Imagine you are working on a research paper about virtual relationships and online dating. Read the three information sources that follow this page and keep the CAARP model in mind as you review each source.

Remember:
C = Currency
A = Authority
A = Accuracy
R = Relevance
P = Purpose

For the third and final source you will see the address (URL) of a website. Click on that link to be taken to a website. Please review the website as a whole for your third and final source.

To complete your assignment, go to: http://library.uncw.edu/instruction/UNI_library_assignment. Login at the bottom of the page and follow the directions to answer questions about each information source.
The contemporary Internet represents a striking evolution from its modest beginnings in the 1960s as a medium to connect academic institutions and eventually American defensive facilities in the event of war. What was once understood as a valuable component of American national security has blossomed into an international social microcosm, where online defensive facilities in the event of war. What was once under- romantic interpersonal relationships can come to exist in this the complexities of interaction among its inhabitants, and how desires can be fulfilled (Wysocki, 1998). Today, social scientists communities are created, social networks thrive, business transactions occur, future marital partners are found, and even sexual actions occur, future marital partners are found, and even sexual desires can be fulfilled (Wysocki, 1998). Today, social scientists are only beginning to understand the reasons for its popularity, the complexities of interaction among its inhabitants, and how romantic interpersonal relationships can come to exist in this seemingly inanimate and impersonal global matrix of computers.

A recent survey by Internet demographers Nielsen Media/Commerce Net finds that the number of Internet users over the age of 16 in the U.S. and Canada has reached 78.6 million, with global use encompassing nearly 120.5 million people. In addition, the growth and popularity of the Internet are expected to continue to intensify and by the beginning of the next millennium, nearly 140 million people are predicted to make use of Internet technology (Commerce Net, 1998).

When one examines this developing civilization of virtual worlds and cyber-relationships, it becomes apparent that some interpersonal relationships have experienced a transformation during the last decade of the twentieth century. Relationships that previously were established and sustained primarily through face-to-face interaction have come to be complemented by a social technology that is creating a new genre of interpersonal relationships (Kraut et al., 1998). For example, it is now possible to shop for a new home, complete a college course, conduct collaborative projects, or find a love relationship without in-person contact with the realtor, professor, colleague, or romantic partner. The focus of the present article is on the latter—romantic relationships that are established over the Internet.

The purpose of this article is to consider the ways in which modern technology has come to influence the nature of relating to another person in terms of a romantic relationship. Specifically, this article will introduce the concept of a computer mediated relationship (CMR) through four separate contexts: first, the history and culture of the Internet will be explored to provide a reference point for family life professionals as they become aware of the Internet and CMR; second, characteristics of CMR and face-to-face relationships will be compared and contrasted; third, a limited discussion will be presented on the implications for family practitioners; and finally, recommendations for future research will be integrated throughout the article.

History and Culture of the Internet

Within a historical context, technological innovation has frequently served as the impetus that can alter a society’s lifestyle. The advent of the Internet, like the telephone and television, appears to have provided this impetus to the extent that Western society has become altered by its presence (Dean, 1997). Through commercials and advertisements that feature corporate World Wide Web addresses alongside product logos, individuals using electronic mail (e-mail) as an alternate for traditional mail, and Internet-based “chat rooms” where people find others to converse with, the ubiquity of the Internet in contemporary society is quickly becoming impossible to ignore (Morris & Ogan, 1996).

History of the Internet

Once Cold War tensions subsided, DARPA was privatized into a civilian organization of American academic institutions called ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Agency) that used the early Internet as a medium to experiment with networking across wide area networks (WAN). However, because these early networked computers lacked a common language to exchange data as well as a method to store it for future retrieval, the potential of the Internet could not be realized (Leiner et al., 1998). During the latter 1970s, with the resolution of these limitations, electronic mail (e-mail), became the primary use of the Internet among researchers because it provided an easily accessible communication vehicle to exchange information within the global scholarly community (Hardy, 1993).

