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“Thanks for writing, but I’m not interested”: A qualitative analysis of men’s experiences of online dating

Abstract.

Research investigating the personal experiences of online daters is currently limited. Moreover, evidence implies that men are likely to experience online dating rather differently to their female counterparts and that this discrepancy warrants further investigation. Eight heterosexual adult males aged 18-60 were interviewed about their experiences of and attitudes to using online dating sites and apps. Data were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. A number of themes were identified from the data, including “necessary but effective online dating”, reflecting the perceived utility of dating sites and their ability to enhance certainty and reduce rejection salience. “Negative impact on self” was revealed through participants’ experiences of online interactions, with participants demonstrating various protective strategies to maintain self-integrity. “Clouded judgements”, insofar as the intentions of other daters were often more difficult to judge accurately, and “frustration”, relating to negative experiences with online dating platforms and the gendered norms within them, were also noted. The last theme was one of “resiliency” which was demonstrated throughout descriptions of participant experiences. Findings provide a rich narrative of the lived experiences of male online daters and the strategies they employ to reap rewards as well as the barriers to success that they incur.

Keywords: Online Dating, Male Perspective, User Experience, Qualitative

1 Introduction

1.1 Online Dating Services

Personal relationships, as manifest in the attraction of an intimate partner, are considered a fundamental aspect of many peoples’ human experience. Intimate partners can facilitate many key life achievements, e.g. having children, and intimate partners can also be a source of social standing and support¹. We also know that there is a significant cost and toll to wellbeing related to pervasive loneliness². Since the introduction of ICTs the inception and development of such relationships has, for many, moved online³. Online dating services (ODS), including dating sites and apps, principally function to assist people to initiate romantic relationships⁴. Some sites are free to join, whilst others charge a fee and claim to offer more bespoke services, for example match-making algorithms. These algorithms, used by sites such as Elite and eHarmony for instance, are a time-saving feature for the user and offer potential matches from the information that they and other daters provide. Other ODS (e.g. Match.com) use ‘see and screen’ methods. In other words, the user is able to select specific criteria based on their own preferences to search for other daters and then choose the individuals with whom they wish to interact. Some ODS, such as OKCupid, use a mixture of both methods⁵. ODS offer convenience, flexibility and the ability to tap into a vast pool of potential partners that one may be unlikely to meet in everyday life. It is easy to see why ODS have become such a popular method for finding love. Indeed, Smith and Anderson⁶ noted that in 2015 15% of all American Internet users had used an online dating site or app. Additionally, they report that the social stigma around using ODS has significantly reduced in recent years, so we should expect ODS to continue to increase in acceptance and popularity. Although relationships flourish for many users following their interactions on ODS, approximately one third of all active online daters report having never progressed to a face-to-face date⁶. It is therefore important to explore the lived experiences of online daters to provide a deeper understanding of the barriers to success as well as how these obstacles to finding love might impact on the self.

1.2 Impression Management in Online Dating

Pivotal to online dating success is impression management, or the various ways in which we can influence the impressions that others form of us⁷. As online dating is about connecting with strangers and initially there is no physical interaction, employing strategic impression management tactics in order to be thought of positively by other daters is common practice⁸. ODS offer daters a great deal of flexibility in how they present themselves to others, for example they may choose a photo which has been edited or put through filters or exaggerate aspects of their appearance, personality or interests in written and visual descriptions to make themselves appear more attractive^{9,10}. Additionally, daters may accentuate more positive aspects of the self, whilst concealing more negative qualities in order to increase their chances of success¹¹ and to compete with other rivals on the site¹². One potential ramification of selective and idealised self-presentation, however, is that this may lead some users to develop unrealistic expectations about what they think they are able achieve via ODS¹³.

