

Internet dating and online friendships : harmless or not

Sociology



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Many, having read about a few successful internet dating relationships have the tendency to dismiss the dark side of online friendships and dating. The truth, as stated in People magazine article, is that tragic stories outweigh the happy ones. Internet dating is dangerous. People hide their true identity, lie about their intentions and often harm their online dates and friends once they meet in the real world. Therefore, even if internet dating involves the practice of basic human rights such as freedom of speech and the freedom to choose whom to date, when and where, it is extremely important that the governments step in to regulate and limit this activity for the sake of fighting crime and eliminate harm to society. Therefore, while Internet dating may be defended as a practice which involves both freedom of choice and freedom of speech, the fact is that it is a deadly form of interaction insofar as it enables people to misrepresent their identity and trick young teens into face to face meetings which may lead to their kidnapping, sexual exploitation and, possibly, murder.

Internet dating and online friendships are only seemingly harmless. As Parker explains, Internet users interested in cyber dating or online friendships have 10, 000 specialized websites to choose from. Then, within each website they have several chat rooms to choose from; for instance, they can enter chat rooms which are reserved for people that have specific interests, hobbies or specific age groups (Parker). Furthermore, within each chat room, they have numerous people to choose from, striking up a conversation only with the people that they find interesting. Furthermore, the length of the conversation, the topics that are discussed and how long it lasts or whether it is repeated again or not, or develops into a relationship or

not, is all controlled by the internet user himself, or herself. Consequently, the structure of online dating and how relationships develop make the users feel that they control the situation and command the relationship.

The stark reality is that internet dating is not safe and is hardly controlled by users. Quite simple stated, people may not be who they claim. Their true identity, their real activities, and even whether or not they have a criminal record are all important unknown characteristics. Worst of all, not knowing these facts can lead to rape or death. In one case, a 13 year old girl arranged a meeting with her online boyfriend. He turned out to be a 25 year old criminal who raped, murdered her, and then threw her body into a ravine (Campo-Flores). In another case, a married man with four children often misrepresented himself in online chat rooms. Once he acquired the trust of his online girlfriends, he would arrange to meet them. By the time of his arrest, he had murdered 11 of his online dates (Gold). In a third case, and as reported in People magazine, a young 14 year old boy established a friendship with a person that he had met online. He thought that this person was his same age, gave him his address and arranged a meeting. This online friend turned up to be a grown man who stormed into the boy's home and raped him ("The Evil"). These three cases are not unique but are realistic representations of the dangers of online dating and friendships that occur every day.

Cyber dating is dangerous. In just one year, as reported in Japan Today, cyber dating related crimes rose up by 37% between 2003 and 2004.

Moreover, as the police complain in "Japan Internet Sex Crimes Rocket," there is nothing that the law can do to prevent these crimes from occurring

because there are no rules and regulations upon internet dating and communications. Police can only take action after the crime has occurred and can do nothing to prevent the crime. This really does not make sense. In the real world, there are laws that govern our behaviour and which regulate our communication and interaction with other people. For instance, it is illegal for us to mis-represent ourselves. We have to be truthful about who we are in the real life, but on the Internet where it is even more important, this is not necessary. To say the least, this does not really make sense.

It is more important to require that people represent themselves accurately online than it is in real life because of a single important difference between the cyber world and the real world. As Kelly Starling explains, in real life dating, people see each other face to face and can make judgments on the other person by the way he or she talks, the clothes he or she wear, tone of voice, even face expressions. In other words, in real life meetings people are in a powerful position to pass judgment on others, and at the so least, conclude whether that person is dangerous or trustworthy. The situation completely differs in online dating as the only method of judging another person is by what that person says of himself and how he describes himself which could be all false actually (Starling). Consequently, even though there will always be people who will break the law, it is important to eliminate the right to anonymity and issue a law that demands accurate representing of identity in cyber space. People should know who they are talking to in regards to the basic facts of name, sex, age and criminal record at the least. Even brief and basic information like this can help protect people in online dating situations.

In conclusion, we are living in an age of the Internet. Practically all the activities that occur in the real world have parallel actions in cyber space. Among these is dating. Cyber dating can be dangerous. Nevertheless, it is a reality that is here to stay. Therefore, even though this proposal will appear to contradict with the rights that people enjoy online, the only solution to the dangers of online dating is its regulation and monitoring.