Commercial applications of the Internet came about in the 1980s as the first national Internet service providers (ISP)—Prodigy, Genie, and CompuServe—began providing the home computer user connectivity to this worldwide matrix of computers. While these first ISPs offered little more than the opportunity for users to participate in real-time dialogue and download software, their presence represented the beginning of an age when new media technology not only became popular with millions

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of average computer users, but also marked the dawning of computer mediated social interactions. In addition, with the development of more sophisticated and inexpensive home computers, the average middle class person could afford to make use of this technology. Today more than half of U.S. households have at least one personal computer in their home (Gray, 1999).

**Culture of the Internet and New Media Technology**

As the market penetration of personal computers and various new media technologies proliferated from the latter 1980s through the present day, home users slowly began to expand their computer usage to incorporate the Internet and its multitude of related applications. A recent study by Ziff-Davis Market Intelligence reports that 61% of all American homes that contain a personal computer are currently connected to the Internet, a 30% increase from their January 1998 market study (Niccolai, 1998). Not surprisingly, with the number of connected Internet users surpassing the entire population of Japan, some authors reason that this dramatic propagation of the Internet is prompting the creation of a new civilization—“one that exists on the shimmering surface of our computer screens” (Nunes, 1995, p. 314; Weil, 1998).

Katz (1997) proposes that Americans are, in general, a very affable people who are among the most technology-loving cultures in the world. Because of this mutual interest in technology and socializing, he believes that American Internet users have exploited the Internet (as well as other modern technological devices) as a social medium as much as a technological innovation. This contention is supported by a recent Ziff-Davis Market Intelligence report indicating that e-mail, or electronically mediated correspondence to another user, has remained the most common use of the Internet (Niccolai, 1998). As computers have become more commonplace within society, the socially constructed image of the technophile has evolved from the schizoid, “nerdy” neighbor, to the average person who wants to shop in virtual stores, exchange e-mail with acquaintances, read hypertext documents (web pages), download software, and even meet new people through Internet chat rooms and bulletin boards (Dean, 1997; Turkle, 1997).

While investigating the social element of the Internet, sociologist Diane Wysocki (1996) reports that the advent of the Internet in modern society has “...had a dramatic effect on social life...” (p. 3) beyond anything we know. Her research findings suggest that Internet users can extend their social networks, create virtual online communities, find prospective marital partners, and even fulfill their most veiled sexual desires (Wysocki, 1998). With the arrival of such virtual, yet sociable activities, it becomes apparent that among Internet users the face-to-face relationship may end. However, this is where the commonalities among face-to-face and computer mediated relationships may end.

**Relationship Formation and Dissolution**

One established viewpoint on interpersonal relationships addresses a simple social psychological principle: those relationships which reward us, or which we associate with rewards, we like (Myers, 1993). Myers posits that this premise of psychological reward as a determinant for positive outcomes in a relationship can be further delineated into two separate ideas, minimax and equity, which collectively address the extent to which relationships are fulfilling at the cost of being emotionally taxing. Minimax specifically refers to the importance of minimizing costs and maximizing rewards in human interaction by suggesting that those relationships that give us more than they take are sustained. Likewise, equity implies that people prefer relationships in which the outcomes are proportional to what they put into them. In both of these instances, the emphasis on interpersonal relationships enhancing one’s life over causing distress is held paramount.

This social exchange perspective for understanding the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships appears to be equally applicable to both face-to-face and emergent computer mediated relationships. Whether meeting and interacting with another person face-to-face or in cyberspace, one could assume that a fundamental tendency toward seeking positive rewards is shared by all individuals engaging in interpersonal relating. However, this is where the commonalities among face-to-face and computer mediated relationships may end.