Despite the potential to refine certain aspects of one’s online persona, this has to be balanced against the goal of meeting face-to-face. Indeed, online daters will need to walk a fine line between creating desirable yet truthful self-images, in the potential scenario that a face-to-face meeting occurs¹⁴. Profiles which are flagrantly unrealistic tend to be disregarded from the offset and judged as fake¹⁵. Moreover, although there is evidence to suggest that many daters

intentionally misrepresent themselves⁸, in many instances daters may also be subject to self-deception. Indeed, Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs¹⁴ discuss the ‘Foggy mirror’, which highlights the discrepancy between how daters perceive themselves in comparison to how they are assessed by others. Part of the motivation for creating idealised self-images lies in the fact that online daters are acutely aware that physical attractiveness is an important quality in receiving positive attention from other users¹⁶. Males, however, place more value on physical attractiveness than females when evaluating others and in making decisions about whether or not to initiate contact¹⁷.

1.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Dating Online

One of the main perks for joining ODS is that they increase our chances of meeting individuals who may not be contactable in the offline world¹⁸. In traditional forms of dating, having to identify potential partners involves making an assessment of an individual’s relationship status, which can be challenging. Hence, joining a ODS removes this ambiguity to a large degree. ODS are also advantageous in that they are a more convenient and accessible method for screening potential dates, which might be particularly helpful to those who live very busy lives as they have more control over the timing and pace of interactions¹⁹. Another component that makes ODS advantageous is that they can help to soften the blow of rejection, which is particularly beneficial to those who are more sensitive to rejection²⁰. For some males, striking up a conversation with a female offline may be a source of angst, with any rejection potentially being played out in public and thus heightening their embarrassment. Conversing with strangers online helps to alleviate this fear as they do not have to face the online dater in public, thus reducing the potential for loss of face²¹.

Many features of ODS may also result in disadvantages for some users. For example, some members may not know how best to sell themselves, and with abundant competition from other users this can be a daunting task. Indeed, males who were evaluated as cautious in their text were contacted less frequently²². Further, individuals with lower self-esteem may be less inclined to join dating sites for concerns over presenting themselves to multiple individuals simultaneously, therefore they engage in an avoidance strategy to protect their self-worth²³. Research has also found that when fostering a relationship through CMC, conversations between potential daters may halt abruptly without any warning and this tends to be a predominately male experience²⁴. Qualitative data from male online daters demonstrates a level of uncertainty around the reasons why communications sometimes cease, with some users indicating that they had already disclosed personal information and were under the impression that the conversation was going well²⁴. Although abrupt endings to communications may come as a surprise to male users, females are more likely to receive messages more abundantly. Unlike males, who need to be proactive to initiate contact, females are able to be more discerning in who they interact with as they have more choice^{24,25}. Further, it could be argued that through being inundated with messages, some females may develop an exaggerated sense of value and perceived desirability from the attention garnered²¹.

In contrast to face-to-face communication, where obvious or subtle body language cues (e.g. avoidance of eye contact) may signal disinterest, this is not always easy to gauge through CMC¹⁰. This can be elucidated by cues-filtered-out theory²⁶ which purports that this ambiguity may result in a more limited ability to interpret the meaning of behaviour due to the absence or attenuation of contextual cues and non-verbal signals²⁷. As interactions take place with strangers, severing contact online can be done with very few repercussions to the individual. In contrast, in a face-to-face scenario this might be harder to do, as it may be perceived as breaking social etiquette, thought of as rude, and the person would likely be appraised negatively²⁴.

Relying on attributional cues, which are present in private messages and on daters’ profiles, is the primary method for evaluating compatibility before meeting face-to-face. Because people can communicate online with less inhibition²⁸, this can lead to heightened self-disclosure and a swifter process for the revelation of personal and intimate information²⁹. Ultimately, it is argued that may also result in some daters developing a false sense of intimacy²⁹, which may lead to unrealistic expectations of one other. In addition, misread cues, such as humour, which is postulated to be a predictor of intelligence and can play a pivotal role in fostering bonds that equate to dating success, may be exaggerated through CMC and not always translate to face-to-face communication³⁰. Leary and Kowalski³¹ propose that this occurs because what we are actually doing is interacting with the impression that we have formed of the person, rather than the person him or herself, per se. This may lead to discrepancies when meeting face-to-face and could result in disappointment with the date. As a consequence, often another date is not pursued, as judgement to suitability has been clouded, and in some cases the spark or chemistry that was present in CMC may not transpose to a face-to-face date. This can result in the whole process having to be repeated again and could lead to feelings of frustration, or people removing themselves from ODS altogether²⁴.

