

## Romantic Online Relationships: The Laptop Never Says No.

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**Abstract:** *This article reports on interviews with people who utilise the Internet to search for a partner and then use online resources to get to know a potential partner before meeting them. Most of the men I interviewed identified online communication as providing an acceptable way for them to express their feelings, emotions or deeply personal thoughts.*

The question I was originally seeking to explore was, 'what draws people to the Internet when looking for a relationship'? A relationship in this instance is defined as a romantic relationship, as opposed to a buddy or penpal. I began this research when I observed that I was continuing to see the same people on dating and chatting sites over a period of years. Surely they must end up meeting people in real life as a result of this practice and if so, why were they continually online? During this research, I spoke with 11 people in total, 5 women and 6 men. The respondents were in the age group 38 – 55 and they had all either been married or in serious long term relationships previously.

The respondents in this research offered positive support for online partner searching, with responses such as:

*When you meet a person online you can at least glean some information about her before you talk to her and decide whether this is someone you want to actually get to know some more.*

*I like that you don't have the distraction of the physical, but at the same time I have to know what they look like, I couldn't chat to an ugly man!*

*Online I can be myself. Women actually accept it if you have doubts and fears and I enjoy the freedom of being able to express myself to a potential partner honestly.*

*I don't like surprises, so it is a good way to see if they are your sort of person, rather than going out and wasting time meeting them.*

*Men tell you more online than they would ever tell you face to face, I don't know why that is, but it is an absolute bonus for us women.*

*Online you have the time to sort and screen for the requirements that you have for a partner without pressure.*

Both men and women described the Internet as a convenient and safe environment that allowed for contact with a large range individuals and all respondents believed that it increased their chances of finding a suitable partner. On the other hand, all of the singles in this research shared one uniform complaint about how people visually presented themselves on the Internet. The women complained that the men were always older than their advertised age, generally shorter, and on many occasions virtually unrecognisable once a meeting took place. Two of the women I interviewed had recently stopped searching for partners online, as they found this practice so disconcerting. One of the women periodically stops her online searching when this deceit becomes too annoying, but then generally returns to this practice once a few months have passed.

Three of the men take their online quest for a partner quite seriously, spending large amounts of time online every day of the week in chat rooms and dating sites. They continue this behavior despite their comments about the discrepancy between the ways the women look in real life and how they present online, describing many women as being older and heavier than the pictures they post on the Internet. However they continue with their searching, as Brandon remarked:

*Even when I am in a real-time relationship I tend to jump onto the chat sites and look around, occasionally chatting to women. It just seems to be a habit I can't get out of.*

David also commented that the online world allows men an acceptable venue to have simultaneous multiple relationships. Aside from the opportunity to date many women at once, David believes this suits some men because they are able get to know the women reasonably well during the course of the online relationship and then....*"choose the one or two to meet and then narrow the field again if things get serious"*.

I have chosen Gary's case-study to discuss in more detail. Gary is someone that I would describe as a heavy user of the Internet for partner searching, as he spends large amounts of every day in this pursuit. He stated that he couldn't see himself sitting in a bar and doing that whole tiresome [sic] *"hi, how are you, buy you a drink thing"* with a stranger and further remarked, *"I don't think I could meet a girl any way but online now"*. Gary can have two dates most weekends with different women and maintains he is genuine in trying to find a true love relationship. The longest relationship he has had in the past 3 years that began online is 6 months. He finds that the longer the relationship stays online, the less successful it is for him when it finally becomes face to face. Despite being aware of this, he continues to let the relationships stay online for up to a couple of months at a time, though he will ensure he has a telephone conversation with the person within the first few weeks. He keeps things online partly because he enjoys the disclosure and sharing that happens in what he terms 'the intimate space' of the online environment.