When one considers the characteristics of computer mediated relationships, it is probably not surprising that, in many respects, such relationships could be viewed as being at variance with the face-to-face relationship because they represent a developmental and behavioral sequence far removed from customary methods of finding attraction and intimacy with another person. There are numerous differences between these two modalities of interaction that may have implications for how relationships develop. For example, the global presence of the Internet diminishes the need for spatial proximity; the textual and graphical based interface of Internet applications reduces the salience of physical attractiveness; Internet communication allows for anonymity; and candid self-disclosure becomes significant as the only means for two users to know one another (Cooper & Spor-
Interpersonal relationships do not come to exist as fortuitous events, but instead are subject to a number of variables that determine the likelihood that two people will discover an affinity sufficient enough to form a relationship. These variables are likely to differ for computer mediated versus face-to-face relationships because of the distinctive environments in which each relationship comes to exist. For example, in a face-to-face relationship, one of the most powerful predictors of liking another person is having sheer proximity to that person (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1968). Indeed, in considering this predictor of relationship formation, the absence of any face-to-face interaction guarantees that two people can never come to know one another. In contrast, because the Internet has a global presence, those who engage in CMR are likely to find themselves with considerable geographical separation between them. Thus, the importance of spatial proximity as an initial predictor of relationship development appears to be minimized in the case of CMR.

In the developmental sequence of a face-to-face romantic relationship, after two individuals spatially interact, physical attractiveness and attitudinal similarity are important factors contributing to the likelihood of an initial interaction developing into a relationship (Brehm, 1992; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Myers, 1993). Certainly, physical attractiveness is often what sparks initial interest in another person and leads each party to want to continue to interact. Through these continued interactions, partners engage in a process of social penetration in which they begin to establish a sense of rapport and look for similarities between themselves (Montgomery, 1994; Reiss & Lee, 1988). Eventually, should attitudinal similarity and physical attractiveness be discovered in one individual, the likelihood that a successful and intimate romantic relationship will develop substantially increases (Brehm, 1992). Finally, a process of revealing intimate details about oneself to another person, or self-disclosure, must come about as it not only leads to a sense of closeness and connection to another person, but frequently sparks interest emotionally, romantically, and sexually (Brehm, 1992; Jourard, 1971; Montgomery, 1994).

Thus, the development of a face-to-face romantic relationship moves from initial encounter, based on spatial proximity and physical attractiveness, to discovery of similarities and to self-disclosure. In contrast, most Internet romantic relationships progress through an inverted developmental sequence. That is, two individuals first come to know one another in the course of capricious discussion on an Internet medium such as a BBS, Internet chat application, or chat web page (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). In time, should both individuals find one another interesting, the topics of discussion can turn toward personal and intimate matters, and a powerful rapport may be established between the users. Intriguingly, unlike face-to-face relating, the importance of physical attractiveness in CMR, as a relationship determinant, is minimized by the ability to know someone through intense mutual self-disclosure and intimate sharing of private worldviews. In the end, with the presence of such heightened self-disclosure, these individuals may arrange to meet one another, occasionally with highly sexualized outcomes (Leiblum, 1997). However, how often computer mediated relating leads into face-to-face relating remains to be determined by future research (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Schnarch, 1997).

Although some CMR do in fact move into face-to-face relationships, others are terminated without ever doing so. While little research exists on the topic of the formation of computer mediated relationships, there is none on the topic of dissolution of such relationships. The predictors of relationship instability and the process by which CMR deteriorate have not been empirically examined. In the case of traditional face-to-face romantic relationships, exchange theory has been used to explain relationship dissolution. According to this view, a relationship is likely to dissolve when the costs of the relationship outweigh the rewards, when there are desirable alternatives to the relationship, when the relationship does not match one’s ideal, when little has been invested in the relationship, and when there are few barriers to breaking up (Kurdek, 1995; Sabatelli & Shehan, 1992).

If these same elements play a role in computer mediated romantic relationships, then one might suggest that these relationships would be more prone to dissolution. For example, in contrast to face-to-face relationships, individuals in CMR are likely to have ready access to more desirable alternatives via their Internet connections. At that point when the costs outweigh the rewards, it would be relatively easy to find someone else to interact with in cyberspace. Similarly, without having a face-to-face component to a CMR, there are likely to be fewer barriers to breaking up. Family and friends may be less likely to exert pressure to maintain a relationship that they may have viewed as less “authentic” to begin with, and the logistics of breaking up may be as simple as logging off the computer or not replying to electronic messages.

On the other hand, it is plausible to suggest that because of the inverted developmental sequence described previously, CMR may be characterized by a higher degree of personal investment of time and self-disclosure than are typical of face-to-face relationships. This greater investment may result in a stronger commitment to work through disagreements and maintain the relationship. All of these issues await answers from family researchers.

