We Met on the Net: Exploring the Perceptions of Online Romantic Relationship Participants

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Parks and Roberts (1998) found that 93.6% of Internet users participated in online relationships and that 26.3% of those relationships were romantic in nature. Despite their growing popularity, relatively little is known about how participants perceive their online romances. This study examined the written narratives of 202 online romantic relationship participants to learn more about how they describe online romances. Five themes were identified: (a) intense emotional arousal, (b) high levels of caution, (c) strong linguistic connections, (d) high numbers of extramarital affairs, and (e) a lack of social support from offline family and friends. These findings are discussed in terms of how social cognition and the online medium may impact the nature of a romantic relationship.

There are at least 182.1 million U.S. and 679.7 million global users of the Internet, with more people going online every day (Global Reach, 2003). The average user spends over 70% of his or her time online building personal relationships, including online friendships, sexual partnerships, and romances (Nua Internet Survey, 2002). Online romances (romantic relationships initiated via online contact and maintained predominantly through e-mail, chat rooms, interactive games, or newsgroups) are increasingly prevalent (Griffiths, 2000). Parks and Roberts (1998) found that 93.6% of Internet users participated in online relationships and that 26.3% of those relationships were romantic in nature. Scharlott and Christ (1995) reported that over half their female respondents and approximately one-third of their male respondents participated in an online romance. Additionally, in a survey of undergraduate...
students, Wildermuth (2000) found that 46% of the participants had been involved in an online romance or had a friend or family member currently (or previously) involved in one.

Although online relationships in general have received attention from scholars, studies specifically examining online romantic relationships are less common (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002). Research often subsumes romantic relationships, friendships, and sexual partnerships under the general category of online relationships (McQuillen, 2003). As a result, the relational characteristics specific to online romances are not well understood. To compound matters, the body of research encompassed by the broader category of “online relationships” is paradoxical and presents differing views of the nature of these relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996). For example, different researchers describe online relationships as: (a) highly impersonal and shallow due to the restricted nature of the medium (Parks & Floyd); (b) interpersonal, but more restrictive than face-to-face relationships so that they take longer to form and to develop (Lea & Spears, 1995); or (c) accelerated, and so intense that individuals self-disclose rapidly and form deeply intimate bonds in a short time frame (Walther, 1996).

All three perspectives emphasize the physical context of the Internet as a medium of communication (i.e., lack of cues, anonymity, asynchrony) and the impact this relational modality has on the nature of online relationships (i.e., it makes them impersonal, interpersonal, or accelerated). These perspectives take McLuhan’s ideas about the medium being the message (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) from mass communication applications and extend them to the interpersonal arena. The physical elements of the context are seen as playing a significant role in determining the nature of the relationships developed within that context. Unfortunately, the emphasis on context diminishes the role relationship participants play in the equation by treating the medium itself (i.e., Internet) as the fundamental component shaping relational dynamics (Riva, 2002).

An alternative way to understand the nature of online relationships may be by focusing less on the implications of the online context and more on examining the meanings users construct around their interpersonal online interactions (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). In support of this perspective, Rothenberg (2000) argued that rich descriptive information from online-relationship participants is vital to our understanding of the nature of online romances. Furthermore, Gurak (1996) claimed that online-relationship research should include an examination of how individuals understand and interpret their own online romantic experiences. In sum, these researchers supported operationalizing online relational participants as not merely “users” impacted by the online medium but as social “actors” who shape the online context for themselves (Riva, 2002; Stasser, 1992).

Social cognition offers a conceptual framework to examine how online romantic participants describe their relationships. It examines how people make sense of themselves, others, and the world (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). According to social cognition, the meaning of a given situation is inherently subjective, as the human mind actively constructs a reality beyond the original situation (Ross & Nisbett, 1991).
The meanings people construct for given relationships are stored as relational schemata. Relational schemata are cognitive structures relational partners use to store fundamental beliefs about the development and nature of particular relationships (Kunda, 1999). Individuals’ relational schemata house the expectations, anticipatory assumptions, rules, and beliefs that people use to understand and to assign meaning to relational behaviors (Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001).