1.5 The Current Study

The literature reviewed suggests that heterosexual men and women experience online dating rather differently. It has been argued that females are at an advantage on online dating sites, having a far greater chance of meeting a potential

romantic partner from the offset²². Males not only outnumber females, but they are more active on ODS and this is put forward as one of the contributing factors to why females receive significantly more messages than males; men are essentially competing with other men in an arena that is male-dominated^{22,32}. Males initiate more contacts²¹ and need to send out on average 58 messages (compared to 13 for females in the same age bracket) in order to get a response³³. Further, as men may experience a lack of feedback in ODS, encountering a void of communication, many will develop a fear of rejection and gain concerns that they are undesirable, and in frustration they may experiment with varying communication styles to see if they can excite responses²⁴. Masden and Edwards³⁴ interviewed OkCupid and Tinder users and also found, in support of Zytko et al.'s²⁴ findings, that frustration was a central theme. They concluded that men receive considerably fewer messages than women, but did not provide a detailed evaluation of how this might impact on the self, and this study intends to build on this limitation.

Implications of the online dating experience for self-esteem will also be explored in this study. Impacts of rejection in the dating arena for male daters will be considered in relation to self-affirmation theory³⁵, which focuses on the manner in which people adapt to experiences or information which might threaten self-worth in order to maintain self-integrity. This current exploratory research study intends to build on and develop the research and theories discussed, and explore online dating from the male's perspective through the narrative of the male experience, by exploring the following research questions:

RQ1: How do men experience online dating and how does this compare to their experiences of more traditional dating?

RQ2: What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using online dating services from the viewpoint of men?

RQ3: How do men use online dating services to connect with others?

RQ4: Do men's experience with online dating services link to their self-evaluations and subjective well-being?

2 Method

2.1 Participants

A purposive, opportunity sample of 8 heterosexual males were recruited into the study. Inclusion criteria included being active on ODS within 2 years of participation and being at least 18 years of age. Participants' ages ranged from 18-60 with a mean age of 39.40 years. Participants were recruited through social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter and via the University of Wolverhampton's participant pool.

2.2 Approach and Procedure

To address the research questions, an exploratory qualitative approach was utilised, underpinned by a post-positivist epistemology³⁶. Specifically, we conducted interviews with 8 heterosexual males in order to gather insights into their attitudes to and experiences of using ODS. An interview approach was deemed more appropriate than focus groups given the private and personal nature of the topic. Interviews were expected therefore to elicit more candid and authentic responses.

Following ethical approval for the project being gained from The University of Wolverhampton Ethics Committee, interviews were conducted between December 2016 and February 2017 over the telephone (N=3) or face-to-face (N=5), depending on the participant's preference. In the first instance, an information sheet was given to the participant, detailing the aims of the study, and informed consent was sought. The interview followed a semi-structured format, asking opened-ended questions such as 'what in your opinion are the main advantages or disadvantages to using online dating sites?' and 'has online dating had an impact on how you evaluate yourself?' Probes were used to motivate participants to elaborate in more detail on their personal experiences. For example, for the question 'tell me about your experience of online dating', participants were probed with follow-up questions such as 'before using online dating sites what was your attitude or understanding of them?' and 'tell me a little about why you choose to use online dating sites?' At the end of the interview the participants were given the chance to feedback anything they thought relevant to their experience that had not been explored. All of the interviews were audio-recorded using a Dictaphone. Upon completion of the interview, participants were debriefed and provided with contact details of the research team should they have any questions or wish to withdraw from the study.

2.3 Data Analysis

Interviews lasted between 17:39 and 85:02 minutes (mean = 42:01 minutes; S.D = 22:51). The interviews were transcribed verbatim, imported into NVivo and analysed by a single member of the research team using Thematic Analysis. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. The analysis followed the process

recommended by Braun and Clarke³⁷, which included: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. An inductive approach was employed thereby allowing the data to structure the analysis through the interpretations of the researcher. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, the themes developed by the principal coder were checked and verified by the other two members of the research team with any inconsistencies and themes identified refined through discussion. Also, a copy of the transcript of the interview was provided to two of the participants to feedback for accuracy. Both participants felt the transcripts accurately reflected the interview and their experiences of online dating. In addition, a member-checking process was implemented to enhance confirmability of the analysis. Three participants were offered a summary of the findings, and confirmed that the themes emerging from the analysis accurately represented and summarised their experiences. Two participants gave written feedback and one provided feedback verbally.