Self-Disclosure

Within face-to-face relationships, unhindered self-disclosure requires one to let go of the anxiety and apprehension of losing someone else’s affection or approval as a result of knowing one more intimately. Because of the powerful nature of this apprehension, only one’s most intimate and deep relationships are usually perceived as worthwhile avenues to take such a risk (Myers, 1993). In the context of CMR, however, self-disclosure cannot purely be restricted to one’s highly intimate relationships or else social isolation and loneliness could ensue.

Recent qualitative research by Wysocki (1996, 1998) supports this position in that the nature of self-disclosure in computer mediated relationships versus face-to-face relationships seems to be markedly distinct. Results of this research indicated that Internet users come to personally know one another more quickly and intimately than in face-to-face relationships. Because individuals in face-to-face relationships do not typically have anonymity or the psychological comfort that comes from such anonymity, they tend to reveal a little information about them-
selves at a time until they feel safe (Montgomery, 1994). In contrast, CMR self-disclosure appears to be richer and to progress faster since the Internet affords a level of anonymity that can reduce feelings of discomfort one may experience in face-to-face relating (Wysocki, 1996, 1998).

Another dimension along which the nature of self-disclosure in CMR versus face-to-face relationships may differ is that of gender differences in levels of self-disclosure. In research on interpersonal relationships, variations in self-disclosure across gender have been well documented (c.f. Griffin & Sparks, 1990). For example, females have been found to generally self-disclose more about their fears and weaknesses than males, even when controlling for the effects of various intervening variables such as gender of the recipient and attractiveness (Jourard, 1971; Myers, 1993). While the issue of gender differences in self-disclosure in CMR has yet to be empirically examined, one might speculate that such differences would be less evident. That is, in computer mediated relationships, the necessity of textual or graphical communication and perceived anonymity while conversing on the Internet may permit the user to step outside of constraining gender roles of communication and may allow males and females to communicate as equally robust and unfettered. Clearly, this is a potent area for future research.

Relationship Infidelity

Another aspect of interpersonal relating that may differ for computer mediated versus face-to-face relationships is the significance of infidelity as a source of betrayal. Betrayal is viewed as a violation of the trust or expectations on which a relationship is based (Jones & Burdette, 1994). Such an act harms a relationship not only because it represents a loss of time, effort, nurturance, and trust that have been established by the partners over time, but also because it is a threat to one’s sense of self and well-being (Jones & Burdette, 1994). In any close interpersonal relationship, each couple must determine their own relationship boundaries in terms of what level of contact with others is permissible before it represents betrayal.

In a face-to-face romantic relationship, infidelity represents the ultimate form of betrayal to the boundaries of that relationship. Typically, infidelity is defined as a sexual act outside of one’s current relationship or marriage (Young & Long, 1998). It represents a theft of the trust bond within a relationship and thereby undermines intimacy (Masters, Johnson, & Kolodny, 1994).

In contrast, for a computer mediated relationship, the bond of trust cannot as easily be violated by physical sexual acts because of the geographical separation of the partners, and consequently, the definition of infidelity may need to be broadened to include more than sexual behavior. Glass and Wright (1992) suggest that relationship infidelity can be organized around three types: emotional, sexual, and a combined emotional-sexual involvement. Because heightened self-disclosure is a central feature of computer mediated relationships, the bond of trust sparks powerful emotional bonds between two individuals, it seems plausible to suggest that infidelity within cyberspace is better accounted by emotional betrayal than sexual involvement. Moreover, it is possible that choosing to self-disclose to more than one partner at a time, and subsequently developing another highly personal computer mediated relationship, could be viewed as a variety of infidelity and relationship betrayal. What acts specifically constitute infidelity and thereby relationship betrayal within CMR have not been empirically identified. Research is needed to determine how individuals in computer mediated relationships define the boundaries of betrayal, and whether infidelity is as destructive to such relationships as is its occurrence in non-computer mediated relating.