One of the most effective ways for people to make their relational schemata available to others is to share relational narratives or stories (Collins & Cooper, 1997). In other words, through studying online romantic participants’ narratives researchers may begin to understand the meanings people assign to their online romances (Harre & Van Langenhove, 1991). In the present study the following research question was posed:

RQ: How do participants describe online romances when they tell the story of their relationships?

Method

Data Collection and Analysis

Romano, Donovan, Chen, and Nunamaker’s (2003) method for collecting and analyzing web-based qualitative data was implemented in this study. There are four steps to this process: (a) participant recruitment, (b) data elicitation, (c) data reduction, and (d) visualization.

Participant recruitment

A purposive sample was gathered by eliciting participants through a nonmoderated Usenet newsgroup focused on discussing online romantic experiences. At the time of data collection, the group consisted of over 500 members. However, only 25–35 members actively posted messages. The typical number of messages posted per day ranged from five to seven. A call for participants was sent to the list with links to more information about the study.

Data elicitation

When “investigating the nature of a certain experience or phenomenon, the most straightforward way to go about collecting data for such research is to ask selected individuals to write their experiences down in narrative form” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 63). Thus, after agreeing to participate, participants were asked to electronically submit (a) a demographic questionnaire and (b) a detailed narrative of their online romantic relationship experience. The specific request for narratives read: “Please tell me the story of your online romantic relationship. How did you meet? How did you develop your relationship? If your relationship is over, how did it end? If it is ongoing, how are you maintaining your relationship? From your perspective, what is being in an online romance like? What do you think are the issues of concern
and sources of joy in such relationships?” Questions were worded so that participants reflected primarily on one online romance. Thus, if participants were involved in multiple relationships online or had experienced more than one online romance in the past, they were guided to focus only on one relationship in their answers. All identifying information was removed from the narratives prior to analysis.

In this study, participants were allowed to self-define “romantic relationships.” Although the call for participants clearly defined online relationships as relationships initiated over a computer and entirely or primarily maintained through computer-mediated communication, no specific definition of the term “romantic” was provided. This allowed respondents to define what “romantic relationships” meant to them because the decision about whether or not a relationship is romantic should not be dictated by researchers but, rather, should be determined by the relational partners involved (Berscheid, 1994).

**Data reduction**

Data reduction involves “selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw data to make it [sic] useful” (Romano et al., 2003, p. 221). In the current study, data reduction was accomplished through a thematic analysis of 202 narratives following Marshall and Rossman’s (1989) guidelines for analysis. There are three stages to this process. First, transcripts are read many times so that researchers become familiar with the narratives. Second, transcripts are read to identify passages with recurring themes across multiple narratives. A theme is defined as the focus or point of a passage; themes articulate something particularly essential or revealing about the experience described (Van Manen, 1990). A recurring theme occurs in more than one narrative; highly recurring themes indicate patterns across many people’s experiences (Silverman, 1993). Third, narratives are sorted into piles based on recurring themes. Throughout this sorting, individuals’ narratives can only be placed in the same thematic pile once (even if narratives consist of multiple passages addressing that one theme). However, narratives might be placed in many different thematic piles depending upon how many passages addressing distinctly different themes those narratives’ contained. In the current study, themes that occurred in at least 25% of participants’ narratives were classified as major themes. This benchmark was selected to ensure that there was reasonable representation of major themes across the sample of participants.

**Visualization**

Visualization involves careful articulation and naming of the themes to permit drawing conclusions. Throughout this process, the following list of criteria for thematic visualization was followed. Theme names and descriptions should: (a) reflect an understanding of the participants’ meanings, (b) reflect the researchers’ openness to reflecting the social reality of the phenomenon, (c) be clear, so that participants can recognize and relate to the researchers’ interpretations, (d) reflect a careful use
of language, and (e) make the phenomenon accessible to nonparticipants (Van Manen, 1990).

