Title
Redefining The Route To A Relationship

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How technology's influx into the dating world creates a new approach to finding one's true love

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The rise of technology and its increasing integration into human emotions have made possible experiences of a new type of "love" that can be felt and maintained without the need of the lover's physical presence, thus leading critics to question the reality of such a technology-based emotion. Real love as defined by ancient times is an evolutionary need that makes the interwoven survival of humanity possible. Within this net of connectedness, people often favor situations that ignite positive emotions. Emotion causes human beings to choose favorable situations over unfavorable ones in a manner similar to natural selection, such that, over time, favorable situations win out over the unfavorable situations. A social psychologist, Wukmir demonstrates this Darwinian need for love by describing emotion as a response "that informs about the degree of favorability of the perceived situation" where positive emotions are sought after (1967). Love is one such positive emotion.

These emotions often occur in congruence with physiological arousal triggered by the five human senses (Syque 2008). For example, a slight caress on the skin surface can trigger the cilia or epithelial hair cells to act as mechanoreceptors, which are sensory signaling molecules that can send messages of touch to the thalamus, leading to an affectionate response in the presence of a romantic partner (Ochoa and Torebjörk 1983). This emotional arousal of passion leads one to attribute the experience to the phenomenon of

love as asserted by the attribution theory of emotion. According to this theory, "the cognitive attribution or evaluation concerning the causes of physiological changes, determine to a great extent what emotion is experienced" (Glietman 1991). Thus, an individual feels a physical arousal and then characterizes this phenomenon by an emotional feeling of love.

However, due to the advent of technology, the traditional physiological precursors that lead one to arousal and thus to the attribution of love now disappear or appear as something different. A prolonged and teasing entanglement of two tongues that fires the taste buds, thereby leading the body into passion may now seem too tedious a foreplay when flirtatious texting can possibly achieve the same result. Thus, the traditional initial sparking moments that ignite human emotion have been replaced by or are now preceded by online chat boxes, Facebook "pokes" and text messages due to the overwhelming influx of technology into the everyday lives of people.

At first glance, it seems that technology takes away the need for propinquity, or physical proximity, in forming relationships. The social psychologist Bossard, in his study of correlation between married couples and their pre-marital addresses in Philadelphia, discovered that "One-third of all couples lived within five or less blocks of each other" (1932). This observation, made before the technological influx into the social scene, coined the propinquity effect in which

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF INTERNET USERS, 1996-2005 (PROJECTED)

Millions of People
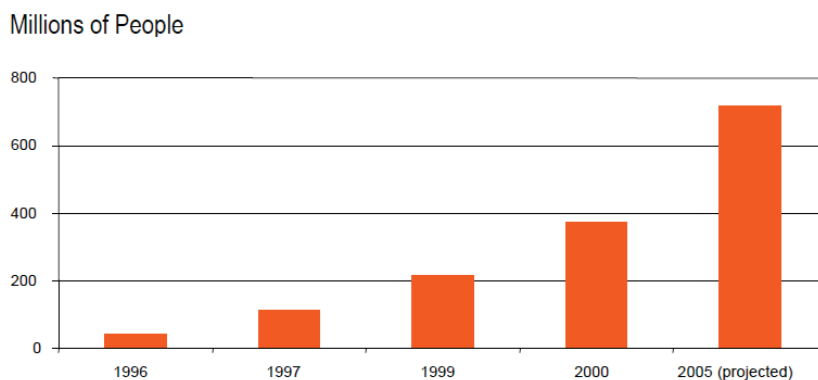
A graphic representation of the rise of online daters.
http://www.nelson.com/nelson/harcourt/sociology/newsociety3e/loveonline.pdf

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people tend to form relationships with those who live physically close to each other. Further research by another psychologist, Clarke, studied the degree to which propinquity mattered in relationships. Their findings suggested that physical proximity relates not only to eventual marriage but is "also present in the meeting and dating patterns of couples" (1952). So what happens to the validity of these profound studies in the wake of the technological age, where dating occurs in a new online society that shatters all previously held boundaries of neighborhoods and horizons?