The emergence of computer mediated relationships may have implications for how we think about infidelity in the context of one’s off-line relationships as well. The availability of sex, pornography, and erotic chat rooms add another dimension to the magnetism of computer mediated relationships that troubled partners may be attracted to when their real-life relationships are experiencing discord. Within the realm of cyberspace, even the most sexually inhibited or dysfunctional individual has the opportunity to gratify himself or herself in a sexually safe manner (Leiblum, 1997; Wysocki, 1996). What is more, for those with fetishes, various pathologic sexual paraphilias, and unusual sexual preferences, the Internet is teeming with resources to satisfy their needs as well (Kim & Bailey, 1997). While the ubiquity of sex on the Internet is often over-represented in the popular culture media, one recent consequence of the popularity of computer mediated relating is the increase in Internet mediated real-life relationship infidelity (Shaw, 1997).

Although current technology limits the extent to which an individual can physically act upon a computer mediated rela-

Conflict Management

Marital and family therapist David Schnarch (1997) suggests that one reason for the powerful allure of the Internet, as a context to meet significant others, relates to the ability to have emotional contact “without risk, exposure, or being known” (p. 17). In addition, having control to simply disconnect from irritating or unsafe individuals, freedom to experiment with various personas, and the ability to impression manage makes computer mediated relating an attractive alternative to traditional social environments.

The implications of computer mediated relating for the acquisition and development of skills for managing interpersonal conflict represents another unexplored yet viable avenue for future research. It seems plausible that with the user’s power to flee from virtual situations that cause discomfort or annoyance, those who predominantly engage in CMR as their preferred method of relating to others may find it difficult to acquire and exercise the interpersonal skills necessary for conflict management or peacemaking. Having the opportunity to freely disengage while interacting with others on the Internet is likely beneficial to those experimenting with new personas or methods of interaction, not only because of safety concerns but also as a part of the learning experience gleaned from social interaction. Yet, when avoidance and escape prevail as the user’s conflict management style, concern arises about the extent to which such behavior could become self-reinforcing. Social psychologists refer to the four C’s of peacemaking—contact, cooperation, communication, and conciliation—as a useful mnemonic device for easing inharmonious situations (Myers, 1993). Because each of these strategies presumes some degree of interpersonal interaction and commitment to resolve the situation, those who preferably exit the problem without sufficiently working through the details, may come to rely on this method in face-to-face situations and subsequently fail to gain a necessary life skill. Clearly, research is needed to clarify how online behavior generalizes to face-to-face social interactions.

Family Relations
tionship, family professionals should be cognizant of the Internet as another potential medium where relationship infidelity can occur (Kim & Bailey, 1997). Popular culture literature such as Dr. Judy’s “Complete Idiot’s Guide to a Healthy Relationship” (Kuriansky, 1998) describes “cybercheating” as becoming more commonplace within troubled relationships, and suggests that it is as much of a form of relationship betrayal as any real-life act. Certainly, scholarly research is needed in this area to determine the extent to which extramarital affairs occur via the Internet and whether such cyberspace infidelity has the same ramifications for a relationship as does traditional infidelity.

Implications for Practice

Developing an understanding of CMR and its implications for practice will be essential for the responsible and well-prepared family professional during the new millennium. Previous literature has substantiated that clients are already presenting problems such as: compulsive Internet use (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997), Internet infidelity (Shaw, 1997), sexualized Internet use (Leiblum, 1997), and CMR discord (Schnarch, 1997). In the absence of adequate preparation and subsequent research, it is possible that practitioners could find themselves ill-equipped to work with individuals and families in the years ahead. In addition, with the recent technological advances such as the Internet2 project boasting faster data transmission and enhanced usability (Niccolai, 1999), the upgrading of America’s cable infrastructure for cable modems, and telephone companies promoting xDSL (digital subscriber line) technologies for broadband Internet access, it seems reasonable to anticipate that family practitioners will increasingly be called upon to work with clientele who present issues relating to CMR and Internet usage. While the current literature offers only modest advice for family life professionals (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Schnarch, 1997), speculation, based upon the topics discussed within the current paper, leads to several key recommendations and issues to be cognizant of during the new millennium.

