OLD DOGS, NEW TRICKS? ONLINE DATING AND OLDER ADULTS

Sue Malta & Karen Farquharson

Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Faculty of Life & Social Sciences, Swinburne University, Hawthorn, Victoria

Abstract

Most studies of online romantic relationships use younger sample populations, making it difficult to generalise to older adults. This paper describes online dating amongst a group of Australian seniors. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 30 older adults (aged 60 – 76 years) all of whom used online dating websites to find new romantic relationships. We chart the progression of their romantic relationships, describing the participants’ reasons for going online to look for romantic partners, followed by the way these romances unfold. We argue that the online environment structures their development by predetermining the progression of the romances through several stages: the posting of personal profiles, the initial contact (“kisses” and “winks”), emails, phone contact, face-to-face meeting, and finally sex. The majority of these online-initiated relationships followed this very structured pattern of progression, with only minor variations.

Rationale

Most studies of online romantic relationships use younger sample populations making it difficult to generalise to older adults (see for instance, Donn & Sherman, 2002) and are usually situated within the psychological literature (for example, Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Why older adults are not included in such studies appears to be based on ageist views and stereotypes that depict older adults as technologically incompetent (Philbeck, 1997) and, furthermore, asexual (Minichiello et al., 1996, p. 187). This stereotyping has meant that love and connection in later life have been rarely studied, despite the fact that most of us spend decades as older adults – and despite the fact that older adults who are socially isolated have been shown to be in poorer health and to have less well-being than those who are socially connected (World Health Organization (WHO), 2002, p. 28; WHO, 2003, p. 22). The current study aims to fill the gap in the scholarly literature by taking a sociological approach to understanding online dating amongst older adults.

Methods

This paper reports the findings of semi-structured qualitative interviews with 30 older adults (15 females, 15 males; aged 60 – 76 years; mean age 65.5 years), who sought romantic relationships through online dating websites. The sample was recruited through a number of methods: via an online ‘Call for Participants’ notice, at RSVP.com.au®, an Australian dating website; through publicity in local and interstate news media and on radio; and, in some cases, through referrals by friends or other participants; in effect, creating a snowball sample. The interviews were conducted using four different interview methods: (1) face-to-face and (2) telephone interviews and (3) email and (4) instant messaging, and have been described previously (see Malta, 2009). The phone and face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Instant messaging and email interviews generated their own transcripts. All transcripts were analysed thematically by means of ‘analytic grids’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 127-132). Themes based on the research questions were identified and interrogated.
Results

Why go online?
These older adults went online because they felt there were very limited places and opportunities for older adults to find each other. This is exemplified by Ester:

Because, although I move around in a number of circles, there just wasn't anyone around that I could be interested in. The Net seems to be the "In' thing these days.

Ester (71)

In some cases going online was recommended by children, and in others participants had heard a professional or an expert talking about it, such as a counsellor or therapist, or someone on TV or the radio that they trusted.

The structuring of romance through predetermined stages
Once they decided to go online, our participants found that there was a very structured process around online dating that started with registering on a dating website such as RSVP.com.au® and completing a 'personal profile'. Online dating profiles consist of a series of check boxes detailing one’s demographic and physical details and a section where members use their own words to describe themselves and what they like to do (for a more detailed discussion on profiles and their use, see Baker, 2005, pp. 32-34). Members also have the opportunity to post photos of themselves. The profile, which can be likened to a self-portrait in words, is then displayed on the database for other members to look at.

Part of completing a personal profile involves selecting preferences for potential partners by completing an Ideal Partner Profile. The websites provide checklists, detailing long lists of characteristics that one might desire in a potential partner – such as height, weight, lifestyle, political affiliation, religion, even hair colour – which members can “tick” according to their preferences. For the older adults in the current study, going through the process of writing a Personal Profile and establishing an Ideal Partner Profile, meant that they were required to think very carefully about how they wished to portray themselves and what they were looking for in a new partner.

There are approximately 1.6 million registrants on RSVP.com.au®, 11% of whom are aged 56 years and over (Fairfax Digital, 2010). Finding a new partner from the myriad of choices available involves searching the database and scanning photographs “for a person fitting a ‘preferred partner profile’ in a [specific] geographic area” (Owen, 66). Many participants rely on photographs attached to personal profiles as an initial screening tool to see if they find a person attractive or not. Neville (76) said he thought photos were very important, and Russell (70) said he would only ever contact people who supplied their photos. If Neville and Russell did not like the look of a particular photograph, they would not contact the person further.

The online dating process thus begins with registering, then completing and posting a profile. It is the first in a series of steps that registrants hope will culminate in finding romance. Once a search has been undertaken, Neil, a veteran user of dating websites, explained the next stages of the online dating process:

1. Send an electronic kiss [to someone you like the look of]
2. 15-20% send back a “Yes, please email me”. That means using an RSVP “stamp” costing $4 to $7
3. Then you can email but anonymously via RSVP for a month, but if it’s going to go anywhere you soon exchange personal names, email addresses and phone numbers
4. Then you talk on the phone
5. With the ones who are really interested you start exchanging compliments. If
   the phone calls go on for a couple of hours at night a few terms of
   endearment start to creep into the conversation
6. You agree to meet for coffee
7. If you feel pretty good at the meeting, you go out for dinner afterwards
8. By then it’s pretty obvious if you have a mutual enough liking to get round to
   actual dating
9. Keep in mind that we grew up in the swinging late sixties where everyone
   went to bed with everyone after a dinner date – so sometimes we just relive
   our youth and do that
10. If not, then there is a period of courting leading up to the physical – if it’s
    obvious that both people want to move to that, sometimes an hour after the
    coffee meeting, sometimes a week, though often not to full intercourse [right
    away]. More like teenagers with heavy “petting” it used to be called, but
    definitely sexual. Neil (71)