The popularity of online dating is increasing ever-more rapidly in cultures all over the world, often allowing for intermingling of individuals even at opposite ends of the Earth. The *Report on Online Dating in Canada* by sociologists Brym and Lenton reveals that by the middle of 2000, the seven largest online dating sites on the Internet boasted over 12 million registered members and many more 'guests' or 'visitors'" (2001). Incentives to partake in such sites include the

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"a quarter of online daters misrepresent themselves."

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opportunity to meet people that one would never encounter in person, the convenience of availability just one click-away, and the freedom of privacy and confidentiality. Thus, it now becomes easy to meet people online who might live far away from one's own home. Nonetheless, while in the midst of their online interactions these online daters might still lack a sense of physical sensory closeness.

However, some researchers suggest an evolution into a new kind of closeness called electronic propinquity. This theory alludes to a psychological feeling of nearness that internet users feel towards the ones they communicate with (Korzenny 1978). Thus, even after the disappearance of face-to-face interactions and in-person contact, online users still claim to experience love from a kind of arousal felt via this electronic closeness. However, the degree of this propinquity may differ. For example, a text-based message can be either of low, moderate, or high propinquity based on many different factors. One such factor is the amount of bandwidth, i.e. the number of communication channels, available for the interaction. For example, audio-conferencing and text-messaging would be a lower bandwidth communication than audio-conferencing, text-messaging and video-conferencing because the

former scenario lacks the video-conferencing channel. Two scientists interested in Korzenny's theory of propinquity, Walther and Bazarova, carried out an experiment comparing groups that communicated via audio-conferencing versus another that used visual-conferencing, which is at a higher bandwidth. A third group consisted of a mixed media scenario, where there was a choice of either a high or low bandwidth medium. Participants then gave satisfaction ratings for the people with whom they communicated. A more satisfactory interaction meant greater propinquity. Results were as follows:

1. In both the low bandwidth and the high bandwidth scenarios, propinquity levels were the same. However, in the mixed-media scenario, the perceived propinquity was greater for higher bandwidth due to the psychological effects on the presence of a choice in available media richness. Thus, in the presence of media choices, an awareness of a higher bandwidth available affects propinquity.

2. In either the low bandwidth or the high bandwidth scenarios, propinquity levels were the same regardless of the difficulty of the task. However, in the mixed-media scenario, propinquity levels differed based on the media choice.

3. Despite the difficulty of the task, the communication skills of the user were a huge factor in determining whether the low or high bandwidth will yield greater propinquity in the various scenarios.

Altogether, the findings implicated that, in fact, users of low bandwidth can achieve greater levels of propinquity if they have mastered the communi-

Just a few online dating sites available to love seekers on the internet.
http://www.onlinedatinguk.com/onlinedatingtips/images/online-dating-sites.jpg

cation skills of the low bandwidth media compared to the unskilled users of the high bandwidth media (Bazarova, Natalya and Walther 2008). Thus, just like in offline dating, where verbal communication skills have a great importance between the interactions of two people, so can such skills on a technological level benefit one in one's online dating endeavors.