First, while it may be alarming to some that society may increasingly turn toward the Internet as a medium for engaging in interpersonal and romantic relating, Cooper and Sportolari (1997) contend, “... aspects of CMR actually promote and support intimate human connectedness” (p. 13). As Western society continues to accelerate its pace, free time becomes more of a scarcity, and individuals strive to balance multiple roles and responsibilities, people are finding themselves thrust into a position where they must find non-conventional avenues for social interaction such as the Internet (Merkle, 1999). Family professionals will need to not only acknowledge the Internet’s role in future interpersonal relating, but also equip themselves with conceptual knowledge about this medium in order to responsibly serve their clientele.

Second, the established literature and conventional wisdom on romantic relationship formation and dissolution will need to be adapted to account for the inherent differences between computer mediated and face-to-face relationships. Necessary face-to-face determinants such as spatial proximity and physical attractiveness are diminished in their importance, whereas self-disclosure assumes a pivotal role in promoting computer mediated relationship formation. In fact, because self-disclosure on the Internet tends to become more private and less inhibited faster than in face-to-face relating, it is important to recognize that individuals often describe their CMR as extremely intimate and as “authentic” as any face-to-face relationship. CMR dissolution, in contrast, requires empirical investigation to clarify its process, and currently it is unknown whether CMR are more or less likely to dissolve compared to face-to-face relationships.

Third, because online relating affords the opportunity to simply disconnect from CMR partners with whom one is in conflict, it is plausible that an avoidant style of conflict management could emerge where individuals focus on conflict avoidance instead of negotiation and reconciliation. Subsequent research is needed to determine if online behavior generalizes to face-to-face social interactions, and whether CMR can provide the opportunity to acquire relationship skills. In the meantime, family professionals should be aware that those who primarily engage in CMR may lack the life skills necessary to maintain a long-term face-to-face or marital relationship (Schnarch, 1997).

Finally, family professionals should recognize that CMR infidelity can occur within two separate contexts, either within one’s current CMR or as an extramarital affair mediated by an online relationship. While current Internet technology necessitates that these acts involve typically emotional betrayal over physical encounters, their occurrence should be understood as indicative of a compelling desire by the partner to be cared for, loved, and sexual in a fashion that is not being met within the current relationship (Shaw, 1997). In addition, there are variants of online infidelity that do not involve a specific person per se, but instead entail the viewing of the Internet’s sexually explicit content as a means to achieve sexual fulfillment outside one’s current relationship (Leiblum, 1997). Clearly subsequent research is necessary to determine the extent that CMR and Internet mediated infidelity occur, and whether these forms of betrayal hold the same consequences as traditional infidelity for romantic relationships.

Although this article attempted to introduce and integrate available literature on computer mediated and face-to-face relationships, the difficulty in accomplishing this and the need to draw upon informed speculation demonstrates the importance of subsequent empirical research in this topical area. Some preliminary directions for this research and family life practice have been suggested, but undoubtedly there are a multitude of unanswered questions awaiting scholarly attention.

References

Announcement

The National Council on Family Relations wishes to announce that Kay Pasley, Ph.D. is the next editor of Family Relations, beginning with the January 2001 issue.

As of March 1, 2000, manuscripts should be submitted to:

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What's My Type?

A new kind of online dating tries to match people by what they do, not just what they say

Keywords: Social life; Internet; Behavior; Relationships

Turns out I don't love firefighters. I thought I did. They were always my emergency responders of choice. If anything really bad were going to happen to me, I secretly hoped it would be a fire rather than, say, a cerebral hemorrhage or an attack by a knife-wielding madman, so that strapping firefighters would come to my aid rather than paramedics or cops. But according to the online dating service Zoosk, I've been deluding myself for years.

Earlier this year I decided to take Zoosk for a spin for a few weeks to see what I could learn about the mechanics of attraction. I chose Zoosk because it stakes its reputation on behavioral matchmaking, the newest flavor of digital dating. The biggest sites -- like Match, eHarmony and OkCupid -- direct people to each other mostly on the basis of personality profiles and questionnaires about their preferences in a mate. Zoosk asks fewer questions and relies more on users' actions to bring them together.