To ensure that the themes identified in the current study reflected the participants’ meanings as accurately as possible, the researchers conducted a member check, which is a way to verify meanings elicited from qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To conduct the member check, a random subsection of 23 participants (11% of the sample) was shown the final themes and asked if the interpretations of the data corresponded with their own understanding of the nature of online romantic relationships (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). All 23 participants indicated that the themes reflected how they conceptualized online romances. Two participants suggested minor rewording of theme names; their suggestions were adopted.

Participants

Two hundred two individuals were recruited from an online discussion forum to participate in this study. One hundred forty-four participants were female (71%) and 58 (29%) were male. The majority of participants were from the United States (n = 169, 84%), while the remaining participants (n = 33, 16%) were from other countries (11 from Ireland, 8 from England, 7 from Australia, 2 from Sweden, 2 from China, 1 from France, 1 from Thailand, 1 from Brazil). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 years old, with an average age of 41. Participants were Caucasian (n = 147, 73%), Asian (n = 26, 13%), African American (n = 17, 8%), or members of other ethnic groups (n = 12, 6%). One hundred twenty-eight participants (64%) had or were studying to obtain a college degree, while 74 participants (36%) had a high school education or the equivalent. Sexual orientation was not addressed in this study.

Participants reported that they met their online romantic partners in a number of ways. One hundred forty-nine participants (74%) reported that they met their partners in common-interest chat rooms, 33 participants (16%) reported that they met their partners through introduction by a mutual online friend, and 20 participants (10%) reported that they met their partners through web-based personal ads or dating services. The physical proximity of online romantic partners varied. The majority of participants (n = 186, 92%) reported that they were living at least one hour of driving time away from their partners. In fact, 59 of these 186 participants (32%) were involved in international relationships. The remainder of the participants (n = 16, 8%) indicated that they lived one hour or less driving time from their online romantic relationship partners. Of the total number of participants, 73 (36%) reported that they had face-to-face interactions with their online partners at least once.

At the time of the survey, 95 participants (47%) indicated that they were currently participating in online romantic relationships, and 107 participants (53%) indicated that they were previously involved in online romances but the relationships were unsuccessful. Sixty-five individuals (32%) reported that they were married or
romantically involved in face-to-face relationships at the same time they were involved in online romantic relationships.

Results

Analysis of the 202 narratives revealed five major themes. Online romantic relational participants described their relationships as: (a) involving intense emotional arousal, (b) requiring high levels of caution, (c) having strong linguistic connections, (d) involving high numbers of extramarital affairs, and (e) lacking in support from offline family and friends (see Table 1). Participants’ comments illustrate each theme.

Table 1  Summary of Major Themes from Online Romance Participants’ Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of theme</th>
<th>Example statement</th>
<th>Number of narratives in which theme occurred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intensity of Emotion: The ability of the online environment to elicit emotional reactions.</td>
<td>“Our love is so strong, I can place my hand on the keyboard and feel his love flowing through each key.”</td>
<td>127 (87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Caution: Warnings and cautionary advice about online romances.</td>
<td>“When you talk to someone online you get to see only the part of themselves that they want you to see. Beware, anyone can color themselves so that they appear as they want to appear instead of as they really are.”</td>
<td>92 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power of Linguistic Connections: Positive and negative implications of the nonphysical nature of online relationships.</td>
<td>“We’ve talked so long that we are past the point where looks actually matter.”</td>
<td>88 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extramarital Affairs: Relational infidelity in online relationships.</td>
<td>“Even though we both know in our hearts that we love our spouses, we cannot resist our feelings for one another.”</td>
<td>54 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response from Social Networks: Concerns from online romance participant’s offline social network.</td>
<td>“My friends and family thought that he was some weirdo from the net that was going to erase me from the face of the earth.”</td>
<td>50 (25%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although extensive quotation is provided, the comments chosen represent only a
portion of the total data for each theme. No significant differences were noted
between men’s and women’s narratives. As a result, their responses were combined.

