

SOCIAL TRENDS OF DATING AND MODERN RELATIONSHIPS

Abstract

Dating is one of the biggest relational social trends out there and affects many people's lives. From social media, online dating, to how contemporary relationships have more access and freedom to form, there is a whole world of possibilities for dating and the future of it.

In this article I explore how modern dating trends and technologies can influence relationships and connection, whilst also exploring modern concerns they also can bring. The article looks at traditional views as well as contemporary and shows that one doesn't always cancel the other out, meaning that futuristic dating trends don't always erase the past.

There's also a focus on the media and its influence on dating trends, and how for some this may be one of the biggest educators around dating insight and may influence future dating scripts further.

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I. WHAT ARE SOCIAL TRENDS OF DATING?

The social science and psychology behind trends are complex in itself as many people have tried to figure out why particular things start to become popularised and trends in the first place. A trend can become a momentary or even lifelong part of an individual's life that also helps them feel connected on a social level. Generally trends have positive rewarding factors in which encourage a group of individuals to either follow them as an individual or as a group [1]. However, when looking at current dating trends, many are negatives rather than positives and whilst they are classed as trends they may not obviously follow the traditional sense of a trend equating rewards. This is why we need to take a more nuanced lens when looking at dating trends in modern society and working out why they hold such importance over relationships and their future.

For a long time the main dating trends within western society focused on leading to heteronormative marriages. Where love would also have a focus on reproduction and committing with another for life. Over time marriage has declined, and for those that have married divorce has risen. This doesn't mean that dating has come to a halt, but rather there are new forms of accessing relationships such as the use of social media and dating apps resulting in many alternatives people can explore when dating that do not have to result in marriage [2]. Society has also not only widened its views and access to alternative forms of dating, many people within society are now open to wider definitions of relationships, sexual orientation, and attachment styles. When in the past only one style of dating was acceptable, there are multiple options available for people to explore and express with less stigma, shame and judgment.

II. THE NUCLEAR FAMILY: IS THE TRADITIONAL DATING GOAL GONE?

Within western society the nuclear family was seen as the traditional and expected relationship structure, with many people entering dating in hope that they would follow this relationship dynamic structure laid out by society. However, as time has passed there are fewer people entering marriage, with also many marriages resulting in a higher rate of divorce meaning that more relationships than ever are breaking away from traditional dating trends which follow the nuclear family script.

A study by Hannah Tessler looked into the importance of the nuclear family, and its importance in modern relationships with a particular focus on asexuality and aromantics, and still found that whilst many were moving away from sexual or romantic forms of dating that they still regarded the nuclear family as a desired relationship structure [3]. Tessler's research also looked into the thought processes of individuals who sought relationships that didn't involve sex or romantic exchanges, and how these individuals reinvented new forms of platonic relationships which they regarded as just as important if not more so than relationships which involved either sex or romance within them. Relationships still held many important factors which the nuclear family structure prompted such as a particular focus on care giving. Whilst marriage may be dipping in popularity, many people are finding alternative ways to uphold some of the traits of a nuclear family when structuring their romantic life. Sex and romance may also have less importance for some now, due to the ability to explore alternative forms of sexuality easier. Although sexual orientation in itself is not a trend, and for many an integral part of their identity, it may have some influence in why

certain dating trends are more favourable now than ones which use to focus mainly on heteronormative and monogamous values.

Queerplatonic relationships may have always existed but never had the freedom of expression up until now. As queer historians such as Kit Heyam [4] has pointed out, that many alternative gender and sexuality may not have even been accepted previously and due to biases of recording the then present happenings, we may have a narrow historical view on how people actually dated in the past due to records focusing on staying in line with social norms and trends around relationships.

Compulsory sexuality as highlighted by Gupta is where societies expectations lead to people feeling they have to conform to a normative view on dating [5]. That even marginalised sexualities feel the need to follow certain dating scripts. For some modern dating trends there may be more freedom for marginalised groups to express their sexual and romantic sides, making these expressions less of a trend and possibly more of a natural way for some marginalised groups to experience dating which we weren't allowed to be aware of before due to previous segregation. This may mean that whilst some trends may feel new to those outside of marginalised groups, that for many LGBTQIA+ individuals they are just normative ways for them to experience relationships that were previously denied.

III. PLASTIC SEXUALITY: THE FREEDOM OF DATING AND SEX

Gidden came up with the idea that erotic tastes and sexual exploration can now be adapted to the individuals desires due to the invention and access of birth control [6]. It's worth considering how dating trends have changed and will change with the advancements of sexual health and easier access to both safe sex methods and barrier methods become more available. Plastic sexuality focuses on the malleability of contemporary relationships, which may not have been available beforehand.

