
Frustrations with Pursuing Casual Encounters through Online Dating

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Abstract

Many users of online dating systems have a multitude of relationship goals including casual encounters. However, most studies of online dating systems have focused exclusively on users' abilities to find long-term relationships. This has restricted our understanding of how to design systems for users that have multiple relationship goals. To address this gap in understanding we explored how people use online dating systems in regards to casual encounters. We did this through an interview study with users of a popular online dating system in the United States and a study of online dating coaches who give behavioral advice specific to the pursuit of casual encounters. Findings highlight how users subtly disguise and probe for openness to casual encounters, while coaches try to overcome ambiguities in user intentions through a series of targeted dating methods.

Author Keywords

Online dating; impression management; romance

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H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

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Introduction

Members of the online dating user-community search for partners to satisfy a variety of relationship experiences including marriage, long-term relationships, and casual sexual encounters. However, existing online dating research has focused primarily on how to support people in finding long-term partners. As a result, the challenges facing online daters who may seek partners for alternative relationship experiences have been under-reported and our understanding of how to design systems to support the broader user-community has been highly constrained.

To start to address this gap in knowledge this work-in-progress focuses on user behavior in online dating systems regarding casual encounters. First, we discuss findings from an interview study with users of a popular online dating system in the United States about their online behavior concerning casual sexual encounters. We then discuss preliminary findings from a study of online dating coaches, many of whom give behavioral advice specific to casual encounter pursuits.

Study 1: Openness to Casual Encounters in Online Dating Systems

It is no secret that some people use online dating systems to consciously pursue casual sexual encounters [1]. Several popular online dating systems—like *OkCupid* and *Plenty of Fish*—let users select casual encounters as an explicit relationship goal in their profiles, and others like *Tinder* and *Grindr* have their reputations forged upon this relationship goal [1]. While previous studies have looked at how online daters self-present to and evaluate other users online [3], research has seldom investigated this behavior specific to casual encounters.

Method

We conducted an interview study of 41 users (20 male and 21 female) of a popular free online dating system in the United States that lets users select casual encounters as a relationship goal in their profiles. Twenty-eight of the interviews were conducted in-person, and 13 were conducted via *Skype*. All participants were recruited through the online dating system's search feature and were active users at the time of interviewing. The desire for, or openness to, casual encounters was not a criterion during participant selection, but was rather discovered during interviews. Twenty-seven of the 41 participants explicitly stated they were open to casual sex or recounted instances when they desired or engaged in casual sex with a fellow online dater.

Results

This study yielded three findings regarding online daters and casual encounters: 1) they were often open to multiple relationship experiences, 2) they attempted to disguise their openness to casual encounters online, and 3) they struggled to evaluate potential partners' openness to these encounters.

MULTIPLE, SIMULTANEOUS RELATIONSHIP GOALS

A majority of participants in this study were open to more than one type of relationship experience. Openness to long-term relationships and casual encounters were seldom mutually exclusive—it was not uncommon for participants to discuss meeting or wanting to meet users for long-term relationships while still being open to casual sexual encounters (see quotes from Linda and Arnold in side bar). Participants also tended to have a different relationship goal for each user they were interested in. Female participants, in

Quotes from study 1

Linda, 19: *"I'm not opposed to a [long-term] relationship if it feels natural, but I'm not actively looking for one."*

Arnold, 24: *"I don't really have a relationship goal [laughter]. I'm looking for dating and sex."*

Amanda, 29: *"If I'm just looking to hook up that night, we'll meet up faster. It depends what I'm looking for [with a particular user of interest]."*

Winona, 25: *"I was just looking for people to hang out with [for casual encounters], but now I'm looking for a serious relationship because I'm getting older."*

Bertha, 22: *"I want a meat market to go through [...] but I don't like it when [messaging] gets immediately sexual. [...] I don't like it when they talk to me like that."*

particular, recounted some male users they only wanted a casual encounter with, and others that they pursued only for a long-term relationship (see Amanda's quote in the side bar). Additionally, relationship goals were seldom static. Some participants discussed how they initially signed up for the online dating system with casual encounter motivations, but have since become more interested in long-term relationship prospects (see quote from Winona in side bar).

DISGUIISING OPENNESS CASUAL SEX

The online dating system studied allows users to explicitly list casual encounters as one of their relationship goals in a "looking for..." section of their profiles. However, no participant selected this option, even if they were open to casual encounters. Participants felt it was inappropriate to disclose their openness to casual encounters, either in profile pages or during private messaging, because it would negatively impact their ability to achieve their relationship goals. Female users feared being judged and "slut shamed" by men on the system, which led them to disguise their openness to casual encounters until meeting a potential partner face-to-face (see Bertha's quote in side-bar and Rachel's quote on next page). Male users also tried to disguise their openness to casual sex because they feared being labeled as "players," or men who value women only for sexual gratification (see quote from Arnold in the side bar on next page).