Intensity of Emotion

This theme referred to the ability of online environments to elicit intense emotional
reactions, both positive and negative. Emotions ranged from feelings of love, passion,
and attraction for online romantic relational participants to anger, sadness,
depression, and betrayal when online romances failed.

Many participants described their feelings for their partners as “true love.” Par-
ticipants characterized the experience of falling in love online as “getting swept away,”
“going fast and furious,” or “feeling an instant connection.” Participants used
phrases such as “my love for him is unconditional,” “this is true love,” and “I didn’t
know what real love was until I met him.” One participant stated, “The depth of our
love was nothing short of unbelievable, a very special, deep, emotional attraction.”
Another shared, “Our love is so strong, I can place my hand on the keyboard and
feel his love flowing through each key.” One participant summed up the love felt
between many online couples by stating, “I found my one in a million. She means
more to me than I can ever express in words. I know with all my heart and soul that
this is the person I have been looking for in my life. She completes me.”

However, many online romantic participants who mentioned true love also
reported the emotional costs of online love. In fact, the intensity of the pain and
heartbreak expressed was overwhelming for some participants. One participant
acknowledged, “I am severely depressed. Dear God, how could he just let go so eas-
ily?” Another user disclosed, “If you ever see a girl called Karen in the chat and she is
from Canada and used to love a guy in England, please, please, tell her he still cares.”
Another wrote, “He would tell me just to give him time that he was busy or pres-
sured. But that wasn’t it at all. The truth was that he never did love me. He never
did. I feel like a nobody.”

Caution

This theme refers to warnings and cautionary advice given to participants about
online romances. One participant warned, “If he is too mysterious, then he is lying.
There was a guy that came across as really brilliant and charming online, but was
really a dangerous convicted felon. I was infatuated and didn’t pick up on the clues.”
Another told this story, “One day I tried to send flowers to his office, I was told he
didn’t work there, in fact they’d never heard of him. I thought it was a mistake so I
tried to send the flowers to his house. The florist said that the address I gave was for
the parsonage and that the parson was married!” Stated one participant, “When you
talk to someone online you get to see only the part of themselves that they want you
to see. Beware, anyone can color themselves so that they appear as they want to appear instead of as they really are.”

Many narratives consisted of specific advice on techniques online users could employ to protect themselves in online romances. Advice included “don’t give out your phone number,” “remember that criminal records and civil records are public information, that marriage records are available through companies like Vital Statistics, and that the county courthouse will list property ownership,” and “always have a friend go with you when you meet for the first time.” One user asserted, “I urge people to be as thorough as I was. I saved all his email and I captured logs of all our chats. Then I read those transcripts over and over to look for discrepancies. While the majority of people online are genuine, you have to protect yourself from those who are not.” The theme of caution was summed up in one participant’s narrative when he stated, “I have to warn you. What people tell you is [sic] mostly all lies and this cyber love is just a game to most of them out there. So beware before you get hurt and spend hours, night after night, crying in front of your computer.”

The Power of Linguistic Connections

This theme addresses positive and negative implications of the nonphysical nature of online romances. Users made claims such as, “We’ve talked so long that we are past the point where looks actually matter.” One participant shared, “I fell in love with the person inside and not the physical part.” Another claimed, “I would have met him at the altar sight unseen if that is what we had decided, for cyber relationships force you to get to know each other first, force you to find out if you are compatible. They allow you to share common interests and to communicate.” Another participant’s comment was, “He is falling in love with what I say to him, not what I can do for him.”

Although participants indicated that words online are powerful, many participants acknowledged that online exchanges are not enough to sustain long-term relationships. These participants reported the need to meet in-person and experience the physical side of intimacy. One user noted, “The lack of the physical is the hardest part. We talk up a storm but it is never the same.” Another commented, “I felt so helpless, I was just words on a screen when what she needed was a real hug.” Several users acknowledged that after they had met or spoken on the telephone, online communication lost its appeal. One participant wrote, “We don’t spend much time on the computer anymore, it’s just not the same after meeting.” Another agreed, “The restrictions of online drive me crazy, because once I heard her voice, Internet chatting just doesn’t mean much anymore.”