Much as Netflix recommends movies you might want to watch based on films you've already sat through, Zoosk says it can figure out what you like in a person by analyzing your behavior on the site. Whose profile do you look at longest? What do the folks you respond to have in common? Sociologists and market-research professionals have long known that what people say they want to do and what they actually do are two very different things. As David Evans, a consultant to online dating businesses, puts it, "Why do you say you want a 6-ft. 2-in. lacrosse player and keep checking out the profiles of short Asian dudes?"

Ordinarily, people who use Zoosk are shown potential dates but not given any reason why the service thinks these people are right for them. The plan in my case was to spend a few weeks on the site and then get its techies to let me in on the results. They would tell me what I liked in guys and not just what I thought I liked. Full confession: I am not actually in the market for a new partner. That is, not on most days. I'm married. To make my project a little more interesting, I signed my husband up on the site as well, to see if we could find our way to each other. Of course, I asked his permission before doing so. Or at least, not long after.

After several weeks of research and immersion in Zoosk, I made an important discovery: I need to be much nicer to my husband. I can't go back out there. Dating on Zoosk felt like shopping for a wedding dress in a thrift store -- there's not a lot of choice, and what there is seems kind of random.

To be fair, my experiment was hampered by some methodology flaws. The first was that there was no way I was putting a real photo of myself on the site. The photo-agency image I initially selected as most like me depicted, the caption said, "a woman with a headache." So I went instead with a picture of a normal-looking older lady, who, my son later observed, was better-looking than I am. The second flaw was the fact that I have always been terrible at any sort of dating, and I suspect that years of practicing journalism may have made me worse. I opened one online chat by asking a guy why his skin was such a strange color. I was extremely suspicious with a guy who was 56 and never

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What's My Type?

A new kind of online dating tries to match people by what they do, not just what they say

Keywords: Social life; Internet; Behavior; Relationships

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To be fair, my experiment was hampered by some methodology flaws. The first was that there was no way I was putting a real photo of myself on the site. The photo-agency image I initially selected as most like me depicted, the caption said, "a woman with a headache." So I went instead with a picture of a normal-looking older lady, who, my son later observed, was better-looking than I am. The second flaw was the fact that I have always been terrible at any sort of dating, and I suspect that years of practicing journalism may have made me worse. I opened one online chat by asking a guy why his skin was such a strange color. I was extremely suspicious with a guy who was 56 and never
married. And I had to refrain from pestering a man for hard numbers when he said he wanted a woman who was "sexually insatiable."

But I did my best to mingle and engage. "The whole beauty of behavioral matchmaking is that we don't need that much interaction to find the biggest nuggets about the person," says Zoosk's co-founder and president, Alex Mehr. "About 80% of someone's preference comes out in the first few interactions." And Zoosk, as with most dating websites, offers up myriad ways to talk to strangers. There's a carousel of guys, a process of winking and sending digital gifts, a messaging service and a search function. And there's a thing called SmartPick. You get one guy a day who has been carefully selected for you based on your prior activity. It was not, as I was hoping, that you get a really bright guy.

Essentially since the dawn of the Internet-dating era, we've been engaged in a massive longitudinal study of mate selection. To conduct the experiment, we've opened the partnering flywheels. Finding a consort has gone from choosing between maybe two options presented by your family to finding a suitable person in your neighborhood and social circle to cherry-picking from among the scores of contenders you meet at school or college or work to scrolling through thousands of faces on a phone. In terms of choice, that's like going from eating whatever Mom is serving for dinner to carrying a plate around an all-you-can-eat buffet stocked by every restaurant in the world while people dump food onto it.

Using Big Data and predictive modeling, dating websites hope to act as filters, funneling people to the most promising candidates. The rewards for a better matchmaking model are high: about 10% of all Americans and 20% of 18-to-35-year-olds have tried online dating, according to Pew Research. The activity has lost much of the stigma it attracted since Pew's last study on it, just eight years ago. For young urban people, it's almost mandatory, and nearly 40% of all people who'd like to find love are looking for it online. This is partly why Zoosk has filed for an IPO.