PROBING FOR CASUAL SEX DESIRES

Evaluating a potential partner's openness to casual encounters was a frustrating task for most participants. They felt it was inappropriate to blatantly ask about

another user's openness to casual sex during private messaging. Instead they attempted to covertly probe for casual sex motives, for example, by making sexual remarks during conversation and gauging the user's reaction (see Mitch's quote in side bar on next page). Similarly, some female participants who were against casual encounters would insert sexual remarks during their conversations to bait men into revealing such motives (see Amanda's quote in sidebar on next page).

Ultimately, participants were reluctant to convey their openness to casual encounters online, and conversely, struggled to evaluate potential partners' openness to these encounters.

Study 2: Online Dating Coaches and Their Advice for Casual Sex Pursuits

The above findings, and publications related to that study [3], have elucidated the struggles that online daters face in achieving their relationship goals. Yet there are self-proclaimed online dating experts who insist on having mastered self-presentation and evaluation within online dating systems. These self-proclaimed experts are online dating coaches—individuals who sell products or services with advice on how to use online dating systems to satisfy a particular relationship goal. We are currently conducting research that aims to understand the self-presentation and evaluation behavior used and/or advocated by online dating coaches for a variety of relationship goals in hopes of distinguishing between online dating struggles that stem from poor behavioral choices, and struggles that stem from suboptimal system design.

Quotes from study 1

Rachel, 22: *"Slut shaming. That's one of my deal breakers on [men's] profiles. It's when men shame women for wanting sex. [...] I don't mention my lifestyle in my profile anymore because of that."*

Arnold, 24: *"I never respond faster than the girl does. I don't want her to think I want [sex] too bad."*

Mitch, 21: *"Do you want to know my secret? I say 'hey sexy.' That's my message."*

Amanda, 29: *"During [Skype] video chat I want to see how they really are. Sometimes I bait them into a sexual discussion so I can understand his real intentions."*

Method

In this study we have amassed a list of 132 online dating coaches found through *Google* and *Youtube* searches for 10 different variations of the terms "online dating expert" and "online dating coach."

Thirty-four of the 132 coaches provide advice that pertains explicitly to casual encounters, either to help users achieve these goals (29 coaches—4 female) or to avoid users who are in search of casual encounters (5 coaches—all female). Twenty-eight of these 34 coaches are male, 9 are female, and one is an agency with multiple coaches. Most of these coaches base their advice on personal experience as active or former users of online dating systems (29 coaches—4 female), with one boasting the ability to set up three dates a day from online dating (<http://3girlsaday.com>), while another claims to have had over 100 casual encounters with women from online dating systems (<http://executetheprogram.com>). The other 5 coaches (all female) base their expertise on graduate degrees in psychology (3), experience as an advertising strategist (1), and life coaching certifications (1). It has to be noted that any expertise claimed by the coaches is purely self-reported and not validated by client success.

Our research method consists primarily of content analysis, with support from semi-structured interviews. Content analysis was conducted on the advice published online by the dating coaches through blog posts, e-books, and *Youtube* and *Vimeo* videos (287 unique sources). Additionally, semi-structured interviews with 5 of these online dating coaches have been conducted over *Skype* voice and video chat to further probe into the self-presentation and evaluation behavior they advocate in their publicly available

content. All 5 interviewed coaches are male and derive their expertise from personal experience as users of online dating systems. The 34 online dating coaches with advice specifically for casual encounters were each assigned an anonymous identifier (i.e. ODC1) and will be identified as such for the remainder of this paper.

Results

This in-progress study has yielded four tactics regarding how online dating coaches advise their clients to explicitly pursue casual encounters. These findings consist of two types of information — 1) coaching advice, and 2) the behavior used personally by the coaches to enact their own advice. Most of the coaching advice discussed in these findings was originally discovered through content analysis, while much of the behavior used personally by the coaches was discovered during interviews.

TARGETED SYSTEM CHOICE

The coaches agree that the choice of which online dating system(s) to use is key to the pursuit of casual encounters. The 34 coaches primarily use or advocate online dating systems with free membership for casual encounters—notably, *Tinder*, *OkCupid*, and *Plenty of Fish* (see quote from ODC22 in side bar on next page). Since free sites require no financial investment, coaches indicate that these sites are enticing to people with more casual intentions "*who are just trying it out*" (ODC5). Conversely, coaches indicate that paid sites—like *match.com* and *eHarmony*—require users to commit through paid membership, which attracts users who are "*more invested in finding someone [for a long-term relationship]*" (ODC5). The 29 coaches who derive their expertise from personal experience are typically

Quotes from study 2

ODC22, from content

analysis: *"If you're casual about online dating, use a free site."*

ODC5, from interview: *"To reach the largest number of girls on online dating sites, I'd recommend split testing in other cities aside from your own."*

ODC17, from content

analysis: *"Online dating for men is a numbers game, and the more messages you're able to send out, the more chances you have to make a connection during the time you have available."*

ODC4, from interview: *"I'll get 7 to 20 replies [for every 100 messages sent]. 70-80% of those lead to sex on the first date."*

ODC4, from interview:

"Come on, when they get a message from [his username], they know what they're getting into."

active on two or more of these free-membership systems concurrently.

