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Recommended Citation

Dibble, Jayson L and McDaniel, Brandon T. PhD, "Romance and Dating in the Digital Age: Impacts of Computer-Mediated Communication and a Global Pandemic." (2021). *Health Services and Informatics Research*. 55.

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Romance and Dating in the Digital Age: Impacts of Computer-Mediated Communication and a Global Pandemic

Jayson L. Dibble, PhD^{1,i} and Brandon T. McDaniel, PhD^{2,ii}

SCHOLARS HAVE DESCRIBED communication to be the currency, if not the lifeblood, of human relationships in general and romantic relationships more specifically. Through communication romantic relationships are solicited, established, maintained, and dissolved. For example, if prospective partners are to find one another, they must first communicate their desire and availability for romance. With a centuries-long history of intertwining between communication mediums and pursuit of romance—even the earliest newspapers included personal sections¹—it was no surprise when the Internet and digital technologies became coopted for love and sexual expression. In short, whatever uses people may have for digital technology, romance and sex are clearly among them.

Furthermore, the relationship between digital technology and romance has shown considerable staying power. The online dating company Match.com in 2020 celebrated its 25th anniversary, and more than half of Americans claimed recently that online dating is a very or somewhat safe way to meet romantic prospects.²

Uses and gratifications approaches prioritize the user's agency to choose how and why they will consume media.³ To those in search of romance and/or sex, digital tools afford a variety of conveniences. For example, online daters appreciate the ease and efficiency of online searching (vs. offline efforts such as visiting bars and waiting for prospects to enter their lives) and the ability to search across wide geographical regions (which expands options beyond local social circles). Online dating websites replicated quickly in scaled-down forms with the advent of smartphones. Smartphones can run specialized dating applications (apps), and the smartphone's small size and portability facilitate greater discretion and privacy than, for example, speaking aloud into a telephone.

Simultaneously, demographic changes in dating and marriage have occurred, impacting the demand for digital platforms related to romance. For example, in the United States the millennial generation trails prior generations of the same age in marriage rates and birth rates, with more than half of millennials being unmarried and those who got married doing so later in life. Similarly, millennial women who gave birth did so at a later age than did previous generations.

In addition, partly for financial reasons, more adults are opting for cohabitation without getting married.⁴ Apps such as Tinder and Grindr, for straight and gay audiences, respectively, filled a void by inviting users to seek commitment (if that was their goal) or to explore casual sexual relationships and experiences, the latter perhaps enabling people more easily to remain focused on their careers while simultaneously pursuing certain sexual desires.

Despite affordances, the combination of digital mediums and romance has not been without negatives. For individuals, online dating opens users to deception and harassment in forms such as lying to prospects to make themselves appear more desirable, using fake profiles to scam others, and receiving sexually explicit messages or images they did not ask for.⁵ These and other factors have combined to lead about half of adults in the United States to conclude that dating overall has become more difficult in the past decade.⁶ Within relationships, computer-mediated channels have been linked to jealousy, infidelity, relationship uncertainty, and intimate partner violence.

Because digital technologies can facilitate both benefits and harms to individuals and relationships, researchers began to study their impacts. Theory development soon followed. To illustrate, Joseph Walther in 1996 published a model of hyperpersonal communication.⁷ Compared with face-to-face (FTF) communication, early computer-mediated communication (CMC) was sparser on nonverbal cues with which interactants could derive meaning, and this creates an exaggerated experience known as hyperpersonal communication. In romantic settings, hyperpersonal communication, compared with FTF communication, inflates perceptions of relationship satisfaction, invites overidealizing one's partner, and drives deeper and more rapid self-disclosure.

Subsequent testing has supported the hyperpersonal model. However, the model is 25 years old, and CMC has changed dramatically since the early days of typing text-only that appeared in monochrome or an otherwise black monitor. Platforms such as Skype and Zoom have emerged, and these have reshaped the communication landscape. For example, the communication over these platforms occurs synchronously and marked improvements in video resolution

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combine to resemble in many ways FTF interactions. Now that lovers can engage in videoconferencing, is selective self-presentation still as opportune? With more cues available with which to infer meaning, are recipients still as likely to overidealize their partner?

In other words, is the hyperpersonal experience still as hyperpersonal? A goal of this special issue was to invite scholars and theorists to revisit and reappraise our earliest theories about relationships and CMC to determine the ever-green aspects as well as aspects that may warrant revision.

Having already mentioned videoconferencing, our special issue would be remiss not to acknowledge the global COVID-19 pandemic that gained worldwide attention in early 2020. Seemingly overnight, municipalities shuttered their workplaces, schools, entertainment outlets, and more, and enforced stay-at-home orders and lockdowns in hopes of stopping the spread of the novel coronavirus. Given that humans are by nature a social species, we anticipate these physical isolation measures to have ramifications for people's social well-being. The pandemic triggered us to invite scholarship that addressed impacts of the pandemic on the demands for CMC by romantic partners and would-be daters. For example, anecdotal reports abound of daters making their first overtures to dating prospects and even observing their first dates over Zoom.

We open the special issue with a study from the United States that extends and updates Walther's hyperpersonal model to the situation of a third-party observer, known here as the hyperperceptual model. Researchers from the United States sampled noncollege adults, most of whom were married, to examine impacts of gaining covert access, during stay-at-home orders, to a romantic partner's mobile digital device on jealousy and relationship uncertainty. A study from the United States and Netherlands utilized an international sample of 1,676 Ashley Madison users and applied evolutionary theorizing to digital behavior while exploring links between online infidelity, mate poaching intentions, and the likelihood of meeting offline. Scholars from Austria and Germany presented an analysis framed by the general aggression model to understand cyber dating abuse. U.S. researchers uncovered four latent profiles of behaviors that characterize ways people utilize social media and experience distress after a romantic breakup, whereas other scholars from the United States studied implications of keeping ex-partners as back burners (i.e., potential romantic partners with whom people communicate, often digitally, to establish a future romantic or sexual relationship). A study from China applied media richness theory and social penetration theory to investigate mobile digital communications, love attitudes, and subsequent relationship quality. Social exchange theory and sexual scripts theory were applied in a mixed-methods study by a U.S. researcher to examine changes in dating app use by young adults in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, a collaborative longitudinal study from the United

States, Czech Republic, and Ireland examined digital technology use, self-isolation, and romantic relationship quality among adolescents during COVID-19 lockdowns. This collection of articles revisits extant theories and extends them to the digital domain, sharpens understanding of the impact of digital communication technologies on romance outcomes—both beneficial and detrimental—for individuals and relationships, and addresses influences on romance and dating brought by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

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