Rathus, 2005).

Duck (1981) emphasizes the importance of agreement as to what friendship or a romantic relationship actually entails. Similarly important is agreement on where the friendship or relationship is going, even if it’s open, as well as its pace. Many relationships and friendships break off because of a divergence in one of these areas. For romantic involvements similarity in sex role ideology is essential important (Grush and Yale, 1979). If the man believes that the female should just clean the house, cook
and tend the children, while the female believes in equality, a romantic relationship is very unlikely to work out. Similarity in sexual attitudes also helps (Smith, Becker, Byrne, and Przybyla, 1993). Fascinating is the research on genetic similarity, which finds that we somehow manage to select mates who have a similar genetic makeup (although not too similar, which would find us attracted to our family members) (Lumpert, 1997). Rushton (1998) examined 1.000 paternity claims brought by women against men who allegedly were the father. In all cases were paternity was proven, there was greater similarity between the real father and the mother, than in the cases were paternity was disproved.

Similarity is in fact the mainstay of matchmaking activities, following the matching hypothesis, which states that people prefer the other to be like themselves or a little bit better. Research provides little evidence of successful outcomes when opposites attract (Pines, 2005; Rathus, Nevid, and Ficher-Rathus, 2005). An exception is sometimes found in the realm of personality. Here sometimes opposites are sought, if compatible, e.g., in the case of a dominant character and a submissive character. Generally, however, people like their friends and partners to have a good character, especially to be warm and trustworthy (Fletcher et al., 2004). Both men and women look for warmth, trustworthiness, understanding, sensitivity, intelligence, emotional stability, and a sense of humor (Regan, 2003). To a certain extent these wonderful qualities can come about because of self-fulfilling prophecies: when one partner or friends believes that the other has a good trait, the other will start to act accordingly (Murray, Holmes, and Griffin, 1996). Positive illusions about the other’s personality help to develop the relationship (Martz et al., 1998). (Still later, putting up with stuff helps (Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman and Levinson, 2000; Rusbult et al., 1991)).

Prompts: How to match on the basis of inner similarity? Which characteristics match best?

Cooperation. Sherif et al. (1961) in their famous Robbers Cave experiment showed that boys in a camp readily form in-groups and out groups when arbitrarily divided into two groups. Quickly adversity and hostility between the two groups developed. They also showed that when the two rival groups had to work cooperatively on a certain task for which the input and effort of both groups was necessary, e.g., a truck needed to be pulled out of the mud, the groups started to merge and to like each other. People like people with whom they work cooperatively on a task

Prompts: How to incorporate cooperation in interacting activities?

Ideas: Dating agency that organizes cooperative tasks, e.g., to build a house, to work for a social cause. Cooperation in speed dating: e.g., solving a puzzle, building a house from matchsticks.

Associations that cause liking. One avenue of being liked is to associate ourselves with other things or persons that are liked. On the dating market, we can list our preference for movies, movie stars, pop groups, novel authors etc. Apart from disclosing ourselves, their popularity reflects on us. Advertisers have known this for a long time and on the dating market we reveal as well as advertise ourselves. Another example is the luncheon technique (discussed in Cialdini, 1993). It’s good to take friends and dates for lunch or dinner because people tend to like their company after having food and drinks. Also, take your date out to a feel-good movie rather than a sad movie (Gouaux, 1971). Your date will like you better (mood plays a role here as well).

Prompts: Which associations to use that cause liking?

Social Skills. Social skills are a very important factor in attraction and bonding. Lack of social skills are a very important issue for the dating industry as a whole and will also be discussed under that heading. People well versed in assessing other people and situations accurately, adopting appropriate styles of communication and body posture, selecting and revealing information in an inviting way, and in pacing the friendship or relationship properly are obviously at an advantage in building relationships (Duck, 1981). There’s a broad range of skills involved in creating and building contacts:

Disclosure rules. For example, research shows specifically what is appropriate and what is inappropriate to disclose in the first 30 seconds, after 1 minute, 5 minutes, 10 minutes, etc. of a real-life first encounter (on the web there are different rules) (Knapp and Vangelisti, 2000). An external example of disclosure is that relationships should at some stage achieve public recognition, for example, by meeting in public.

