



# Internet Dating

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## Overview

From a historical perspective, “Internet dating” can be tracked back to the mid-1960s when early computers were used to match individuals by comparing data derived from questionnaires. The technology of using a computer to bring humans together was promoted as “scientific” and the use of the computer for this purpose rapidly gained popularity in the United States and Germany (Hardey, 2002, p571). The rapid expansion of single person households, especially among professional classes who are most likely to have Internet access in their homes provides a context for this phenomenon. Internet dating itself can be characterized by a “seamless movement between reading descriptions, writing responses, and exchanging messages. Compared to the effort, awkwardness, risks and physical embarrassments often associated with ‘real world’ dating, the Internet can provide some advantages” (Hardey, 2002, p572).

Moreover, Internet dating can be viewed as a potential advancement of the use of new technologies in the postmodern world. Marked by constant change, postmodern society now “infiltrates every sphere of social life” (Morgado, 1996, p44). One such developing interest to researchers is the way humans create and re-create their personal identities. An individual’s identity can be defined as the “cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are” (Schouten, 1991, p413). According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, one part of the understanding of who or what we are is based on “reflexive evaluation” (Solomon, 1983, p321), which can be defined as the way “we believe that others see us” (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005, p735).

Since humanity’s inception, it can be argued that individuals have modified their behavior to construct and re-construct their identities in numerous settings. Some of these behavioral contexts include,

- Cosmetic surgery (Schouten, 1991),
- Skydiving (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993),
- River rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993),
- Participation in fantasy-based activities (Kozinets, 2002), and

## Abstract

This article clarifies issues surrounding the relatively new phenomenon of Internet dating. These issues will be examined in a review of present literature referencing Internet dating. Due to the fact that the phenomenon of Internet dating is new and has been relatively unexplored in a handful of books and articles about this topic, potential sociological dimensions of this trend are not clearly understood. Sociological issues that potentially impact Internet dating include social capital and social support. These two sociological concepts will be discussed. A conclusion will be offered that details implications for further research.

## Keywords

**Identity**

**Internet Dating**

**Social Capital**

**Social Support**

**Symbolic Interactionist Perspective**

- Natural health food (Thompson & Troester, 2002) consumption communities (cited in Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005, p736) .

Additionally, individuals also use their behavior in online contexts to modify their identities. Research conducted by Schau and Gilly (2003) demonstrated that consumers utilize personal website postings to learn about themselves and communicate aspects of their identities to others. Moreover, “if identity is truly a social phenomenon as intimated by the symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), then feedback from others would be an important part of the identity creation and re-creation process” (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005, p736). Within the realm of Internet dating additional research should be conducted on ways individuals choose to re-frame their identities in light of the potentially artificial environment that dating anonymously might elicit.

### Virtual & Physical Reality

Previously conducted research has suggested that virtual reality is enveloped within physical reality. This research subsequently pointed out that an individual’s online experience influences their offline identity” (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005, p736). Particularly on Internet dating sites, individuals create profiles of themselves that contain information about their physical appearance, demographics, and personality characteristics. The use of these profiles theoretically allows individuals to explore and re-create their personal identities. The high level of anonymity that the Internet allows as compared to face-to-face encounters offers individuals the opportunity to showcase elements of their personalities or self-perceptions they may not ordinarily present in person (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005). Furthermore, the anonymity that Internet dating offers may enable individuals to effectively lie about themselves, and exaggerate specific characteristics they would like to possess or may have the potential to possess in the future (Mantovani, 1995; Riva & Galimberti, 1997) (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005). Only a few studies have been conducted in this area, and as the potential for Internet use grows, it is pertinent for researchers to better understand the impacts of this phenomenon.