Participants also mentioned that online romances could become “flat” due to heavy dependence on textual interaction. One user stated, “We are in a long distance relationship and we are frankly bored. We are bored with the Internet, bored with the phone. We already know so much about each other that communication about past experiences, how we feel about things, and how we feel about each other is known,
accepted, and uninteresting to talk about anymore.” These participants mentioned the strain of always having to be entertaining when they were together online. Shared one participant, “We are under constant pressure to keep a conversation going and be interesting. It is hard to know how to avoid repetition and boredom.”

**Extramarital Affairs**

This theme emphasizes extramarital affairs in relation to online romances. Participants offered different perspectives on extramarital affairs in their narratives. Several participants explained that they were involved in online affairs because they were unhappy in their “real-life” relationships. These individuals described their real-life relationships as “troubled,” “bad,” “unhealthy,” “unsatisfying,” and “poor.” They stressed that marriage problems were not the result of online affairs; rather, marriage problems caused online affairs. One user acknowledged, “If I was happy at home, I wouldn’t need to go looking elsewhere.” Yet some participants reported that they were happily married and happily involved in online affairs. These participants perceived online affairs as inevitable or out of their control. As one user stated, “The only reason we have to hide our love for now is that we are both happily married—to someone else. We are wracked with guilt and pain as if it were an affair in real time. But we are also blessed with the joy and love as if it were in real time.” Another user claimed, “Even though we both know in our hearts that we love our spouses, we cannot resist our feelings for one another.”

Some participants did not view Internet affairs so lightly. Several participants stated that online affairs were just as painful a betrayal as “real-life” affairs would have been. One participant disclosed, “The effect on a husband when he discovers his wife has been having cyber-sex is sheer hell. Why, why, couldn’t things be talked about with me? Why? I now have a deep distrust of my wife and a feeling of constant paranoia. The effects on my marriage were disastrous.” Another concurred, “I loved my wife but I betrayed her trust. I told myself an online affair was no big deal. But then why was I so worried about getting caught?” Another stated, “I think people may be more inclined to leave a real-life relationship if they have an online affair. That’s because the online romance is easy. Everybody is on their best behavior and it’s fun. The real-life relationship requires work and stress, and yelling and pain, so they give up on it and escape into the online fantasy.” Another participant claimed, “Which comes first the chicken or the egg? You say you’re online because your wife and you are having problems. Did you ever think your wife and you might be having problems because you are online? I know guys who are on for 8–10 hours per day. You neglect your real-life relationship, what do you expect?”

**Response from Social Networks**

This theme addresses concerns about negative reactions from participants’ offline social networks. Participants’ messages focused on the way offline family and friends
seemed to think people online were “psychos and serial killers.” One participant mentioned, “My friends and family thought that he was some weirdo from the net that was going to erase me from the face of the earth.” Another participant claimed, “They think I am nuts. They seem to forget that there are stalkers in real-life too.” Other messages focused on the blame that offline friends and family placed on online romances for breaking up offline relationships. One participant stated, “I wasn’t allowed to use the family computer anymore for they thought that my relationship online was the reason for my divorce.” Another user noted, “Everyone I know has a friend that left his or her spouse for somebody he or she met on the net. My family makes it out to be some sort of heinous epidemic.”

These participants mentioned that family and friends thought it was “impossible” to really know someone over the Internet. One participant shared, “I think there is a huge stigma attached to meeting people online. Non-computer users don’t think it is possible to meet a normal person on the net.” Another concurred, “My mother all but threw a fit saying ‘you don’t know him.’ She insisted that you couldn’t get to know a person that way.” These participants felt it was difficult to make anyone understand that it was possible to know someone without physically meeting. As one user noted, “For those who do not use the Internet regularly, the idea of meeting someone over the net ranges from curiosity to ridicule. The most support I’ve gotten from my offline friends is either words of caution (he could be a psycho killer), or bizarre attention as an Internet love-freak.”