Small talk ability. In the very first parts of initial conversation, small talk ability is very important. This refers to breadth-of-topic coverage rather than talking about topics in-depth (Knapp and Vangelisti, 2000). www.branddating.nl was a great dating site that facilitated just this. The dating situation can be quite awkward (see paragraph 6) and on this site people were matched on the basis of
brand preferences. Thus, people’s initial conversation could be about toothpaste, sandwich spreads, or sunglasses, instead of discussing the amount of wished-for children.

**Signals of interest.** Being friendly, smiling, and having a nice opening line is obviously inviting when initiating contact. Flirting behavior goes a step further. For females, the hair flip, the skirt hike, the object caress, and applying lipstick can all be courtship behaviors that serve as nonverbal signals to potential partners. Moore (1985) found an additional 48 of those.

**Reciprocity.** People form a relationship when the attraction is mutual. Reciprocity creates cycles of positive experiences and emotions that reinforce the bond. Curtis and Miller (1986) led people to believe that another person liked or disliked them. The person who thought they were liked subsequently acted warmer, more pleasant, more agreeable, and disclosed more about themselves. Subsequently, the persons who erroneously believed that they were liked, were in fact liked more after the interaction. This sets cycles of reciprocation in motion.

**Giving praise.** As a rule, we tend to love praise, and like those who provide it, even when it’s clearly false. In an experiment done by Drachman, deCarufel, and Inkson (1978), men were given feedback from another person who needed a favor from them. Some participants got positive feedback; others negative feedback, and others mixed feedback. When the evaluator gave only positive feedback, he was better liked, even though the men fully realized that he stood to gain from them, and that the positive feedback was randomly given and thus true as much as untrue. We love to be loved – the fact that someone likes us creates liking in itself.

**Prompts:** How to incorporate friendship and intimacy skills?

**Ideas:** The dating agency giving public recognition to emerging relationships. Making information about dating candidates gradually available.

### Special Problems of the dating industry

The dating industry has a number of special problems in being successful in connecting people. First, people don’t like to admit that they are lonely. Loneliness is something that happens to other people. Thus, a firm can not state that it caters for lonely people. Similarly, many people don’t like to admit that they are alone, and they may feel being a loser using the services of a firm in the dating industry (Adelman and Ahuvia, 1995). In response, the industry as well as the media (T.V programs, magazines, newspapers) that cater to people living alone have come up with the image of the happy single, whose primary assets are to be free, active, and adventurous.

There is a social stigma to loneliness and even to being alone. One response to this pressure can be that people hang out or even have a relationship with someone just in order to not feel lonely. This is usually not effective in the long run and in the end the other, manipulated person may feel lonely as well. There is also a perception that dating services are being used by losers. This image is presumably held by people who do not consider themselves a loser.

**Prompt:** How to market your product or service avoiding negative connotations?

Additionally, there is the issue of unruly or obnoxious behavior. If someone proves to be annoying, threatening, or otherwise not conforming to the regulations of the firm, he or she can be removed from the service. But then, being rejected by a dating agency must be the ultimate form of loneliness.

**Prompt:** How to prevent your business being spoiled by unruly behavior?

**Ideas:** Use feedback systems like Ebay to filter out non-behaving individuals

Duck (1981) has stated that many people without friends or a partner lack in social skills. Thus, for these people setting them up with someone else is not enough, and is even likely to aggravate the situation, as it was the lack of ability to make it all work that caused to person to be without friends in the first place. These people would certainly benefit from a training in the many skills involved in building and maintaining relationships.