### Presenting Selves

In order to better understand human perception and Internet dating, it might also be necessary to understand the components of iden-

tity, because each of these components factor into how individuals present themselves. Self-conception can be potentially divided into categories. The first category can be described as “now selves.” Now selves “describe the self as it is presently is perceived by the individual.” Another potential category is “possible selves.” Possible selves are “images of the self that have not yet been realized but that are hoped for or feared (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p957, cited in Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005, p737). Markus and Nurius (1986) demonstrated that possible selves play an important role in the identity re-creation process. The notion of possible selves can be used to better understand ways that “cognitive bridges between the present and the future, specifying how individuals may change from how they are now to what they will become” (p961, cited in Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005, p737). Moreover, Wurf and Markus (1991) predicted that the re-construction of identity “involves a multi-step process of development, validation, and redevelopment” (cited in Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005, p738).

The context of Internet dating offers individuals opportunities to explore their possible selves online and offline and at the same time; Internet dating allows individuals to use a combination of online and offline behavior and feedback to re-create their identities. In fact, several dating services encourage participants to “‘update’ their profiles to reflect personal changes that have occurred since they first posted their profiles” (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCable, 2005, p739). Starling (2000) reported: “It’s easy to make up an identity in cyberspace. People can send you phony pictures and conjure fascinating lives.” One woman she interviewed indicated, “You have people out there pretending to be one thing when they are something else” (p50). Before embarking on the Internet dating field, additional research again should be considered into potential dates and their backgrounds.

Hollander (2004) suggested: ‘Nagging questions remain, in particular, why such fine human beings must invest so much time and energy in the search for suitable partners? Are these self presentations largely wishful fantasies, or exaggerations of traits possessed’ (p75). Further, Hollander (2004) indicated that “implausible self-presentations are attention getting efforts, overselling oneself is a response to keen competition for partners not easy to locate” (p75). More dramatically, Hollander (2004) indicated that the human need to oversell “reflects the pressures of a competitive culture and a competitive market place of personal relationships...especially [among] older women who are even more often without partners” (p75).

### Advantages of Internet Dating

Findings from a recent study indicated that Internet dating seems to be the new approach to dating for multiple reasons: “According to a New York Times report (Style Section, November 24, 2002) 16.6 million people visited matchmaking Web sites in September alone ... a figure [that] has made Internet dating seem almost stigma-free...” (Hollander, 2002, p. 69).

This occurred in 2002 - early on in the Internet dating phenomenon. In addition to matchmaking through the internet

with specific sites geared toward “dating,” there are also computer dating services and “personals” which are published in printed publications that offer new ways to initiate relationships. Arguably this new phenomenon is relatively unexplored with accompanying social and personal ramifications that are largely unknown and not understood (Hollander, 2002). Starling (2000) indicated that despite the unknown factors,

... on-line dating, with all its joys and dangers, has become the decade’s hottest way for many groups including African-American singles to connect through sites specifically geared to meet the needs of specific social groups and individuals . . . From on-line personals to cyber-chat rooms and message boards, professionals are using the Internet to meet new people and find love” (p46).

According to Starling (2000) the Internet is giving romance a different perspective. “Instead of hooking up in nightclubs and gyms, Black singles also can meet interesting prospects without leaving home. On the Internet, the world becomes your meeting ground” (p48). Individuals can connect through on-line personals, or they can find their soul mate by chatting in topic rooms about the Harlem Renaissance or urban renewal. Moreover, some prospective dates choose to send “virtual flowers and electronic greeting cards” (p48). One 41-year-old mother of two girls stated: “I wouldn’t give out my identity or my phone number right away. Take it slowly and chat with them for a while and get a sense of their personality and their true self” (p50). Several individuals indicated the use of reasonable caution as a means of self-protection.

Hardey (2002) indicated that one of the most important aspects of Internet dating is the wide variety of ways that needs are met. Dating sites dedicated to individuals with disabilities, members of ethnic communities, individuals seeking casual relationships, individuals with unusual sexual interests, and sites dedicated to religious preferences and diet offer a deviation from typical sites operating within the heterosexual market often advertising their services in terms of “finding a “soul mate” either leading to marriage or cohabitation. Internet dating itself operates in stark contrast to traditional approaches to love and marriage” (p574).