Gary acknowledged that he has fallen in love with women without meeting them, and during the process of our sessions we have explored how he may be experiencing a state of limerence rather than love or attraction. Tennov's (1979) coinage of the term limerence refers to a state in which, at least in the beginning, the love object's attractive features are emphasised and unattractive characteristics are given little or no attention. It is my observation that the person who is in limerence is in some ways 'in love with feeling in love', (though Dr. Tennov has concerns that this description trivialises the feeling) and while Tennov wrote of limerence long before virtual relationships, I believe limerence has found its 'raison etre' on the Internet (Lewis 2004). Dr Tennov, in commenting on my current research also agreed that limerence does not appear to require face to face contact, remarking "...my belief is that limerence can break out among onliners. Maybe even more readily" (Tennov 2006). I believe an online relationship can unwittingly foster these types of behaviours, as both people are in the position to present the sides of themselves that are complimentary and mask any unattractive traits. This can then also lead to the development of unreal expectations from either party. Gary identified a problem earlier of the higher incidence of his relationships not lasting in real life when they had been going on for a long period online and this is possibly because (as he acknowledges), they never match up to the final expectations that he has built up for the woman. It must be said that Gary also has an exceedingly attractive photo of himself on his Internet profile and acknowledges that he may be sabotaging his own efforts by also misrepresenting himself a little. While he is now in his late 40's and leading a quiet, suburban life he still thinks in terms of being accustomed to "*getting any woman I want, when I want, from the time when I used to be in a band*". This is of course easier to do in an online environment.

Snarch (1997) in fact maintains that the anonymity of the Internet specifically leads people into emotional or sexual behaviours that they would not indulge in if it were an ordinary face to face relationship. This is partly because the online environment may encourage an emotional affair or relationship to occur because the people involved spend a lot of time online together, exchange stories, secrets and deep thoughts and often begin to project their needs and desires onto the other person. The men in particular described themselves as able to relax and enjoy the presence of the other person, while sharing intimate thoughts and conversations. The men in this albeit small population sample were also stronger proponents of keeping a relationship online for as long as possible, and like Gary it is probable they do this in part because they enjoy the opportunity to open up and share thoughts and feelings that are difficult to express in a real life situation. Suler (2002) describes this as a 'disinhibition effect', which is caused by or heightened by the following features of online communication:

**Anonymity** - no one knows who you are on the Internet if you choose to be anonymous, and so you are free to say whatever you want without anyone knowing it's you who said it, including acknowledging highly personal feelings or emotions.

**Physical invisibility** - you don't have to worry about how you physically look or sound to other people when you say something. You don't have to worry about how others look or sound when you say something to them. "*Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can slam the breaks on what people are willing to express.*" (Suler, 2002)

**The absence of responsibility** - with a lack of visual or auditory cues, a person may feel as though the interaction is occurring in his head. This may give some people the false sense that they can 'say' things online that they may feel shy or inhibited to say in a face to face situation. This can be coupled with a sense of 'immediate gratification', whereby a person can say anything they think or feel at any time, including in the middle of the night when a person may be the most tired or emotional.

**Equalitarian status** - in the case of online flirtation and emotional sharing, barriers of race, age, social status and gender are now removed.

While both the men and the women interviewed said they were happy to exchange some emails and get to know one another before embarking on a meeting, I observed that the women were far more focused on taking the next step of a phone call and a meeting, usually within the first few weeks. This is also the way that women have been found to shop online; they rarely browse for goods, instead locating what they want and ordering it (Pew Report, Fox et al 2005). Commenting on her need to move to phone calls or meetings fairly quickly, Gwen remarked, "*the medium is great, as long as one doesn't take shelter behind the screen for too long!*" Alarm bells go off for Gwen if things remain online for too long without progressing to in person, as she starts to wonder if the other person has something to hide.

Rita also preferred to meet sooner rather than later, as she finds the longer she leaves the relationship online, the greater her anxiety becomes that she will not live up to the other person's expectations:

*While I don't lie about myself, like everybody else I exaggerate my good points, so I might describe myself as having slighter bigger boobs, blonder hair, greener eyes or as being more athletic than I really am – I mean I do go to the gym, but I don't run 6km everyday. The other person might then expect more of me when he meets me, so I think it is better to meet the man sooner rather than later, so he doesn't have (thanks to me!) an unreal expectation of what and who I am.*

None of the women supported the idea of keeping a relationship online long-term, aside from Jacinta who is involved in a virtual relationship with a prison inmate. Most of the women believed that when a person is genuinely looking to form a relationship with an online contact they will try to move things along in order to speak with and meet the online person, with an avoidance of meeting face to

face generally viewed with suspicion.