**Prompts:** How to match people with poor social skills? Which services can be offered that would improve social skills? How would a service looks relies less on social skills, at least initially?
**Ideas:** Non-verbal speed dating, e.g., massage dating. An impression coach service, just like the make-over programs on TV, provide advice and guidance with regard to hair, dress, manners, conversation, and such.

**DISCUSSION**

This study on dating market opportunities forms a trilogy with two other studies. One investigated opportunities in response to individualization of demand in the undertaking business (Van Gelderen, 2004). The other looked at meaning in life as a source of opportunities for enterprise (Van Gelderen, 2006). They form a whole, because together they address the three fundamental themes of existential psychology: loneliness, death, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980; 1989). In all three papers it is argued that because of individualization processes (and a range of other causes) opportunities have emerged for new products and services, and in all three papers several of those opportunities are identified.

In this paper use is made of what van Gelderen (2004) labeled a heuristics approach. Rather than presenting a comprehensive overview of information, business owners are presented short bits of information that were selected for their heuristic, inspirational value. In cognitive psychology, heuristics are defined as mental shortcuts. Busenitz and Arthurs (2007, p.138) argue that the use of heuristics helps to learn more quickly and to think differently, which can lead to innovative insights. They further state (2007, p.140) that "extensive use of heuristics allows one to make substantial leaps in logic and to make approximations regarding the future directions of a specific market". Still, we provide the heuristic inputs (information) and record the outputs (ideas), but can not ascertain what the cognitive underpinnings are in the creative process, e.g., is it schema adjustment (Gaglio and Katz, 2001), pattern recognition (Baron, 2006), recombination (Ward, 2004)?

The author contributed to the opportunity recognition process in two ways. Firstly, by selecting and presenting social psychology research outcomes and issues particular to the dating industry. Secondly, by being responsive in the brainstorming that ensued. Thus, the entrepreneurship researcher was actively part of the OR process, and therefore part of the research. This is an uncommon type of inquiry as normally the researcher is assumed and expected to be independent of the research topic and outcomes. One advantage however, is that the researcher does not come to the participant empty-handed, just to get data or information. Rather than inquiring about current (best) practice, the entrepreneurship researcher contributes to envisaging future possibilities (Davidsson, 2002).

There are also theoretical reasons that support taking this active role, when seen from to the perspective of the knowledge spillover theory of entrepreneurship (Audretsch, Keilbach and Lehman, 2005). The creator of knowledge is often not the same agent as the exploiter of knowledge (Audretsch et al., 2005; Buenstorf, 2007; Sanders 2007). Much knowledge in public research is driven by recognition rather than by economic rents (Sanders, 2007). A researcher investigating attraction and bonding may be motivated by peer recognition rather than the possibility of a commercial application. Audretsch et al. in their theory make the case that entrepreneurship is the mechanism by which society more fully appropriates its investments in generating new knowledge (2005, p.71). Thus, knowledge needs to spillover from the creator of knowledge to the entrepreneur, and that is exactly what the entrepreneurship researcher is doing in this current research.

The social psychology research outcomes presented were in some cases new to the participants but in other cases they were not, depending on their prior knowledge. Issues particular to the dating industry are obviously familiar to those involved. Still, participants were able to brainstorm about solutions, applications, and innovations. It is not necessarily the newness of information that leads to opportunity identification. It can also be reflection on known information that does the trick (Corbett, 2007). Experience can not be equated to learning, even less to creativity (Ward, 2004). A particular issue can be daily confronted and it may still be fruitful to be forced to reflect on this issue by a visiting researcher, especially in combination with other information that is brought along.

