

Love 2.0: The impact of digital technology on dating

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Abstract:

Online dating services are meeting places for people who want to date. Users are looking for a place for meeting, even when this remains taboo. Dating has two phases: on line and in real life. On line, the meeting is prepared by creating a profile and exchanging messages. Off line, a meeting tells us about changes in the morals related to marriage and sexuality; and it proves, when the relationship lasts, the cogency of the norms of romantic love. These websites lead us to ask questions about our collective ideas on dating, gender identities and the relation between our impression of ourselves and the impression that others have.

Dating websites are now a full part of contemporary life, but they are also a source of anxiety or questions.¹ Are they to be seen as the death of romantic love? As the waning of spontaneity in love? Or even as the end of authentic feelings? Such questions regularly spring up in the media. But what are the real effects? What impact do these websites actually have on dating? This article seeks to answer this question by referring to the results of 25 interviews conducted between 2014 and 2018 with users of Meetic, Tinder and AdopteUnMec: heterosexual men and women between the ages of 29 and 45 who lived in the Paris region (NADAUD-ALBERTINI 2016 & 2018a).

Dating websites, a meeting place

Before meeting someone, users have another meeting: with dating websites. This visit is not always evident for them (CHAUMIER 1999, PARMENTIER 2012, LARDELLIER 2012, NADAUD-ALBERTINI 2015a & 2015b). Let us start by examining their motives and qualms.

A place for dating

Interviewees explained that they started visiting dating websites to broaden their opportunities. Some of them said that their worklife was so intense that it kept them from being available for dates arranged through offline sociability (work, friends, leisure activities), that their professional requirements (*e.g.*, staggered workhours) limited the chances of meeting people, that a change in their lives made it necessary to “*find a network when you know no one*” (Beryl, a 30-year-old single woman, no children, estate manager), or even that they wanted to “*dynamize [their] network*” after its possibilities had been exhausted (Laura, 31, single, no children, a jurist). Others said they were tired of peers intruding in their love life with a slue of “*doomed plans made by girlfriends who always introduce you to the wrong person and who insist too much*” (Ingrid, 41, divorced and remarried, three children, saleslady in clothing wear). Still others, among the oldest,

¹ This article, including any quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites were consulted in August 2019.

explained that, having been in a couple for a long time, they had forgotten how to meet, cruise or seduce someone and were concerned lest they no longer know how to do so due to lack of practice.

Regardless of the reasons given, the motivation always came down to the following: interviewees saw dating websites as a simple and direct way to meet a partner. In Oliver's words (34, single, no children, a teacher), "*Visiting this sort of website means that you want to meet someone.*"

A taboo place

Though not evident to them, users accepted to enroll on line to find a date. Much depended on the sort of relationship they expected.

Some of them were looking for a so-called "serious" relationship, with the ideal of romantic fusion, a monogamous relationship leading to a long-term commitment in line with the ideal of a legally married couple and parenthood (KAUFMANN 1999). For them, this was the model for a "good" relationship, since the long-term perspective attested to its quality and sincerity. This sort of relationship allowed for a period between the first contact and the first sexual intercourse.

Other interviewees were looking for more occasional contacts based on sex as a pleasurable leisure activity, *i.e.*, "*in an atmosphere of sweetness and gaiety dominated by fondness for the partner [...] candor, connivance and, above all, curiosity about the partner, a fondness for discovering an unknown world*". The contrast was made with the "*sexual hunt [...] galvanized by the often very egotistical quest for pleasure (with implications of lying to partners about one's intentions, and then rejecting them later on without an explanation)*" (KAUFMANN 2010:135-136).

Other interviewees expected to meet sex-hunters, like Arlequin (an alias, a 29-year-old video games salesman in a nonmonogamous couple, no children) who explained, "*My expectations? Sex, and one more added to my list each time.*"

Interviewees looking for a long-term commitment were the most reluctant to visiting dating websites. This reluctance was less strong but not negligible for persons (in particular women) who wanted sex as a leisure activity. It was very weak for sex-hunters.