3 Results and Discussion

Analysis resulted in five central themes of ‘Necessary but effective online dating’ (including the subthemes ‘utility of ODS’, ‘enhanced certainty’ and ‘reduced rejection salience’), ‘Frustration’ (including the sub-themes ‘attitudes to dating sites’ and ‘gendered norms’), ‘Clouded judgements’ (including the subthemes ‘initial investment’ and ‘physical and interpersonal incongruence’), ‘Negative impact on self’ (including the sub-theme ‘strategies to protect the self’) and ‘Resiliency’. These themes will each be discussed in turn.

3.1 Necessary but Effective Online Dating

Speaking to the utility of ODS, all interviewees regarded online dating as a superior method for finding a potential partner, compared to more traditional ways of meeting. The more traditional route was roundly discounted by participants as not being a valid option to attain dating success.

“Without dating apps what other way is there?” (Ben, 39)

“Everybody’s online so you give it a go” (David, 47)

The effectiveness of ODS was also considered in relation to being able to connect with a wider network of potential dates, whilst being able to search for individuals on the characteristics which were deemed important to the user.

“You know, it makes it really easy to sort of filter out a lot of people and even wider than your current circle” (Charlie, 22)

Part of what made ODS effective was the numerous advantages that it offered to members. Largely, these advantages reflect what has already been discussed in the research literature¹⁸⁻²¹. For example, using dating sites/apps allows one to speak to numerous individuals simultaneously, therefore increasing the odds of finding a connection.

“Yeah, but, I mean - This is one thing I’ve found - I mean, I’ve spoken to probably thousands of people” (Charlie, 22)

ODS also allow users to interact with individuals who one would have been unlikely to meet in the offline world.

“Well, definitely wouldn’t have met her in our day to day life because obviously, like we wouldn’t have come in contact with each other” (Seb, 44)

ODS offered participants the flexibility to access other single people where and when they liked, and this convenience was seen as a major advantage, for example Tom (60) enjoyed the ability to “*dip in and out*” when it suited him.

The overriding motivation for using ODS was to make connections which could lead to dates and many participants indicated that they were not meeting single females in their offline lives, for example because they were too busy with work and family commitments.

“You’re busy with work. I’m working full time, so it’s like easy access to hundreds of people, that’s why” (Lucas, 35).

Most had no desire to go to bars or pubs with the intent of seeking a partner.

“So it’s trying to find something that fit in with my lifestyle rather than me hanging around in city bars” (Tom, 60)

Some of the males spoke of struggles establishing the relationship status of females in their offline lives and referred to this being a barrier to initiating contact offline. Using ODS therefore enhanced the certainty around the availability of the women they were seeking to make a connection with, at the same time ensuring that one's time was not wasted in the process of attempting to discover this information.

“Well, at least the people who were on that (ODS) are looking for a relationship. So that, you know...because people you meet in your daily life, you don't know if they're in a relationship or not” (Bertie, 50)

While some participants extended no adverse feelings towards ODS, for others there was some reluctance to participate, for example because it was considered a more “*impersonal*” (David, 47) method of interacting with potential dates, linking to cues-filtered-out theory²⁶ and the notion that it may be more difficult to express and interpret the emotional tone of messages in the absence of non-verbal communication cues. Despite this, all participants considered online dating sites as a necessary way to meet women in contemporary society.