In sum, the relationship narratives shared by participants in the current study revealed that online romantic relationships (a) involve intense emotions, (b) require caution, (c) are both enhanced and constrained by their textual nature, (d) may occur in conjunction with offline romances and (e) are often not supported by offline social networks.

Discussion

The present study examined online relational participants’ narratives to learn how individuals describe the nature of their online romances. Analysis of the five themes suggested that (a) social cognition offers an appropriate framework for examining perceptions of online romances and (b) the role of the medium in online romances may evolve over time.

Social Cognition

Social cognition is the study of how the human brain processes information and assigns meaning (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Acknowledging the role of cognitive principles in the process of meaning making can deepen our understanding of the results of the current study. The themes identified in the participants’ narratives can be better understood by applying the social cognitive principles of (a) perception, (b) information processing, (c) self-presentation, (d) impression formation, and (e) social influence (Fiske & Taylor).
A foundational principle of social cognition is that meaning is in interpretation, not in interaction (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). According to social cognition, how people come to understand their relationships is determined more by subjective factors such as how they perceive relational experiences, than by objective factors such as the context of the relationship or the medium of the relational communication (Ross & Nisbett). Previous research suggests that online relationships are less likely to elicit strong or genuinely felt emotions because elements such as physical appearance, voice, posture, eye gaze, and spatial proximity are limited in the online context (Parks & Floyd, 1996). These contextual elements have long been regarded as essential to establishing emotional intimacy and relational closeness (Clark & Reis, 1988). However, if, as social cognition principles claim, the perception of a situation and not the physical reality of that situation primarily influences emotional and behavioral outcomes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), such limitations for online romances may be less significant than previously proposed. In support of this view, findings from the current study indicated that despite the physical limitations of the medium, online relationships elicited powerful positive and negative emotions for participants. Individuals spoke of the love, happiness, fear, anger, and sadness resulting from their online romances. Thus, despite the contextual constraints, participants in the current study perceived their relationships as intimate and acknowledged strong emotional reactions.

The information processing principle of social cognition states that humans use available information to draw conclusions; when information is limited, the human brain fills in the blanks (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). When individuals process information, they are often motivated to reach particular conclusions based on their own personal needs and desires (Fiske & Taylor). Individuals engage in what social cognition theorists label “motivated inference” and fill in any missing information so that they “see what they want to see.” Motivated inference is most likely to occur when alternative sources of information are not available to contradict idealized misperceptions (Fiske & Taylor). In the online context, romantic participants are often forced to rely extensively (if not exclusively) on textual messages. Alternative sources of information about a partner are not always readily available. Thus, online participants often rely heavily on one medium when forming impressions and perceptual descriptions of their romantic partners. According to the social cognition principles just discussed, this reliance on one medium may make it easier for individuals to create and to sustain idealized positive biases toward their online romantic partners. Motivated to “see what they want to see” and not having a lot of information available to contradict their perceptions, online romantic relationship partners may be likely to perceive an idealized or fantasized relational partner. Results from the current study supported this possibility. Many participants described their online romances as ideal; they perceived their relationships as especially loving, deeply emotional and intimate, and based on “real connections” as opposed to superficial physical attractiveness.

The potential for online relationships to be viewed positively by those involved can also be explained by cognitive principles surrounding self-presentation. According to
social cognition, when people believe their audience has limited ability to verify the information they provide about themselves, self-enhancement is often the rule (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Online romantic partners may believe that the textually dependent nature of the medium limits the ability of their partners to verify the stories they tell about themselves. This belief could encourage participants to engage in strategic self-enhancement. As a result, people “getting to know each other” online may be more likely to present themselves in idealized ways that are positively skewed. The ability in the online context to present an “enhanced” self to others with less fear of repercussions may explain the high rate of online affairs revealed in the current study. Because one can present an idealized self online (and as part of creating that ideal can choose not to tell an online partner that he/she is married), participants can potentially lead parallel lives in two mediums, with decreased risk of being found out by either their online or face-to-face romantic partners.