According to Bataille (1962), intimacy associated with the kind of relationship associated with Internet dating involves the maintenance of clear personal boundaries, rather than an absorption into the other. The consequent vision of this modern intimacy is “based on talk rather than passion, negotiation rather than commitment, and the advancement of self rather than the development of the couple all which suggests that the Internet is uniquely enabled to facilitate this kind of liaison” (Hardey, 2000, p574). Moreover, once a user has made contact with another member in an Internet dating site, a decision is required as to whether to enter into an “exchange of messages or to ignore the invitation. Many users express that this choice allows them a greater sense of control, which some individuals describe as “liberating” them from what may be a source of embarrassment off-line” (p 576). Clearly, many advantages have been described as part of the Internet dating phenomenon.

Essentially, the users of Internet dating sites are purposed with the potential of translating virtual relationships into meetings between flesh and blood individuals (Hardey, 2002, p579). Hollander (2004) indicated that communication of intimate personal needs via “terse advertisements may promise to be a more rational and effective approach to mate-selection that those which used to prevail in modern Western societies” (p69). Internet dating makes it possible to thwart the frustration of meeting someone in-person making judgments based on personal impressions, appearances, and chance. In choosing to date through the Internet, it has been advised that participants should clearly specify the kind of person they are and the type of person they are seeking. Moreover, potential Internet daters should “make clear that the centerpiece of [their] recreational interests are Bach cantatas and vacations in Mediterranean fishing villages rather than country music and bowling, which produce a better chance of meeting kindred spirits” (Hollander, 2004, p69).

## Applications

### The Sociological Impact of Internet Dating

#### Social Capital

From a sociological perspective, Internet dating might be viewed through two different lenses. First, Internet dating could be viewed through the concept of social capital. Social capital has been described as a characteristic of the relations between people. Through trust and reciprocity, social capital enables one to access the human, social, and cultural resources within a community or social network (Coleman, 1988). It can also be defined as: “Connections among individuals – social networks and norms of reciprocity and trust that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p). Bourdieu described social capital as both a quality and quantity of relationships; “first, the social relationship itself that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates, and second, the amount and strength of these resources” (Portes, 1998, p4). In this understanding, “social capital is something possessed by individuals that gains its strength in the aggregate of social networks” (Seaman & Sweeting, 2004, p174). Social capital can also be viewed as having the potential to enhance the health of individuals and communities (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000). Multiple implications regarding social capital and Internet dating could be inferred from this definition, and further research in this area should be conducted in order to understand potential impacts.

Beaudoin and Tau (2007) indicated that approximately 28% use online support groups related to medical conditions and personal problems. For example, 58% of patients with cancer use the Internet as a source of cancer information and support. This type of Internet use leads to “increases in social support, community, and coping and decreases in loneliness, depression, and anxiety” (p587). According to ComScore Media Metrix, over “19% of Web surfers visited a dating site last October” (cited in Goldberg, 2003, p109). In the case of positive outcomes from Internet encounters, “potential benefits and increases of social capital were found. In the case of online support groups, social capital

and social support increased, which led to subsequent positive health outcomes” (Beaudoin & Tao, 2007, p589). Certainly then, it could be concluded that in the case of Internet dating, in order for social capital to be an outcome, experiences should be positive, supportive, and authentic. Based on the potential positive outcome of increased social capital, increased social support may also result. Social support “involves advice and emotional reinforcement [and] is a behavioral outcome of social capital” (p589). Results from an additional study suggested that while the Internet may suggest a socially displacing effect, “it is also likely a source of new, qualitatively different social capital” (Williams, 2007, p398).