Appropriate etiquette around approaching and seeking information about the relationship status of women in their offline lives was a concern for some participants, particularly those with professional careers. There was also some fear of embarrassment around having to interact again in the future with women who may have spurned their advances. Thus, using ODS was seen as removing this risk of embarrassment or public rejection. For instance, Tom (60) indicated that it was easier to talk to women on ODS as there were some assurances of them being single and this was preferable to “*doing things in a big, um, sort of public social arena.*” In comparison to face-to-face communication, ODS therefore offer a reduced sense of risk of rejection, including a reduction in the emotional impact of rejection. Rejecting or being rejected was also considered to be easier on ODS in comparison to face-to-face contexts, not just because the rejection wouldn't be played out publically, but because it decreases any consequences of dealing with the rejecter/rejected in one's offline life.

3.2 Frustration

All participants spoke of their frustrations around using dating sites and apps and this accords with the research of Zytko et al.²⁴ and Masden and Edwards³⁴ which also uncovered frustration as central theme in the male online dating experience. One area of contention which aroused anger and a sense of inequity centred on feelings that men were being coerced into paying for the full functions of dating sites, whereas women were not.

“From a male's perspective, from my perspective, it's hard enough trying to get people to respond to you at the best of times, let alone being limited to only talking to five people a day and then only being able to message those that you match with. And it makes you feel like you've got to pay. It's like, I'm not paying to speak to people.” (Charlie, 22)

Some sites, such as Match.com, encourage men to pay for add-ons that allow them to contact all users (including members who do not have a paid subscription). Men far outnumber women on dating sites³², and may feel obliged to pay because the assumption would be that other males will do the same. Women on the other hand may feel less obliged to pay for subscriptions under the assumption that men will make every effort to initiate contact with them²¹. This predicament was summed up by Ben (39):

“Match.com, uh, well I registered myself probably in August last year, and it's free. But it's quite easy to fall into its, of uh, paying a subscription.”

An additional facet to this experience is that sites which restrict users' choices and ask for payment, often give the notion that paying will result in greater success (e.g. as they are not competing against males that do not pay). Hence, this may give the potentially false impression that they are reducing the competitive field³⁸, which may account to why some males self-select to pay such a premium. This unfavourable treatment revealed a feeling of frustration for participants. This was supported and furthered by David (47) who felt that through his experience of Elite singles, where he paid a premium to get the complete bespoke service that he deemed as “*absolutely hopeless*”, and considered no better than the free sites he was also using. Moreover, he also voiced suspicion at this site, expressing mistrust in their motivation to make money.

“So, they gonna do everything they can and I don't just trust them really”

This account also hints at the notion of a level of entitlement, in other words the expectation of results based on payment for a service.

Frustration was also expressed concerning how men and women were assigned to unspoken gender norms and roles, which resonates with a very traditional idea of dating offline, deriving from and supporting the evolutionary perspective³⁹. Although the Internet should be a great leveller and a socially liberating environment in which to contest stereotypical gender norms, the experiences of these male participants suggests otherwise. When it came to initiating contact, instigating dates, and in some cases paying for all of the dates, participants considered that this was the 'expected' role of the man. Nearly all of the participants spoke of frustration with regard to how the onus appears always to be on the male to approach females.

"Like, you know, the typical way it works is that men will send out tonnes of messages to women. Women will then choose and pick the ones that they want to respond to" (Charlie, 22)

Corroborating prior literature³⁴, two participants had never experienced a female ever initiating contact with them. For example Bertie (50) indicated:

"Yeah, well I don't think anyone ever even initiated a single conversation with me"

Two other participants found that it was a rare occurrence to be contacted by women on ODS. For example, Lucas (35) noted:

"No very rare, it's always the man, not the woman"

The lack of females initiating contact had, as a consequence, left many of the males at a loss as to why this was happening and participants realised quite quickly that if they were going to have any success that they needed to be proactive in creating this for themselves.

"This is the 21st century and women can chase too. But, uh, there are women out there who actually are so old-fashioned - that they expect the man to come forth, to chat them up and do everything and it's really frustrating to gauge whether the woman is interested or not" (Ben, 39).

Moreover, participants expressed a level of frustration with initiating countless communications, but rarely receiving a response. Even when responses were forthcoming, they were often generic pre-selected messages. Nonetheless, these replies were still appreciated, because at the very least they inferred some sort of acknowledgement that the message had been received, therefore reducing uncertainty around whether or not someone was actually at the other end of the profile.