Findings from the current study demonstrated that people involved in online romances are aware of possible dangers associated with the potential for idealized perceptions and self-enhancement in the online context. The need for caution was stressed in many participants’ narratives. Work related to impression formation states that when people are able to identify consistency in someone’s messages over time and across topics, they are more likely to trust the impressions they form of that individual (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Due to the textual nature of the online medium, participants may verify message consistency in their online partners’ e-mails by reexamining previous message exchanges. In fact, participants are able to check, and to double check, message content. Results from the current study suggested that participants seek significant consistency across partner messages so that they can feel secure in the assessment of their partner. For example, many participants in the present study indicated that before progressing to the next stage of intimacy in their online relationships they cross-referenced their partner’s e-mails for inconsistencies or they asked for and contacted potential partner’s references.

Online romantic relationship participants are not the only people aware of the inherent dangers of online interaction. Findings from the current study suggested that family, friends, and society are likely to be skeptical of online romances. Previous interpersonal relationship research has demonstrated that romantic dyads and social networks are intricately connected, with significant others, such as parents, friends, and coworkers, playing a powerful role in the success and quality of romantic relationships (Femlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990). The principle of social influence states when individuals make highly salient judgments (for example, evaluating the quality of a romantic relationship); they are likely to rely heavily on input from people whose opinions they value and trust (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). As a result, disapproval from family and friends toward online romantic relationships may play a significant role in how online participants assess their relationship’s viability. Femlee et al. (1990) found that the less support a couple received from their social networks, the greater the likelihood that face-to-face romantic relationships would dissolve. Thus, the powerful role of social influence in decision making suggests that negative reactions to online romantic relationships
from social networks may result in a high percentage of these relationships being unsuccessful over time.

**The Role of the Online Medium**

Previous studies examining online romances have emphasized the significance the medium has on relational development (Lea & Spears, 1995; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Walther, 1996). Although these scholars did not agree with the exact role played by the online media, everyone acknowledged that utilization of the Internet as a means for developing online romances would significantly shape the nature of romances created and sustained. This study found that these scholars may have overestimated the role of the primary medium (e.g., the online context) while underestimating the role of secondary medium (e.g., telephone, face-to-face interaction) over the span of online relational development.

First, results of this study suggested that the online medium influences the messages available to participants when making preliminary decisions about relational development prospects. The heavy reliance on textual data sets parameters for the types of information exchanged by participants. Participants may be forced to assess verbal cues differently because their access to nonverbal messages is limited in initial exchanges. As a result, message content decisions may take on greater significance for prospective online romantic partners. Although participants in this study did not consider this to be a shortcoming of the medium during preliminary stages of relational development, there could be dissatisfaction associated with the limitations of the online medium as relationships intensified.

It was very common for participants to increase the type of information available to them about their partners by incorporating secondary medium (such as telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings) as they felt more comfortable in their online romances and wanted access to additional verbal and nonverbal cues. Although some participants were content with messages exchanged solely via the Internet, others appeared to be constrained or bored with the role of the online medium and its inability to satisfy their needs for additional communication exchanges. This does not suggest that the primary modality was failing online participants. Rather, this suggests that as online romances intensified, individuals wanted to maximize additional modalities to enhance their relational experiences (Monberg, 2005).

For instance, participants consistently mentioned an unfulfilled need for physical contact. They wanted to hold hands, hug, sit together on the couch and watch movies, make-out, and as one participant stated “get comfortable enough around each other that I could burp in front of her without feeling weird.” Although some may claim that physical aspects of relationships are less relevant in online relationships, others may still feel a need for the physical copresence of their relational partners (Wood & Duck, 1995). It is not that love, sympathy, tenderness, humor, sadness, or happiness cannot be conveyed in an e-mail. Rather, it may be that “eye contact, body language, facial expressions, vocalizations, hugs, pats on the back, cries,
embraces, kisses, and giggles are fundamentals of our evolutionary socioemotional well-being” (Nie, 2001, p. 432). Without a physical component, online romantic participants are only able to access a portion of their relationship partners, and humans may need a complete tactile physical presence in order to make a lasting bond (Toufexis, 1996). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the insertion of secondary media into romantic relationships is not limited to online romances. For example, face-to-face relationships often integrate online exchanges and text messaging into interactions as additional means for interacting with romantic partners when they do not have access to face-to-face channels. As a result, a future consideration is whether participants select mediums due to necessity versus choice for their primary and secondary medium options.

