

## **Online Dating and Intimacy in a Mobile World<sup>i</sup>**

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### **Abstract:**

The nature and possibilities for intimacy between adults are changing in the mobile era. Bauman (2003) has decreed this the era of 'liquid love', in which intimacy is commodified and committed relationships have been replaced by fleeting connections. In contrast, Giddens (1991; 1993) suggests that the reordering of everyday life in late-stage modernity has given rise to the possibility of a democratization of interpersonal interaction, characterized by reflexive 'pure relationships'. The purpose of this paper is to consider theoretical debates about intimacy in the mobile era with regard to the contemporary practice of online dating. Drawing on our qualitative research with 23 online daters in Australia, we argue that, while the architecture of online dating is consistent with liquid love, many online daters simultaneously desire the possibilities for consumption afforded by liquid love, while aspiring to the formation of pure relationships and/or more practical forms of caring. This creates tensions in people's experiences of this form of purposeful meeting, which are reflective of the conflicting socialities of intimacy available to us in the mobile era. At the same time, our research revealed disruptions to these tensions, by illuminating experiences where the consumerist orientation of online dating stimulated processes of reflexive self-discovery amongst our participants.

## **Introduction**

The nature and possibilities for intimacy between adults are changing in the mobile era. As advanced post-industrial nations continue to experience significant changes to traditional family structures, rising divorce rates, and higher median ages at which individuals are likely to marry or commit to a long-term relationship (see Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2006), the likelihood that we will engage in multiple experiences of romantic and/or sexual intimacy also increases. As global labour-market restructuring and regional conflict, coupled with advancements in transport technology, both demand and support increasing mobility of people and cultures around the globe, traditional opportunities for initiating and maintaining intimate relationships are changing. Bauman (2003) has decreed this the era of 'liquid love', in which intimacy is commodified and meaningful relationships have been replaced by fleeting connections. Giddens (1991; 1993) is more positive, suggesting that the reordering of everyday life in late-stage modernity has given rise to the possibilities of reflexive 'pure relationships', that democratize interpersonal interaction free from traditional constraints of social norms and structures. Others, such as Jamieson (1998), are quick to point out that, no matter how 'pure' or 'liquid' intimacy is, practical forms of caring and structural inequalities of gender and other social strata continue to inform our experience and desire for intimate relationships.

The rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT), which is both reflective and constitutive of the transformative effects of the mobile era, is also giving rise to new, or reconfigured, forms of interpersonal interaction, with a recent study of Australians' experience identifying that 13% of respondents had formed social relationships online (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006). This includes the growing use of online technologies – including the internet, email, the world wide web, and mobile telecommunications - for the purposes of 'online dating'.

Online dating is a technologically mediated and purposeful form of meeting new people. In very broad terms, it is comparable to more traditional purposeful dating techniques that are mediated by a commercial interest, such as print based personal advertising and matchmaking services. As Hardey (2002) has observed, online dating offers a virtual

space that generates opportunities to meet people online and move into face to face relationships. Online dating sites usually provide users with opportunities to present personalized profiles of themselves, review the profiles of others, send expressions of interest to other users, and facilitate synchronous (for example, instant messaging) and asynchronous (for example, email) communication between users (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2004). Increasingly, online dating is predicated on convergence of ICT, with web-based services offering a range of technologically mediated interactions, including video-conferencing, voicemail exchange and SMS communication, along with more 'traditional' options of email and realtime chat.

The purpose of this paper is to consider theoretical debates about intimacy in the mobile era in light of online daters' experience. Drawing on our qualitative research with online daters in Australia, we argue that, while the architecture of online dating is consistent with liquid love, many online daters simultaneously desire the possibilities for consumption afforded by liquid love, while aspiring to the formation of pure relationships and/or more practical forms of caring. This creates tensions in people's experiences of this form of purposeful meeting, which are reflective of the conflicting socialities of intimacy afforded to us in the mobile era. At the same time, our research revealed disruptions to these tensions, by illuminating experiences where the consumerist orientation of online dating stimulated processes of reflexive self-discovery amongst our participants that are consistent with pure relationship formation. This is discussed in further detail in our consideration of research participants' experience below.

### **Research Methodology**

Our study was conducted between 2004 and 2005 in Melbourne, Australia. The research included an extensive literature review of conceptual debates and empirical research on relationships initiated online, the nature of intimacy in the contemporary (Western) world, and the socio-cultural impacts of ICT. An audit of online dating websites serving Australian users was conducted, which documented the types of functions offered, and site specific statistics on service use. Using a snowball sample starting with our own professional networks, twenty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with people who had experience using online dating sites. Interviews were conducted either face to face,

synchronously online via Instant Messenger, or asynchronously online via an emailed qualitative survey instrument. Interview data were analysed thematically to identify dominant, and contradictory, constructions of online dating experience amongst our participants.