### Adolescents & Internet Use

Another significant application of the Internet is the impact on adolescents. Adolescents use the Internet for multiple purposes, but one of the biggest applications is its use for communication. The applications adolescents use to further social relationships include e-mail, instant messaging, blogs, and chat rooms (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, 2006; Craig, 2003; Gross, et al, 2002; Schiano, Chen, Ginsberg, Gretarsdottir, Huddleston, & Isaacs, 2002). In a national survey of adolescents, participants revealed that over 25% of Internet users had formed online friendships and 14% formed close friendships or romantic relationships (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002, p445). Research has further suggested that adolescent use of the Internet is associated with declines in well-being (Kraut et al., 1998), and accompanying weaker social ties (Kraut et al., 1998; Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000). Regular Internet users reported lower levels of attachment to close friends (Mesch, 2001), and negative perceptions about the quality of family relationships (Mesch, 2003). These views are directly opposite to other views regarding positively reported social benefits. However, a study of adolescents’ friendship networks revealed that the teens who had stable and active networks reported less loneliness, better moods, and more support from their friends (Degirmencioglu, 1995). Perhaps then, if similar applications could be made regarding Internet dating it could be true that Internet users with highly cohesive and interconnected friendship networks may benefit more from Internet dating than those who do not have a strong base of social support.

### Issues

The issues with Internet dating are profound and largely unexplored. It is difficult to make guesses regarding potential benefits, negative attributes, or other impacts, because more research needs to be done in order to understand the phenomenon of Internet dating.

These phenomenon seem to readily occur and can be linked to the potential for creating and re-creating identity, which was earlier indicated as part of the phenomenon of Internet dating. Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and McCabe (2005) indicated that individuals often used their profiles for “identity exploration and re-creation purposes,” and many mentioned that they would rather try out “new features of their identities on the Internet as opposed to in the real world because the Internet afforded them some degree of anonymity that the real world did not.” As

a result, individuals indicated that “the anonymity of the Internet permitted each informant to include a combination of both now and possible selves in one profile” (p742). It is perhaps likely based on this information that caution is advised before fully engaging in the process of Internet dating.

Cost is another issue pertaining to Internet dating. From a pragmatic perspective, Metz (2004) indicated that eHarmony® ranks first in attracting new dollars. One of the main reasons is that eHarmony® draws large numbers of users because it advertises heavily on both radio and television broadcasts. It also charges a premium for its “scientifically proven” psychological profiling to make matches (p92). Goldberg (2004) indicated that most people sign up for a month at a time on a dating site. However, given that average paying user stays with a dating site for four months, users should consider paying up front for three months at a time, and to cancel the membership rather than risk being billed monthly (p110). Certainly, monetary consideration is another factor in selecting the sites for Internet dating.

### Conclusion

In order to understand the long-term impacts of Internet dating, sociologists should consider more studies investigating the multiple aspects of this phenomenon. Given that the phenomenon of Internet dating has only occurred for such a short period of time, it is hard to know whether the phenomenon is positive or negative and its longitudinal prospects. As additional studies are conducted regarding this phenomenon, it will be interesting to determine gender consequences, impacts on potential offspring resulting from an Internet dating union, and socioeconomic results as the Internet has the potential for breaking through past social and socioeconomic barriers between individuals and groups in differing social groups. Research should be considered in all of these areas.

### Terms & Concepts

**Identity:** Identity can be defined as the “cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are.”

**Internet Dating:** Internet dating can be described as a process in which individuals create profiles of themselves that contain information about their physical appearance, demographics, and personality characteristics for the purpose of meeting, dating, and potentially marrying or entering into relationship with potentially suitable mates.

**Social Capital:** Social Capital can be described as connections among individuals – social networks and norms of reciprocity and trust that arise from them.

**Social Support:** Social support “involves advice and emotional reinforcement [and] is a behavioral outcome of social capital.”

**Symbolic Interactionist Perspective:** According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, one part of the understanding of who or what we are is based on “reflexive evaluation,” which can be defined as the way we believe that others see us.

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## Essay by Sharon Link, Ph.D.

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