Dating websites were described as places of noncommitment, where the phantom hovers of a man looking for self-serving sex. This sort of man has opened accounts on several dating sites, and lays claims to being a sexist; he is a cynical, egoistic boor — the reflection of the type of person to whom interviewees, neither men nor women, wanted to be likened.

Meeting on the website

A meeting has two facets, on line and off line (in real life: IRL). Sometimes, both occur; sometimes, only the first. Let us start with the meeting on the website.

Preparations: Creating a profile

Once having registered with the dating website, the user prepares for online exchanges by creating a profile. Thus starts a process of adjusting expectations: the user's own with those he/she assumes to be the expectations of potential partners.

First of all, how to fill in the profile? How many or few details to provide about one's hopes, personality traits, leisure activities? For some interviewees, providing as many as possible was both a way to reassure a potential partner about their normalcy and a first step toward a commitment. They wanted to show their motivation, indicate the type of meeting being sought, and enable the persons consulting the profile to quickly evaluate common points. For other interviewees, providing few details was thought to be an incentive for a physical meeting, or was a way to protect themselves from persons whom they knew off line.

Another question also crops up while filling in the profile. Should the person sincerely post his/her own expectations as well as the expectations attributed to eventual partners? The answer involves dealing with gender-related identities. Some men did not clearly state that they were looking for sex, either because they (rightly) thought that saying so would turn women off, or because they did not want to meet women with the exactly same objective as their own. Paul (32, single, no children, computer engineer) felt that *“being a number on a list”* deprived him of virility. Other men, who wanted a committed relationship, did not say so right away and presented an image of being *“a real guy, a guy capable of a level of seduction”* in Eric’s words (29, single, no children, engineer). Likewise, some women concealed their desire for a long-term relationship in order, as Alice (35, single, one child, pharmacist) stated, *“not to scare”* men away, whereas women who were looking for occasional meetings seldom clearly said so lest they be seen as *“easy, pushovers”* in Emily’s words (34, single, no children, store manager) and no longer feel free to refuse sexual intercourse during the meeting in real life. Implicit in this gender-related process, we find the two key elements in the game of heterosexual seduction: the man taking the initiative, the woman holding back (BERGSTRÖM 2019).

Another set of questions had to do with whether or not to upload a photograph (NADAUD-ALBERTINI 2018b). Which one? Should it set the person off? Should it be touched up? What about using a photo of someone more attractive? Many interviewees opted to upload a photo that, as Alice explained, depicted them as being *“a little better but not too much, lest potential partners realize you’ve lied and then think you’ve lied about everything”*. In other words, they tried to avoid making a fake *“presentation of self”*: a self-presentation whereby persons consciously present themselves under an appearance different from what they are in reality (GOFFMAN 1959). As Goffman pointed out, a lie, once uncovered, not only makes the person lose face during interactions but also arouses persistent doubts about the person’s self-presentation.

Online exchanges

The first exchanges take place through the dating website, via its chat forum or personal mailboxes. The pleasure of meeting starts as of the first contact, which creates an expectation, a sense of suspense. Will there be a reply? From whom?

These first exchanges were the occasion for an initial *“selection”* based on both style and contents. As Beryl said, *“When there’re faults, you zap. When it’s all below the belt, you zap.”* Some interviewees tried to move rapidly toward a form of communication closer to real-life. There was a gradation in the means of communication: from the website to a Snapchat account (with settings for remaining anonymous), the person’s own e-mail or mobile phone up to the real-life encounter. For other interviewees, the pleasure of the online meeting was important as a time for exchanges about desires and fantasies, romantic as well as physical. Via digital technology, each of the two correspondents explored the other’s virtual identity but without knowing whether it would measure up in real life.