We interviewed five men and eighteen women ranging in age from 25 to 62. The majority of participants identified as heterosexual, with one person identifying as gay and three of fluid sexuality. Our respondents resided in Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia. While the sampling method and sample size do not allow us to make any claims that our research findings are representative of Australian online dating users' experiences, the depth and breadth of qualitative information derived provides us with important insights into the ways in which our research respondents construct the meaning and purpose of online dating from their own perspectives. As such, we are interested in particularity, rather than generalisability, in this exploration.

### **Mobile technologies for a mobile world? Reasons for trying online dating**

Online dating is predicated on the increasing use of mobile technologies in everyday life. At the same time, the mobility of people appears to be a significant force behind their choices to try online dating. While two of our participants identified personal traits – specifically, shyness and a predilection for the written word – as a reason for trying online dating, all participants identified multiple social factors that informed their decision to use these services. These included:

- Moving interstate and overseas for work, and needing to find ways to build new social networks;
- A sense of isolation experienced as a result of single parenthood;
- Long and irregular work hours limiting possibilities for more traditional face to face introductions; and
- Moving out of long-term relationships and having limited access to social networks that included available prospective partners.

In some ways, all of these reasons are reflective of mobility effects, including physical mobility from one place to another, mobility through different stages of the life course, and mobility into and out of interpersonal relationships. With all this movement, what are the possibilities for intimacy in late stage modernity?

### **Theorising intimacy in a mobile world**

In a broader debate about the nature of intimacy in the contemporary era, Bauman (2003) has argued that online dating epitomizes the privileging of desire over intimacy in a period of 'liquid modernity'. He suggests that the art of loving has been replaced by a commodified imitation, the 'love experience', which models "other commodities that allure and seduce by brandishing all such features and promise to take the waiting out of wanting, sweat out of effort and effort out of results" (2003: 7).

In critical response to the proponents of the network as the organising structure of interaction in the contemporary era (see, for example, Castells, 1996), Bauman suggests that an impoverished understanding of 'connections' has overridden the more meaningful idea of 'relationships' in understanding patterns of social interaction. Within this framework of logic, Bauman purports that connecting and disconnecting are equally legitimate, and equally rewarded, choices in a network society. He argues that online dating perfectly fulfils the rational choice conditions of the era of liquid love, as it avoids the awkward negotiation of mutual commitments, allowing for risk avoidance, and instantaneous termination of contact, without emotional loss or regret (2003: 65).

Bauman describes the phenomenon of online dating thus:

Termination on demand – instantaneous without mess, no counting losses or regrets is the major advantage of internet dating. A reduction of the risks coupled with the avoidance of option-closing is what is left of rational choice in a world of fluid chances, shifting values and eminently unstable rules, and internet dating, unlike the awkward negotiation of mutual commitments, fulfils such new standards of rational choice perfectly (Bauman, 2003: 65)

Some of our participants echoed Bauman's critical concerns, experiencing the sheer accessibility of the medium as one of its key weaknesses:

I wonder whether it makes everything too easy, so it can lend itself becoming even more impermanent, relationships even more fragile. It's just too easy to meet people, too easy to cycle through people, so it kind of accelerates the disintegration of long-term relationships, that sort of thing. (33 year old single straight female).

Others viewed the disposability and arms length nature of preliminary online dating contact as a strength of the medium:

You can quickly rip off an email and you don't have to... You just keep deleting emails, you don't have to enter into any face-to-face dialogue or ongoing dialogue (50 year old straight single female).

Those who are more hopeful of the transformative possibilities of online dating invoke Giddens' concept of pure relationships to articulate the intimacy effects of online dating (see, for example, Hardey 2002). In his discussions of constructions of self and intimacy in late modern societies, Giddens (1991; 1993) suggests that the nature of contemporary emotional life has become reordered by the changing conditions of everyday activities. He suggests that intimacy is effectively a matter of emotional communication "with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality" (1992: 130). Giddens argues hopefully for the concept of the 'pure relationship' as the democratization of the interpersonal domain enabled by the conditions of late modernity. He defines pure relationships as free-floating interpersonal negotiations that are not fettered, as traditional relationships have been, by the external conditions of social or economic life. He suggests that the pure relationship exists only for its own sake, focusing on the development of intimacy, and drawing reflexively on the commitment of partners to the relationship to sustain it (Giddens, 1991: 89-94).

Giddens' and Bauman's respective ideas about pure relationships and liquid love present conflicting perspectives on the possibilities for intimacy in the mobile era, which are often mirrored in utopian and dystopian perspectives of relationship formation online. We would argue that, in its architecture, online dating epitomizes liquid love at its most extreme. That is, it is a highly commercially mediated activity (Fiore & Donath, 2004), which constructs relationship formation as individualistic activity based on rational choice. This was reflected in our interviewees' discussions of both the benefits and

limitations of online dating. Typical descriptions of the benefits of online dating included the immediacy of the interaction, and the scope and scale of choice available. The activity was often described in consumerist terms consistent with liquid love, using metaphors of shopping, with comments such as:

I felt like I was going to a supermarket of men when I would go to the dating site – u could choose categories and sit with friends and giggle over the photos (32 yr old married female); and

[online dating] is like going shopping...this is the only sort of shopping I've done online regularly...I relate to it as shopping in one way and entertaining, looking at the talent. If I'm feeling rejected by a particular man I only have to go online and look at profiles to realize there are a lot more fish in the sea (48 year old, divorced, straight woman)

While these features of online dating were described by many participants as part of the appeal, they were simultaneously experienced as negative features of the interaction:

One [disadvantage] is always having several contacts going at once, rather than just one. This is the nature of the beast, and people do drop off a lot without explanation, so I'm reluctant to invest much in a single contact, not at first (40 yr old bisexual, divorced, single female).