This also means that people have more possibilities to influence dating trends when before there were great risks to both health and lifestyle when exploring sex and relationships. It makes sense that people are forming new alternative relationships that don't fit past social norms, and that due to the increasing awareness on how to navigate relationships, dating and sex in safer environments and ways that people will also be reinventing relationship rules. It's likely that there will be a continued fluidity influencing dating trends, however some social and cultural norms may still be heavily ingrained in some.

IV. DIGISEXUALITY: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND DATING

Predictive text first became accessible in 1995 and it quickly sprung into use within everyday situations, helping people communicate their needs and wants. It makes sense that people soon afterwards started to use this technology to interact between those they considered close and personal relationships, such as romantic partners. It wasn't until 2016 when the media caught wind of how predictive text was being used on dating profiles, where one person reported using it to put together their dating profile information in jest.

AI and ChatGPT are now the modern and future versions of predictive text. With news articles already in abundance in 2023 of individuals stating their dating success is due to using ChatGPT to write both profile and message replies to potential romantic partners.

Could predictive text and ai being used for profiles and conversation interactions lead to future couples having more struggles through relationship developmental stages? There are some fears that the use of ChatGPT within online dating could lead to an increase in catfishing. Yet there hasn't been a fuller look into its effects on dating and how it may alter relationship quality and longevity. Some could argue that it could help with the nervousness around taking risks within relationships when a relationship reaches a new stage and possible navigation difficulties that can occur due to uncertainty and risk, where AI can assist on giving a solution on how to move onto the next relationship milestone. However this form of problem solving would also go against the Gottman module of relationship success, where generally problem solving isn't the real answer to relationship difficulties and can even hinder relationships moving into new dating stages [7].

AI may give some individuals the language they need to communicate their love languages, but some may be concerned about whether or not they come from the heart. Regardless of how it is used to enhance the dating experience it is clear that AI started to influence digisexuality and online dating long before it advanced to chatbots, and is likely here to stay.

Digisexuality is the use of technology to help facilitate sexual or romantic interactions, that's with another human or artificial intelligence. Research on digisexuality is still limited, but awareness around technology and its use in dating has been around for some time now and people still exhibit the same dating needs that were around before this technology was easily accessible suggesting that its influence is only small [8]. There are also only a select few who see digisexuality as a sexual orientation where technology is essential for their relationship, although this may change as technology advances more.

V. GHOSTING AND CATFISHING: MODERN DATING CONCERNS

With modern dating there comes additional concerns around risks as deception can be easier when performed in the digital sphere. Ghosting and catfishing have both increased, with many people exploring online dating having some experience or either.

Danielle Knafo, Ph.D 2021 reflected on catfishing and in their paper suggested that catfishing goes against interpersonal norms and boundaries that someone may have around their own embodiment, breaking both the catfishes internal and external world views as they play out a fantasy side of themselves [9]. This fantasy side, where an individual catfishes another imposes their fantasy on individuals without their awareness or consent. Many performing catfishing may not be fully aware of their actions and how their impersonation may hurt others. Knafo even looks at catfishing as a way an individual may navigate their feelings around mortality as the fantasy persona they create may help them avoid the negative realities of dating and the risks associated with it. Essentially the catfishes persona may be a way of escapism and avoidance. This may also mean that those prone to creating catfish identities may struggle developmentally when it comes to advance new dating millstones, as they are unable to differentiate at these stages as the impersonation makes them risk avoidant and unable to be vulnerable with another.

Ghosting is the act of leading someone on often through online dating and giving the impression that the relationship will progress further on relationship milestones but vanishing just before they hit these milestones. It has come to light that both the ghoster and ghostee are

affected negatively by the experience, with the experience impacting both individuals self-esteem negatively [10]. This may even extend to how both see their existence within society, and make it harder for the ghostee in particular struggle connecting with others in the future when it comes to dating.

VI. DATING SCRIPTS

Relationship and dating scripts can help us understand some dating trends. Many dating trends focus on heteronormative social scripts which are often seen as relational scripts. Dating trends which fall out of heteronormativity some queer theorists argue are still heavily influenced by a heterocentric lens meaning that even LGBTQ+ relationships follow many heteronormative patterns [11]. This may explain why some popularised dating trends in the past as well as current times have heterosexual biases, even when those trends relate to the LGBTQ+ community.