"Most of them you wouldn't strike up a conversation, but every now and then one would reply and say, 'Thanks for writing but I'm not interested,' which is nice because 9 out of 10 weren't doing that" (Bertie, 50).

3.3 Clouded Judgments

Participants noted that some of the cues on ODS, for example photographs or characteristics of the online daters they were interested in, were clouded by the medium of the Internet. Hence, this affected the outcome of their interactions impacting on dating success, as judgements about potential compatibility of dates were sometimes difficult to ascertain correctly. Moreover, when meeting face-to-face, this often resulted in disappointment. Lucas (35) recounted one such experience:

"I didn't get on with her at all. And she wasn't anything like um, what I thought she was going to be. And then I had to do the awkward um, 'No I'm just gonna to go home,' [laughs]"

Inferring accurate impressions of other daters is pivotal to successful use of ODS. Participants had to make informed decisions about who they were going to try to strike up a dialogue with from a vast array of potential choices. All participants spoke about a dialogue being built up, sometimes "*for weeks*" (Seb, 44), before the face-to-face meeting took place, therefore an initial investment was built up, leading to increased frustration when they didn't hit it off in the flesh.

"Already, I could tell she doesn't look like her pictures but I stopped for a moment I double backed and see if I go through with it. I am a gentleman. I say I haven't done that yet. I will go on a date, take her for a drink see how it goes" (Ben, 39)

The rapport that was fostered online did not always transfer to the initial first date. For example, Ben (39) discussed one particular incident:

“This woman for me to be able to go on a date with, uh, we must have had common ground. There must have been something funny about her. We just had a dialogue going. But it just didn’t click to see her in the flesh and the way she acted.”

These experiences resonate with previous work suggesting that online communications can sometimes lead to a false sense of intimacy, perhaps because the disinhibited nature of cyberspace results in the swifter revelation of more intimate and personal disclosures, yet the level of mutual trust and knowledge might not have been built up to sustain the relationship at that level of intimacy²⁹.

The physical and interpersonal incongruence of how daters are perceived online versus offline might also be accounted for with reference to impression management theory. For instance, one has the potential to polish one’s online persona and create optimal self-presentations because of the idiosyncratic features of cyberspace. For example, with reference to Walther’s hyperpersonal theory of CMC⁴⁰, users can create a more favourable presence due to editability (e.g. the ability to choose which photos frame the person in the most attractive light) and asynchronicity (e.g. the ability to edit messages to perfection because communication does not take place in real time). Thus, some daters may be presenting an idealised self, or being strategic in their self-presentation, but meeting face-to-face violates expectations and the connection made through CMC might be regarded as contrived.

In particular, participants considered the photograph to be highly valued in terms of making judgements as to whether to make an initial contact with daters. All participants placed importance on the photograph, as they all felt that physical attraction was part of the decision-making for whether or not they contacted someone.

“You want someone that you’re attracted to. I think that’s been my dating factor that the first point is, someone that you’re attracted to” (Lucas, 35)

What emerged as one of the most contentious issues for participants was the notion that many of them had experienced dates with individuals who did not look like their images online. David (47) for instance noted:

“I mean, I had one date last year and her photograph was about ten years old”

This topic induced an array of responses from participants: annoyance, confusion, humour, and concern that they would not recognise individuals on a first date. The participants quickly understood through their experiences that self-enhancement was a common occurrence in the online dating world.

“Only a woman can do it as well as they do. Uh, it’s so deceptive. You meet them in the flesh and sometimes you say, oh, jeez you don’t look like your pictures” (Ben, 39)

For the most part participants did not think that these daters were intentionally trying to deceive, but rather were trying to present their ‘ideal’ self rather than their ‘actual’ self. For instance, Bertie (50) indicated:

“Yeah, but I’m not saying that they are being deliberately, you know, deliberately misleading. I just think they have just chosen perhaps a-- because you’re on there trying to sell yourself and choose a flattering photo, and it might be a couple of years older.”