Our respondents' discussions of the benefits and limitations of online dating suggest that, as a form of purposeful meeting, this activity coheres with Bauman's construct of liquid love. This appears to be both a dominant attraction and a consistent frustration of our interviewees' online dating experience.

Insofar as the formation of intimacy is bound up with construction of the self, however, our participants wove a more complex story of simultaneous consumption and reflexivity. That is, in describing the way in which they develop and edit their online profiles, our participants described both instrumental approaches, which constructed 'self as product', and highly reflexive approaches, which aspired to revealing their 'true self' online. For some people, the profile was treated as an important signifier of self:

[I try to give] a sense of my essence (45 year old single straight female)

[I present]...an idea of who I am as a person...though I don't want to give too much away because it's better to stick with the basics for the profile and go into more detail when you're

actually connecting ‘one on one’ (52 year old single straight female)

I aim for my profile to reflect my real personality (40 yr old divorced single bisexual female)

In keeping with the consumerist orientation of liquid love, however, it is notable that several of our participants described themselves and others as products for consumption when engaging in online dating. These people viewed the dater profile, for better or for worse, as an important marketing device:

I mean, you’re a product on the shelf, literally on the shelf most of the time, and no-one’s ever going to buy you if that’s how you present yourself, both your picture and your profile. I mean they’re so unimaginative that they talk about walks on the beach and romantic candlelit dinners, all of them” (50 year old straight single female)

It’s a bit like a model parade and you have to do ‘good photo’. And so I find that really offputting (33 yr old straight single female)

While metaphors consistent with liquid love and pure relationships were variously adopted by our interviewees in discussing their experience of online dating, a number of respondents identified that online interaction provides unique opportunities for self-reflection and disclosure. In several cases, our research participants simultaneously invoked ideals of pure relationships and the attraction of liquid love in their constructions of the possibilities of online dating. For example, one participant discussed the personal process opened up for her by her online dating experience:

I’m always excited about meeting someone new, getting to know them, seeing if there’s chemistry. It’s an adrenaline rush. For a while it was addictive. Like it was my favourite activity – I had to have someone new on the go – getting to know them, organizing a date for the next weekend...I’d always be excited about the possibilities...but I learned a heap about myself and relationships in a short time, sped up the learning curve, and made some decisions about what/who I was looking for...I got to know who I was and what I wanted, so I could take a stand about that rather than taking whoever came my way. (48 year old, divorced, straight woman)

In this respondent’s case, those features online dating consistent with liquid love – that is, the immediacy of connections, the disposability of those connections, and sheer scope of



prospective partners – supported a personal process of reflexive transformation consistent with Giddens' argument for the democratization of interpersonal interaction.

While this is suggestive of the liberating possibilities of relationships initiated online, we note Jamison's (1998) criticism of the pure relationship construct. As she points out, the structural inequalities that are inherent in personal intimate relationships, specifically between men and women, are in danger of being ignored where we extol the values of mutual self-disclosure articulated in Giddens' pure relationship construct. As a number of our respondents observed, gendered patterns of interaction, such as who contacts whom first, are alive and well in online dating:

There is still a dance to be danced, there is still a game to be played, online and offline...The guy has to contact the girl..I try to do the right thing and contact them and do all the follow-up and I plan the dates and everything (25 year old single straight male)

Further, while online interaction may provide opportunities for the initiation and development of some forms of interpersonal interaction, it is limited in its capacity to facilitate the embodied experience of intimacy. Although some theorists argue that the act of online interaction involves embodied experience (see Ze-ev, 2003), our research participants were overwhelmingly consistent in reporting that the main limitation of online dating is that online chemistry is not necessarily a predictor of physical chemistry. In the words of one respondent:

If they've got that spark in the eye, who cares what they're going to tell you on email. You want to just touch them. You want to be close to them. It's just chemistry (50 year old single straight female).

## **Conclusion**

Our research participants' constructions of online dating suggest a concurrent cleaving to the instrumentalist possibilities of liquid love *and* to the reflexive ideals of pure relationship formation. These findings are suggestive of the inadequacy of the explanatory power of notions of contemporary intimacy polarized along the lines of liquid love and pure relationships. Just as explicating the sociological effects of online dating requires further exploration, there is a need for a continued debate about the nature

of intimacy in which the complexities of self, structure and social strata in a mobile age can be understood and articulated.

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## Footnotes

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