Limitations

Three limitations of the present study were issues of purposive sampling, thematic analysis of self-report data, and sexual orientation generalities. In this study, the sample was not random and the participants may not be representative of the larger population. For example, the current study’s sample was 71% female. Although this was a reasonable reflection of the sex distribution of the newsgroup where participants were recruited and is comparable to the sex distributions found in other online research (McKenna, Green, & Smith, 2001), it is not representative of the online population as a whole. Since August 2000, men and women have had virtually identical rates of Internet use; approximately 53.9% for men and 53.8% for women (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2001). However, research has shown that women tend to prefer personal and contextual uses of the Internet. As a result, women may be more likely than men to participate in online chat rooms and other areas where establishing close relationships is likely (Singh & Ryan, 1999). Women also may be more likely than men to engage in online relationships because the online environment allows them to feel safe and in control of the dating scene (Griffiths, 2001). Although sex differences were not identified in the narratives from this study, the unequal sex distribution of the participants should be noted when reflecting on the perspectives shared.

In addition, thematic analysis of self-report data has inherent potential for error in that researchers’ analyses may not accurately reflect the perspectives of the participants (McClelland, 1995). This study incorporated a member check in an effort to address this concern. However, this issue is a legitimate one in qualitative research. This study also relied on textual self-report data. When self-report data are in written form, linguistic, compositional, and grammatical ability also come into play and may inhibit participants’ abilities to accurately convey their meanings. These limitations reinforce the stance that any attempts to generalize from the results of qualitative studies should be done with caution. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the patterns found in this study are limited to this sample.

A final limitation to the current research is that the question of sexual orientation was not addressed. In future research, sexual orientation should be examined to
explore potential differences and similarities between heterosexual and homosexual online romantic relationship experiences.

Implications for Future Research

There is a strong desire to compare online romantic relationships to face-to-face romances. While this comparison is not inherently bad, it tends to focus on what is lost when using online channels, as opposed to examining the unique features or opportunities the online medium may present romantic partners. Future studies should examine how distance-based mediums such as the Internet allow for the deepening of romantic ties. In essence, how does the power of the online medium shape the relationship? Furthermore, as individuals strive to express themselves through text, what enables these messages to be so powerful for recipients?

The findings from this study suggest that as the Internet gains greater acceptance as a venue for meeting romantic partners, the issues faced by online romantic partners may change (Durbin, 2003). Many young professionals familiar with the lack of time and limited pool of available others that comes with the working world are less opposed to using the online medium to initiate romances than college students (Donn & Sherman, 2002). Due to the significant role that social support has in the future of close relationships, the examination of social support in online relationships is recommended.

Future research may also need to examine the integration of multiple contexts to study relationships (Monberg, 2005). This study found that online romantic relationships were becoming multimediated. Online romances may begin on the Internet, and the majority of interaction may still occur online, but partners also interact through telephone calls, letters, picture exchanges, flowers and presents, and face-to-face meetings. Romantic relational partners who initially began their relationships primarily in the face-to-face context may also use multiple technological channels. As relationships are increasingly blends of multiple forms of interaction, the significance of context as a distinguishing factor may be diminished (Monberg). Therefore, the issue may be less of whether one medium is used to build relationships, and more of how various media affect relationships’ abilities to enrich people’s lives. As a participant from the current study stated, “In the end, it doesn’t matter how we talk to each other, what matters is what we say to each other. When it comes to love... it’s not the medium, it’s the message!”

References