The men on the other hand, described themselves as frequently content to let the relationship stay online for periods of weeks, or even months and mostly described themselves as enjoying the opportunity to express their emotions freely in a text based environment. Many of them said that they regularly shared details about themselves and their emotions that were highly personal in nature, but doubted they would do so verbally in a face to face situation. Based on my small sample group, I hypothesise that for some men, prolonging a relationship online is a way to experience emotional expressiveness, share emotional intimacy and allow the physical to take second place without feeling 'unmanly'. Men are not generally given as much latitude as women to express feelings, with a prevailing western cultural stereotype supporting that 'she' is emotional, while 'he' is not. This is despite the fact that some current findings would suggest there are more similarities than disparity in men and women's emotional experience (Averill 1982; Fisher 2000). When verbalisation of feelings or discussions of emotion are still considered largely to be a feminine trait, it is possible that the anonymous environment that the mostly text based world of the Internet affords is actually giving men an uncensored 'place' to freely express their sentiments in a non stereotypical way.

Gary for example will write pages and pages of text to online girlfriends, describing and dissecting his intimate feelings in ways that he never would in a face to face relationship, especially in its infancy. Sam admits to writing love poems and describing online how he feels hurt and wounded when things go badly at work, but readily admits he could not do that unless he was in the 'safe zone' of his computer screen. Brandon isn't ashamed to discuss sexual problems and how they make him feel, but only when he is typing about it to a woman. Whether men outside of my small population sample in fact experience a new found freedom to be emotionally expressive in a virtual environment is an area which could benefit from more research.

Despite supporting the idea of spending a lot of time online to get to know the women he is considering for a relationship, David's motivations in being online were slightly different. He believes the opportunity to regulate the pace is particularly important to men like him who are in their late 30's to 40's, because as he explained, *"the women in this age group tend to be focused on looking for a permanent relationship or marriage or children; hence men want to slow them down and staying online means this can be achieved"*.

While concerns remain that online communication will encourage people to spend more time alone interacting with strangers and developing 'drive-by' relationships at the expense of forming quality real life relationships (Putnam 2000,p.179), research has shown that people can form strong social bonds virtually (romantic or platonically) that can carry over to the face to face world (Parks & Roberts 1998). Perhaps the time has come to consider an argument that the development and or continuation of relationships online - emotional or otherwise - are simply

aspects of a changing society. And as I found with the men I interviewed, conducting a relationship online can provide some people with a positive outlet for the expression of their emotions that they may not otherwise have had.

Most people also do not confine themselves simply to one medium, generally moving between communication spheres such as the telephone, web camera, face to face or online with text. Perhaps as generations change, 'online' may eventually be accepted as just one more choice in how people communicate and foster their relationships. After all, people considered the telephone an exotic and suspect piece of technology a short 60 years ago and now it is deeply embedded in our social fabric as a way of maintaining, fostering and continuing relationships (Rackow 1992).

#### Summary of Online Behaviours (all names pseudonyms)

Gary & Brandon – continually online for 3 and 4 years respectively. Generally neither takes breaks while dating in real-life.

Sam – continually online for past 2 years, taking brief breaks while actually dating.

David – online in fits and starts over past 5 years.

Jenny & Maria – online for 6 months and 1 year respectively. Both have since given up as discrepancies between the online and offline people they were meeting became too great.

Jacinta – online dating for approximately 5 years, usually stopping when in a real life relationship. Has been continuously online with one person for 18 months.

Gwen – no longer online dating due to one of the relationships ending very badly, but has had 4 what she terms serious relationships beginning online, over the past couple of years.

Rita – online dating for last 12 months, but not continuously. Takes breaks when she has what she terms 'disappointing experiences'.

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