But the promise has not panned out. Pew found that only 11% of couples in a committed relationship formed in the past 10 years met their partner online. Fewer than a quarter of all online daters have scored a long-term relationship or marriage as a result, and a depressing 34% have never been on an actual date, in which people's bodies are in the same room, as a result of their web browsing.

So are there ways we might improve the outcomes in the online dating game? Does analyzing my interactions help a service get a truer picture of me and my preferences than the one I provide in a questionnaire? "The jury is still out on behavioral matchmaking," says Paul Oyer, a labor economist at Stanford University and the author of Everything I Ever Needed to Know About Economics I Learned From Online Dating. "The biggest impediment in all online dating is the dishonesty." In this case, he doesn't just mean the inaccurate picture given by misleading answers to a questionnaire but also the unreliable data that users offer up: the inflated job descriptions, the 10-year-old photographs. (Even my photo was false, remember.) Either the computer introduces the wrong people because it has been lied to, or people are attracted to a poor match because they're being lied to. The duplicity cuts both ways: OkCupid recently admitted that in hopes of improving its algorithm it misled some users about their compatibility with one another.

All the same, the behavioral approach, which is practiced to some degree by all the big dating websites except slot-machine services like Tinder, might still help you achieve some insight into your real desires. Even before the techies crunched my numbers, I noticed some things I hadn't realized about my mating habits. I liked men with no hair (especially if my other option was bad hair), I liked outdoorsy guys, and I tended to discount guys who used the word LOL more than, say, seven times in any one personal essay. I was shocked by how many guys thought the most lady-worthy photos were of their motorbike, boat or recently caught fish or showed themselves frowning into their camera phone while sitting in their car at a stoplight. Also, if someone were to base a whole dating website on my deal breaker, it would be called EwNoMuscleShirtPlz.com.

When my husband's photo came up on my search, I chose the option to like it, stared at him for a while in profound gratitude, read his profile and moved on. But in 13 weeks he never came up as a SmartPick, nor in my carousel, possibly because he wasn't a paying customer. (According to Zoosk, we were about a 60% match.) And he didn't get that many requests to chat either. That might have been because I posted a photo of him wearing a wedding ring. He got an alert that I wanted to chat but says he wouldn't have clicked on that photo.

When Zoosk president Mehr explained my online selections to me several weeks later, he told me, in a nice way, that I was a horrible elitist: my most consistent mating practice was to choose guys who had at least one college degree. "Education was the strongest factor," he said, "then attractiveness, then age." Much of this was not a big revelation, since in a short questionnaire I had said I liked educated guys and preferred to date a nonsmoker with kids. My behavior held true to those patterns. One surprising nugget: I was to choose guys who had at least one college degree. "Education was the strongest factor," he said, "then attractiveness, then age." Much of this was not a big revelation, since in a short questionnaire I had said I liked educated guys and preferred to date a nonsmoker with kids. My behavior held true to those patterns. One surprising nugget: I preferred guys who were 10 years older (my husband is a year younger) and mildly favored guys who listened to Top 40 (the stuff my husband hates most, after jazz and my Carol Channing impression).

I never imagined myself with an older guy. But I realized that I never responded to guys who were younger than me, even if they were attractive and college-educated. And it wasn't because I don't like younger guys. It was because I was certain they wouldn't be into me. I was afraid of being spurned, even from guys who never had a hope in the first place. Fear of rejection may also explain why I've had the same job for so long, have changed cities only once and rarely call my mother.

Come to think of it, it might even explain the firefighter thing. A firefighter is the one type of guy who, no matter how bad the situation is, is still going to come and get you.

Dater Data. How other websites are using behavioral matchmaking

match.com

Notes when users contact people who don’t fit their stated preferences and adjusts for which preferences seem least crucial

eHarmony

Uses algorithms like those that send ads to people based on past behavior; extrapolates from similar users' behavior

okcupid

Users rate the daily matches, which the site says helps improve the matchmaking accuracy of its algorithm

* howaboutwe.com

Makes matches based on users' liking the same activities and recognizes patterns among those to whom users send messages

PHOTO (COLOR)

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By Belinda Luscombe
Source #3

Click on the link below. Examine the website and answer the questions for “Source 3.”

http://www.iarr.org/