However, in the lack of such skills, people often resort to incorrect online presentations of themselves in order to persuade the partner's emotions. Brym and Lenton's study reports that "a quarter of online daters misrepresent themselves" (2001). This false self-image can have adverse effects on the prognosis of a long-term relationship. In addition, it is often easier to present such self-selective false images online when communicating through a higher bandwidth media. For example, in having the choice to display images online, online daters can pick and choose pictures that represent a certain aspect of their personality. A lower bandwidth, text-based interaction lacks such opportunities to misrepresent one's image. Thus, lower bandwidth relationships are more likely to have a basis in reality and tend to result in a longer lasting relationship in comparison with a higher bandwidth media, when communication skills variable is fixed. Walther et al's article, *Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words*, reveals the effects of high bandwidth computer-mediated-communication (CMC) on short-term versus long-term online relationships (2001). To do so, some participants saw a picture of the partner, while another group did not. Thus, they measured the effect of exposure to this photograph on the length of the people's relationship. The study found that "CMC partners with time on their side can achieve greater interpersonal outcomes [i.e. higher propinquity and longer lasting relationship] through strictly text-based exchanges than can others using high bandwidth" (Walther et al. 2001). Short-term relationships, however, tend to benefit from such high bandwidth interactions. Perhaps, as previously mentioned, users of high bandwidth media might have been less skilled since digital images and video-conferencing may be relatively recent popular phenomena. Thus, speculations predict that, over time, when people become more experienced and skilled in higher bandwidth interactions, then, perhaps, they might be able to communicate more effectively in this media needing no false representations of themselves, thereby resulting in longer-lasting honest relationships.
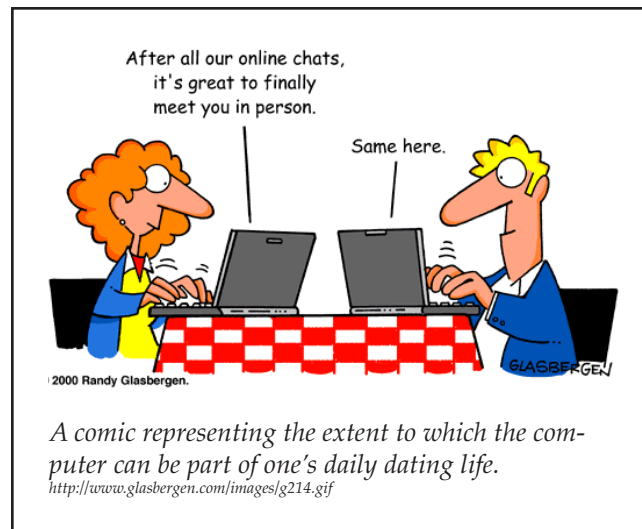
Nevertheless, current doubts about the validity

"technology has redefined how humans conceive relationships"

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of information presented in profiles of online daters are genuine. Even though the electronic propinquity theory overcomes the proximity issue, social psychologists find that the quality and quantity of self-disclosure through written comments and presented images of love seekers on the internet can still tip the balance towards either success or failure in the maintenance of their online relationships. Self-disclosure is the common indicator of the depth and breadth of information exchange (Yum and Hara 1973). This phenomenon, characterized as social penetration theory by Altman and Taylor, who state that more self-disclosure helps individuals to form relationships (1973). However, the internet provides an option for a quick revelation that often is not personal or intimate. As stated by Yum and Hara, "the Internet provides another ideal context for quick self-disclosure in which interactants may break the rules typically governing self-disclosure" (1973). Also noticeable is the finding by Ma that "people who self-disclose in CMC do not appear to have the same level of commitment as those who do it in face-to-face interactions" (1996). Thus one can conclude from these findings that even though relationships can form through online interactions, the level of actual commitment and the validity of the information self-disclosed might be questionable.

Aside from these inaccuracies, the available technology at present still does not compensate for the lack of physical touch. The actual physical universe comprising of physical persons and physical senses constitutes reality. The advance of technology has

A comic representing the extent to which the computer can be part of one's daily dating life.
http://www.glasbergen.com/images/g214.gif

given rise to a warped sense of existence in a cognitive world, which can best be termed the virtual online world. In this world, the presence of thoughts and imaginations residing online is more important than the physical presence of individuals. The basic premise is that because computer-mediated communication lacks cues such as facial expressions, body language, vocal intonation, and physical touching, it is by its very nature a less personal medium (Kiesler et al. 1984; Sproull & Kiesler 1986). Further compounding is the fact that the Internet lacks social presence, or feelings of engaging in a shared physical interpersonal experience (Culnan & Markus 1987; Short, Williams, & Christie 1976). Physical proximity is not essential for developing the new types of relationships anymore. Poets have for long sensationalized love emphasizing proximity to the partner, but modernity will lead them to stumble upon their rhythm now, as computer screens become the communicators of emotions.

Technology is essential in this globalized world to help maintain feelings of belonging and care in people who are being constantly translocated and detached from their past. However, the utilization of technology as the only means to generate new relationships can render it harmful to human emotions, if faked by inaccurate perceptions. This leads one to either question the reality of online relationships or simply accept that initializing relationships through technology is the new way to form them, leading one to conclude that technology has redefined how humans conceive relationships. Believers in online soul mates are now taking charge of their fate by actively participating in the search for their loved one beyond proximal horizons as they enter into the world of online dating, for better or for worse.

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