SELF-PRESENTATION FIELD RESEARCH

Online dating *"gives the advantage of failure"* (ODC5) because users are not penalized with a bad reputation or awkwardness that may accompany rejection face-to-face. As such, online dating coaches encourage their clients to conduct their own "research" or "experiments" with their profile pictures and written profile content in order to understand how to appear most attractive to potential partners. The coaches conduct their own online dating experiments in various ways. ODC5 uses location-based features in online dating systems to perform a version of A/B testing that he calls *"split testing"* (see quote in side bar). For example, he tests the attractiveness of new profile pictures in *OkCupid* by uploading a new picture and changing the location listed on his profile to a geographically distant city. He then "likes" hundreds of profile pages of women in the distant city and counts how many "likes" or messages he receives in turn. By performing the same process with multiple pictures he can determine which picture is best without ruining his chances with any women in his own city.

CASUAL ENCOUNTERS ARE A NUMBERS GAME

In online dating systems, female users typically receive many more initial messages than men (20-60 a week for women, versus 0-5 for men in our previous study [4]). The online dating coaches in this study acknowledge this trend, describing online dating as a "numbers game" that rewards sending introductory messages to as many users as possible in the least amount of time (see quote by ODC17 in side bar). Several of the coaches insist it is a necessity for men to

message many female online daters at once because response rates will be unavoidably low (7-20%, according to ODC4—see quote in side bar). During their personal use, some of the online dating coaches employ copy-and-pasted messaging routines, in which all of their messages and subsequent replies are pre-written, being designed to 1) weed out users with no casual intentions and 2) escalate communication off the system quickly, often by the third message. ODC4 discussed in his interview how he wrote a Python script that messages 100 women a day with prewritten messages that imply his casual sex intentions (see quote from ODC4 in side bar on previous page). Similarly, ODC5 explained in his interview how he pays a man in Africa \$3 an hour to conduct his private messaging conversations with entirely prewritten content.

QUICK ESCALATION TO AN IN-PERSON MEETING

Most coaches agree that the primary objective during private messaging is to escalate communication to an in-person meeting as quickly as possible. This is to minimize the chances of one partner losing interest in, misinterpreting, or *"idealizing"* the other (see quote from ODC14 in side bar on next page). How the coaches choose to escalate their private messaging conversations to in-person meetings varies drastically in their personal use. ODC5 and ODC9 described in their publicly available advice how they provoke their potential partners into wanting to meet in-person through the use of *"emotional polarity"* (ODC5) or by *"invoking an emotional reaction"* (ODC1). This entails removing most logical information—such as careers or hobbies—from their profiles and messages, instead focusing on *"compelling, maybe offensive"* (ODC2) content to garner emotional responses from users,

Quotes from study 2

ODC14, from content

analysis: *"Online dating is just for introductions. [...] If you talk to much on text or chat, you build them up in your head."*

ODC25, from content

analysis: *"Telling stories gets an emotional response. It gets them to envision your life."*

ODC1, from interview:

"Imagine you have a million dollars. Describe your life as if you had that money. [...] I want to buy a tropical island, and build a tree house, and live on it with monkey butlers."

ODC3, from content

analysis: *"Chode [sic] yourself out as much as possible. Be a loser. Be the dorky, funny, insecure guy as much as possible. [...] Look at your competition. They are all trying to be super cool."*

usually through the use of story telling and role playing (see quotes from ODC25 and ODC1 in side bar). Often times the coaches have very specific emotions they want to instigate through their private messages. For example, ODC3 described in his interview and publicly available content how he feigns vulnerability and sexual inexperience to put female online daters in a sympathetic emotional state, which makes them comfortable enough to meet him (see quote in side bar).

Discussion & Future Endeavors

The above studies demonstrate that there is a difference between explicitly pursuing casual encounters and being open to casual encounters. Most participants in study 1 were open to a variety of relationship experiences including casual sex, but seldom considered casual sex to be their primary motivation. The dating coaches as users, however, were looking exclusively for casual encounters and altered their behavior accordingly, with empirical testing of their profiles and mass-messaging routines. They advise their clients to do the same. While online daters motivated only by casual encounters may be in the minority, their behavior—particularly mass-messaging—can hinder the user base as a whole. For example, female online daters typically receive many more messages than men, often overwhelming them to the point of leaving the system for extended periods of time [4]. In this light, a mass messaging approach has benefits only for the sender of these messages, while leaving the recipients susceptible to being overwhelmed by incompatible suitors. Users resort to such behavior because the tools in today's online dating systems for conveying openness to casual sex—such as explicit "looking for" sections in profiles—are considered

counter-productive. System designers need to acknowledge that users are often open to multiple relationship experiences, but cannot convey their openness to all of them in the way manner. Designers could address this, for example, through variable profile pages—each user has multiple profile pages, with the system choosing one to show a potential partner based on matching relationship experiences desired.

Our future work in regards to casual sexual encounter pursuits in online dating will seek to understand how to help users better convey openness to such experiences. This will involve exploring new tools to help users convey their relationship goals—and other sensitive traits—without fear of social backlash.

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