This leads us to the notion of under-exploited opportunities (Plummer, Haylie, and Godesiabo, 2007). Plummer et al. argue that the same opportunity can be exploited in various ways, and that any strategy to pursue an opportunity can still leave room for other, later strategies to pursue the opportunity even better. Buenstorf (2007) makes a similar point when stating that the discovery and exploitation of opportunities are inextricably linked and that a perception-pursuit nexus characterizes new ventures. For example, in the case of the dating industry, it is well known that proximity (whether
physical or virtual) is crucial – however ever more optimal strategies for bringing people together may be thought up, whether on the basis of social science research or the application of new technologies.

Yet another reason why the newness of the presented information is of less concern, is that known information will still be interpreted and evaluated differently. The ideas that a person comes up with depend on his or her idiosyncratic information or beliefs. Shane (2000), and Eckhardt and Shane (2003) have convincingly argued that opportunity recognition is shaped by prior knowledge. Different people discover different things because they have different information and because they evaluate information differently. Participants differ in terms of their experience and life history as well as because they are in different environments and run different kinds of businesses in the dating industry.

This research made use of social psychology research outcomes which is of particular interest in the context of the debate whether opportunities pre-exist or are created. Social science outcomes, in contrast to the natural sciences, do not derive from timeless laws. New services and products in the dating industry are subjective in the sense that individual entrepreneurs create a new dating / relating script or template (Companys and McCullen, 2007), and that they subsequently convince others that this new way of dating is appropriate, feasible, and effective (Chiasson and Sanders, 2005). Yet, especially in the context of the dating industry it is clear that what is appropriate, feasible and effective is highly dependent on the broader cultural context (Chiasson and Sanders, 2005).

Legitimacy aspects (Chiasson and Sanders, 2005) play an important role in innovations in the dating market. Both the dating industry as a whole, as well as specific services have not gained complete acceptance in mainstream society. So especially a new practice runs the risk of ridicule and dismissal (Chiasson and Sanders, 2007). For example, whether a speed dating massage session is seen as appropriate all depends on the agreements amongst the participants. As one owner said, she thought of many new dating / relating practices, and would just give it a try. Experimentation gives rise to feedback which determines what will be retained, adapted or discarded. What helps, is that it is exactly the authority of the dating industry business owner in his or her role of being the person bringing people together, that makes it possible to explore unconventional ways of dating and relating (see the discussion of triggers in the previous paragraph). This status of authority is often augmented by means of published testimonials of former customers stating that thanks to the dating business owner, they now have a successful relationship or a close circle of friends.

There are several limitations to this study. This is work in progress, so only a limited, preliminary set of ideas could be presented. Second, just the initial aspect of the OR process is the focus of attention. Nothing is done to evaluate ideas. Third, the information presented came from the social sciences. Technology developments were not presented to the dating industry business leaders. Fourth, no systematic evidence was collected on individual 'performance'. Obviously, some participants responded better to the workshop set-up than others. However, individual differences in idea generation were not the focus of this study, which reports on the industry level.

The last, and most important limitation, is that the impact of an exercise like this is likely to be marginal in most cases. For the dating business owners a visiting academic is just one fleeting small event in their working lives. By far the most knowledge creation and learning takes place in their daily business practice (Davidsson, 2002). On the other hand, the academic does reach out, provides knowledge, and engages in forward looking activities. In a few cases, whether because of the direct engagement with the research participants or because of the readership of subsequent academic or popular reports, there may be a profound positive impact.

Therefore, projects like this could be a worthwhile pursuit in entrepreneurship education. Students can single out a particular change in a particular market, whether it is technological, demographic, environmental, economic, regulatory, cultural, or a business practice. Their research doesn’t need to be exhaustive or comprehensive – it is the essence of the heuristics approach to single out information for inspirational purposes, not for completeness. In engaging with the business owners the students do not only take but also give, and have a first hand experience of at least the very initial stage of OR. Ultimately, if properly communicated and disseminated, the research may be of benefit to research participants, incumbents, or potential entrants.

REFERENCES


Eagly, A.H., Ashmore, R.D., Makhijani, M.G., & Longo, L.C. (1991). What is beautiful is good, but ...  