Life scripts which were popularised by transactional analysts are scripts people use to navigate the world and social norms, they can be influenced by a parent, adult, and child ego. Relationship, dating and sexual scripts were later coined, and can be seen as ways people navigate what is socially acceptable within dating, sex, and sexual orientation. These scripts are influenced through social interaction and learning. Dating trends could be a chicken and the egg situation where they may be a way of influence social learning around dating, or dating scripts themselves may influence society and the individuals within it. We may never fully know which occurs first, but regardless they both have a big influence on each other.

More research around contemporary relationships and their effect of relationship and dating scripts needs to be done as currently social script theory seems to shine a biased positive light on traditional relationships. Using relationship script theory and dating scripts to look at alternative relationships such as casual sex, hook-up culture, and non-monogamy, many script theorists class these as nonrelational scripts, whereas they see trends around monogamy as relational scripts with connections [12]. Modern research on trends such as casual sex and hook-up culture suggests that there is a relational connection side for some and that it isn't always as emotionless as other researchers have suggested. The normalisation of casual sex and hook-up culture seems to suggest how we view social and sexual scripts is changing and that it is a natural dating trend for many emerging adults [13].

VII. POP PSYCHOLOGY AND MEDIA DATING TRENDS

If you read any form of news paper or magazine, whether that's offline or online, these outlets love focusing on dating trends. However, the trends that they focus on are generally negative and rarely formed from actual research or statistics. Some of these trends may have originated from other forms of media such as social media sites such as TikTok. Yet we can't deny the fact that there are rarely positive trends or terms and labels for these dating styles that focus on positive dating.

We can't discount the fact that these terms are out there. They do hold some importance with many people relating to them. For some it may also be easier to say a phrase such as love bombing, cookie jarring, or stonewalling, rather than going into the complexities of any possible trauma that may have occurred from these encounters. Many of the situations

these trends describe aren't new, and whilst some may have changed over the years with the access to technology, they are still essentially based on human interactions that have always been around when it comes to dating.

Sadly even during times when the world focused on just monogamous heteronormative relationships, bad dating experiences and etiquette occurred. The actions have not changed sadly and some people will always experience dating in these ways, but the terminology has altered to fit more with the current times, and is likely to change again in generations to come.

Positive dating trends that are being suggested are focused more around ethical dating, climate change, and ones that encourage vulnerability and emotions. Since the 2006 #MeToo movement started to bring more awareness around sexual harassment and abuse towards women there has been a strong focus on people aiming on moving away from traditional patriarchy and toxic masculinity within dating and focusing more on ethical, balanced and consensual dating [14]. Previously past movements have led to similar changes in dating trends, with third wave feminism rising in the 1990s, and further wave feminism starting in 2012, it's likely we're ready for a new and influential wave to occur soon as we move past 2023.

Climate change and even diets such as vegetarianism and veganism have always affected relationships as they challenge peoples core beliefs. Again whilst these are currently popular things for people to consider when dating, they too have previously influenced dating, too.

We also have to consider that most statistics around dating are collected by online dating apps. This data is still fairly new, with limitations as we can't look too far back in time as it's only started being gathered recently.

Media trends around sex, intimacy and dating are often loosely based on statistics and more built upon pop psychology [15]. However, whilst pop psychology may have a bad reputation for its lack of science, it has an important role to play within society and how it influences and even supports individuals who devour it. One could argue that pop psychology used within the media is a form of social learning theory where individuals can learn from others social behaviour, or learn to normalise their own social behaviour due to finding easy to digest information from others in the form of media articles or similar. Whilst social theory learning was first coined by Bandura in 1977, it still plays a role today, even in the digital realm [16]. In a world where most information is consumed via online platforms, it makes sense that our social behaviour will be influenced by online platforms and media more than in person settings.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As society advances and tools such as technology alter the way we seek and have relationships it's clear that there will be the reinvention of some dating trends whilst others will still conform to past and similar social norms around dating.

Whilst many have feared modern dating trends reducing intimacy and connection there seems to be little evidence of this happening, and whilst there are new ways to explore

relationships and dating the core values, needs, wants and desires are similar to what they were prior to these futuristic trends. There's still the human need of wanting to care for others or be cared for, although for some this may not be in the traditional romantic need these relationships can still be functional.

Asynchronous and non-stop access to dating is a big concern as people worry about dating burnout, however there are limited resources on this at this time it's an area for people to be aware of and watch closely.

Even as many dating trends seem to repeat core values and behaviours of past trends, it's important to acknowledge how the media plays a big part on which dating trends to focus on and how this may influence the future of dating with media agendas and biases.

When it comes to relationships and dating and thought around a trend occurs, we need to take a step back and ask the following:

- Where did that trend come from? And what was the intention of it being shared?
- As we are yet to gather longstanding data on dating trends that moves away from media or dating app biases too.

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