Although it has been argued that employing self-enhancement tactics needs to be mitigated by the goal of meeting face-to-face¹⁴, this does not necessarily reflect the experiences of the participants in this study, who reported abundant self misrepresentations of others. Consequently, instead of treating the date like a ‘date’, it was more often used as a continuation of the initial impression formation process and could feel like starting from scratch.

“It’s like I have to start again, whether I have- okay, I have already made up my mind whether I like the look of you, but here I am, I have to make that decision again” (Ben, 39)

3.4 Negative Impact on Self

The theme of ‘negative impact on self’ was salient for the majority of the participants and included the sub-theme ‘strategies to protect the self’. Throughout the participants’ narratives, detailed encounters of numerous situations were provided where threats to the self were mentioned. These threats ranged in depth and prevalence, but what was clear is that being an active member of an ODS makes users vulnerable to a variety of different adverse behaviours. For example, many participants indicated that messages they had sent had been deleted without being read, others noted that they had

gone for long periods of time without receiving replies, while some recounted personal stories of communications ceasing suddenly and with no explanation. For example, Lucas (35) noted:

“You might be messaging someone and you think it’s going really well, and you think the conversation’s going well, and they just disappear. I guess they didn’t think the same”

The need to belong is a fundamental human drive⁴¹, so it is not surprising that encounters such as this might negatively impact on one’s self-concept. Indeed, Lucas (35) further noted that fears of being appraised negatively would sometimes lead to him deactivating the app to remove the threat source.

“Yeah, definitely, there’s been a few times where I deleted it because I thought I just needed a break away from it”

When discussing their experiences, participants highlighted how such encounters could undermine their confidence in themselves and their interpersonal interactions online.

“So it kind of knocks your confidence” (Charlie, 22)

“You just come over in some way as being somebody who is um, not- not of personal interest or undesirable I suppose, in that respect” (David, 47)

Participant accounts spoke of the dehumanising effect of receiving limited interest from others and the damaging impact this could have on one’s self-esteem. For instance, Ben (39) noted:

“I don’t have many matches on Tinder basically. I was thinking, okay, why are things drying up, now that people, other women are recognising my face? They’re fed up of seeing it? And not bothered by it and oh ‘it’s him again’ and thinking that this is why they swipe left. Are they thinking that my bio is no good?”

Despite the negative ramifications for the self, participants also rationalised the behaviour of others as a coping strategy to minimise the negative attributional implications for the self. David (47) for example shifted the blame on to the technology itself:

“I think the Internet enables rudeness in a way that you don’t get in the real life”

Indeed, previous research has argued that there are few ramifications for the individual who is ceasing communications online because the individual they are cutting contact with is unlikely to be known to them in the offline world²². It may be easier to distance ourselves emotionally from someone who is on the other side of a screen because their physical reactions, including their sense of disappointment, are essentially invisible to us, making it easier to see them as *less human*²⁸.

Protective strategies were evident throughout participants’ narratives. Drawing on self-affirmation theory³⁵, it was clear that many participants attempted to reframe rejection in such a way as to maintain self-integrity. David (47) for example, bolstered his own self-worth by implying that he wasn’t like all of the other men on the site.

“Um, I think that um-- I think it’s had a positive impact in as much as I am quite pleased that I am not the kind of person who, as a man-- I am quite pleased, as I see it, I am not a typical man on a dating site”.

Self-affirmations occurred through participants looking at these experiences in a broader sense. Subsequently, they were able to distance themselves from the situation by taking value from their own personal characteristics and strengths, making healthy adjustments when faced with setbacks. Nate (18) for instance stated:

“So, if something happened like that, I’m just, I will just sort of get over it real quick and just carry on with what I’m doing”

Therefore, this indicates that behavioural adjustments had taken place, thereby reducing investments and expectations of future contact.

Some participants also expressed personal growth through adversity, improving personal outcomes, bolstering their sense of self-worth and strengthening their identity. For instance, Ben (39) discussed the following example:

“If I hadn’t been as, if I hadn’t been as shit online dating as I am- then I wouldn’t have been as, as confident the way I’ve, er, um, pitched myself. You know, if I just found the first woman that came along and just clicked immediately- just settled, but I

would've been the same all old Ben as before”.