Many older adults in this study had initiated meetings in this manner with numerous
prospective partners over several months, whilst for others the online dating experience was
comparatively brief as they found a connection with someone almost immediately. Russell
(70), an experienced online dater, estimated that 150 or more women had either made direct
contact with him or had looked at his profile. In contrast, Elaine’s online presence was
relatively short-lived, as she found a compatible partner in a very short space of time:

The third man I’d contacted replied to my message… and suggested meeting for
coffee. I replied that I’d like to email him a bit to learn more about him. We
exchanged about three emails apiece and then we met for coffee. Elaine (61)

Online dating websites are for-profit organisations, and part of the structure they provide
enables them to earn money from connecting potential partners. "Kisses" can be sent for
free, and our participants felt comfortable sending them to many potential partners. The next
stage of contact cost money. As Neil reported, if he got a positive response from a "kiss" he
had sent, he was then required to spend between $4 and $7 on an RSVP "stamp" to
respond. The "stamp" enabled our participants to communicate through anonymous e-mails
and/or instant messaging (IM) via the dating website. Our older adults found this method
worked as a further screening measure before committing to talk by phone. Amanda
described the process she went through:

[We] exchanged emails and then phone calls and then met face-to-face. I liked the
look of his profile, I liked the sound of his voice and we did do the chat [IM] thing on
RSVP and that went off very well. Amanda (60)

For our participants, successful online communication led to phone calls, and successful
phone calls led to meeting face-to-face. The majority of participants described their first real
life meetings as occurring during the daytime and on neutral ground. This usually meant
meeting at a coffee shop where neither of them were known, at a location midpoint between
their homes. If the coffee date was successful, other dates usually followed quickly. For
example, when it became apparent that Max and his date had enough things in common,
they arranged to meet over a cup of coffee, which was quickly followed up by a dinner date –
all within one week of meeting online. Similarly, Adam (66) and his partner Marissa had their
first date offline at a “morning coffee rendezvous” within 10 days of meeting online.
At this point the relationship either continues or, if no connection is felt, it ends and participants go back online and begin the process again. For Nellie the process took a long time before she found someone she connected with:

Nothing happened for about three years, other than negative responses to kisses I sent and several meetings with men with whom I had no rapport whatsoever. Nellie (63)

Beyond the initial online attraction and the excitement of first dates, taking these burgeoning associations one step further, involved consolidating them into real life partnerships – usually centred on issues of sexual intimacy. Contrary to existing stereotypes, all older adult participants reported that their relationships were sexual.

For the older adults in this study the Internet acted as a means – a tool, in fact – to firstly mediate online romances and then to facilitate their offline formation. Relationships progressed up to the first face-to-face meeting according to predetermined structures put in place by the dating website, and if that meeting was not successful our participants returned to the website to search for other potential matches. Arranging dates with several people simultaneously appeared to be the norm.

After establishing an ongoing relationship, the website was no longer necessary, although many of our participants maintained their profiles and continued to visit the sites. Our participants reported that the system afforded them the opportunity to shop around for their perfect match – discarding those who did not suit – simply because of the large number of possible partners available online. They liked the structure provided by the websites finding it relatively easy to negotiate and stress free. As Nicholas commented, it was “very easy”:

From my limited experience it seemed very easy... without doing more than preparing what is a personal marketing document and lodging it on a site I was approached by a dozen interesting ladies. Where else could that happen? That was within the first 36 hours! Nicholas (63)

Christopher (61) described the structured process of online dating as akin to a “protocol” and said that, for him, it was both logical and reassuring. The anonymity of the contact enabled our participants to approach a number of people simultaneously, picking and choosing the most likely relationships to pursue further.

*Varying the structure*

The system did not suit everyone. For example, Liam (61) did not like having to use email as a means of contacting people because he said he was a “lousy typist”. Although the dating website forced him to make initial contact through email correspondence, once initial contact was made with someone new, he circumvented the need to continue using it by providing his phone number. His new relationship began with just one email and then quickly progressed to telephone contact. Nevertheless, Liam had to follow the basic process in order to de-anonymise himself to potential partners. The website still structured the progression of his relationship.

These stories illustrate that the initiation of online romances is centred around and organised by the dating website, whereby prospective partners get to meet each other through their personal profiles, photographs and emails, before moving on to online chat and/or telephone contact, eventually meeting in real life. The role of the Internet, in this respect, is as initiator and moderator for these burgeoning relationships and without this role these relationships would not begin.
Summary

Our participants found that online dating followed a predictable structure. The first stage involved searching the personal profiles and photographs on display, followed by initiating anonymous e-mail or instant message contact through the website. If the contact went well, they proceeded to speak by phone and, in due course, met in real life. The structure offered opportunities to both continue and end relationships, and our participants found it easy to follow. The majority of the online-initiated relationships in the present study followed this predetermined pattern of progression, with only minor variations.

Implications for policy and practice

The current study indicates that older adults are utilising the Internet to make romantic connections, connections that are meaningful and important in their lives. However these connections are only available to those who have access to and interest in online communications. Policy around Internet access should therefore specifically target older adults who do not have such access, enabling them to not only remain connected with family and friends, but also to make new links — romantic or otherwise — if they so desire. Such connections could, arguably, have implications for health and wellbeing outcomes in the years ahead, given that socially connected older adults have been shown to be happier and healthier than those who are not.

References