Another pleasure was to tell one’s self or close friends about this relation with someone known only through messaging. This narration enabled interviewees to imagine the possibility of a life with the contacted person. It also built up support for remaining free if the relationship turned out disappointing (e.g., the lack of prospects for a long-term relationship). A purely messaging relationship was also appreciated by interviewees already in a long-term relationship based on legal marriage and parenthood. The dating website allowed them to imagine escaping from the confines of their couple while preserving the couple’s stability (LEJEALLE & NADAUD-ALBERTINI 2015).

While the imagination is of primary importance in a messaging relationship, it is not everything. The body has its place: adrenaline rushes into the muscles, the heart beats faster, the skin flushes red, there is sexual arousal. These sensations are part of the pleasure of this sort of meeting. They incarnate the meeting in the body (a meeting all the more intense given the absence of the other's body). This sets off a momentum that leads to feeling the emotional and physical need to connect.

The meeting in real life

For several interviewees, the encounter in real life was indispensable. It soon took place: a week or less for 31% of meetings and from one to four weeks for 37%.² Far from merely being an extension of online exchanges, the real-life encounter was a new meeting that *"brings onto the scene two individuals quite different from what they were on the Web. Not more real or authentic, but different"* (KAUFMANN 2010:46). Both parties are somewhat apprehensive: will their "chemistry" match?

The chemistry might be missing for two major reasons. First of all, an interviewee might realize that the other person lied in his/her online self-presentation (by, for example, uploading a photo several years old). The interviewee then felt tricked and let the relation drop. Secondly, the partner at the meeting might turn out to be different from what was imagined. The reason might stem from the difference between the photo and the "extra" that comes from a gesture, a look, the tone of a voice, a sense of liveliness or the general attitude. Another factor also came into play: interviewees compared the person they were meeting in real life with the possibilities just a click away (NADAUD-ALBERTINI 2017) and were *"convinced they could still do better"* (ILLOUZ 2006:254).

In other cases, the chemistry was there during the real-life meeting, which was experienced as an agreeable moment when sex and feelings were aligned without any commitment to an exclusive relationship. In this sense, the online meeting suggests a novel relation between marriage and sexuality.

Since the 1970s, the founding of a couple has been the first act of sexual intercourse. Previously, the couple was instituted by marriage, sexuality being a consequence thereof (BOZON 1991). Dating sites are changing the meaning, once again, of sexuality in the formation of a couple. Sexual intercourse soon occurs if the chemistry is present. It signals that the partners appreciate each other but not that they are in a couple or in love. The two persons consider that they form a couple only once they have said so to each other and once they have told the people close to them (BERGSTRÖM 2019). The founding act of the couple is a reciprocal recognition of shared feelings of being in love; this feeling leads the two to see their relationship as long-term and to make this known to peers and family members.

In this new act that founds the couple, the ideal of romantic love has a special place as a filter for telling to oneself and to others the story of the meeting, once the relationship has long-term prospects. When contacts have been made through a dating website, the two persons find it hard to consider their relationship to be for the long term and to present it as such to their peers (BERGSTRÖM 2013). Telling it to oneself and to others by using the narrative code of romantic love places the relation back in line with the norm of a long-term commitment. Ingrid, for example, used the customary categories for describing the love at first sight that occurred during the first sexual experience with her current husband: an illumination bursting into everyday life, something evident that spins the heart around, turns the soul topsy-turvy and makes life teeter, something against which you cannot fight (SCHURMANS & DOMINICE 1997), an overwhelming force that brings together two *"soul mates [because] it was written, we had to meet"* in Ingrid's words.

² According to the *Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux* conducted by INED and INSEE in 2013-2014 (BERGSTRÖM 2019:128).

When the meeting leads to a long-term relationship, the conclusion of the search on dating websites is seen and expressed using the narrative codes for telling a story of conversion, as described by René Girard (2010). It will then be said that, prior to the meeting, desires and searches were focused on the wrong object (sex for sex, or toxic partners) and led only to dissatisfaction and alienation. The story will now tell the relationship apart from all the others and present it as THE meeting of a lifetime.

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