3.5 Resiliency

All of the males interviewed were not only at different stages in the lifespan, but at different cycles in their online dating journey. Two were in relationships with individuals they had met on online dating sites, and one was currently single and debating whether or not to re-join. Emerging from this narrative was a central theme of ‘resiliency’ that was prevalent throughout the discourse.

Psychological resiliency is a complex and multifaceted characteristic that promotes positive adaption when presented with adversity and stress⁴². The participants in this study had very different life experiences, for example some had gone through a divorce or a relationship break-up. In addition, there were individual differences in protective factors such as personal, familial and social safe guards, although participants were united in their goal of seeking dates and potential partners. In trying to achieve this goal, all of the participants experienced some degree of adversity, such as dates that went badly or being ignored by others on the sites they were using. Often they were left to ponder why they were not having the dating experience they desired, experiencing a negative impact on self-evaluations.

“I was feeling a little bit down beat you see” (Ben, 39)

“There’s been a few times where I deleted it because I thought I just needed a break away from it. And if you're sending messages to people and you get no reply you start to think ‘huh, well why?’” (Lucas, 35)

Although most of the participants experienced some degree of success, adversity was the prevailing theme. While recounting their negative experiences, this aroused humour and laughter from many of the participants. Thus, positive emotions were present alongside negative emotions. This was true for David (47) who out of all the males interviewed appeared to find the experience the most unpleasant, but did not let the experience define him:

“I don’t have a high opinion of them and I don’t have a good experience but I don’t think it’s affected me in my view of who I am”

All participants utilised positive adaptive coping strategies, being flexible, remaining optimistic, and displaying competence in their beliefs⁴³

“And so, you know, there are successes to be had” (Bertie, 50).

They remained motivated, exhibiting stamina and tenacity rather than maladaptive strategies, garnering resilience throughout their ODS experience rather than ruminating over the rejection. For example, Charlie (22) noted:

“For me, if someone is not interested no, I’ve learned over my periods on that. If someone is not interested, that’s it. Move on”

3.6. Conclusions and future directions

This exploratory and novel study has provided rich insights into the lived experiences of heterosexual male online daters. The five central themes which emerged from participants’ narratives have elucidated on the bifurcation which is said to exist in how the sexes experience online dating. The participants in this study provided accounts suggesting that men are likely to encounter frequent disadvantages in their quest to seek love online, with numerous barriers to their successful use of these sites. Moreover, these barriers have also been described as sources of frustration, potentially impacting on the dater’s self-perceptions. However, what was also clear is that ODS offered opportunities to meet a partner that were simply not available to them offline, making ODS an enticing and compelling option regardless of the negative ramifications of site membership. Inaccuracies in self presentation identified when online relationships move offline may serve to undermine initial benefits of ODS and lead to frustrations. Despite the negative connotations however, there was also evidence of resiliency, personal growth and tenacity among the participants enabling them to stay true to themselves and persist with online dating, despite the obvious challenges of ‘playing the game’.

Future research may wish to delve further into the psychological impacts of the online dating experience for heterosexual men. Much of the research which has been conducted to date has utilised cross-sectional survey designs. Gathering data from users over the course of their online dating journey should permit insights into which specific parts of the dating cycle are likely to cause the most distress and threats to self-worth. For example, although fledgling members may be characterised by a sense of optimism, experience of multiple rejections may impact negatively on the individual’s psychological wellbeing. It may also be interesting to investigate potential relationships between male

misogyny and persistent experiences of being ignored and rejected on dating sites. Dating sites should also consider addressing the inequity in subscription fees between the sexes. Those which encourage men to purchase add-ons are likely to be met with dissatisfaction from their male demographic. Moreover, there may be some utility in offering online daters opportunities to verify the accuracy of the online personas of other daters prior to arranging a meeting (e.g. via video chat facilities) to ameliorate a smoother transition from online to offline. ODS may also consider taking a leaf out of the book of Bumble, a dating site which encourages women to make the first move. Although this research has prioritised the heterosexual male experience, there is both the scope and need to look at the experiences of heterosexual females and online daters from the LGBTQ community, who might experience online dating very differently.

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