

INTERNET DATING AND “DOING GENDER”:  
AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES DATING ONLINE

By

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To my family  
Thank you for your support.

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Internet dating has become much more common in the past decade. This past June (2009), dating sites reported 27.5 million unique visitors (Comstock, 2009). It is projected that in 2011, dating sites in the United States alone will collect a whopping \$932 million (JupiterResearch, 2007). Although Internet dating is gaining popularity, there has been very little research done on how Internet dating is changing the way people date. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 women between the ages of 18-35 and asked them about their experiences dating online. Interviews were analyzed using grounded theory and coding of the interview data focused on how participants did gender and Internet dating, but focusing on West and Zimmerman’s “doing gender” perspective.

My analysis shows that although the way women are doing gender while participating in online dating is changing, women are nonetheless continuing to do gender. The way that women do gender has been altered by the increased use of Internet dating, but these women continue to adhere to many of the traditional components of dating, including searching for the hegemonic ideal and the “spark” with their potential partner. West and Zimmerman explained that no one can opt out of going

gender. Although the women interviewed reported doing dating differently with the use of the Internet, doing gender is still a pertinent theme in many of these interviews. Furthermore, many of the women interviewed reported feeling held accountable for doing gender appropriately, even while engaged in Internet dating.



## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Most of us who have found our soul mates relied on the randomness of the bar scene or the party circuit or life in general. This serendipity is culturally important – we have a collective investment in the idea that love is a chance event, and often it is. But serendipity is the hallmark of inefficient markets, and the marketplace of love, like it or not, is becoming more efficient.

- Rufus Griscom  
*Wired Magazine (2002)*

Throughout history, human beings have courted and intimate relationships have been one of the most important pair bonds in society. These facts remain true even today. However, the process by which people court and form relationships has been altered with the advent of new technologies. One such technology has been the rise of Internet dating sites. The formation of intimate relationships is becoming increasingly dependent on these online technologies, and because of this, researchers must understand the psychological and sociological intricacies associated with online dating.

Researches have long studied how men and women view and treat intimate relationships differently. The differences we see in regard to gendered performance in relationships are not static—our society defines how men and women should behave in relationships. In the past few decades, our society has undergone numerous changes pertaining to how people treat and define relationships, the roles people perform in their relationships, and how relationships are initiated and maintained. Internet daters are not immune to these gender scripts. This research will predominantly focus on the gender scripts of online daters in the United States, focusing predominantly on what is displayed in dating profiles and the rules associated with relationship formation. In doing this, the research will use a “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) perspective,

focusing on the ways people behave in accordance with their gender and the types of sanctions in place when people do not behave accordingly.

Despite the growing popularity of the online dating industry, there is still a tremendous amount we do not understand about Internet dating and the people who use online dating services. This research will propose to further these avenues of thought and contribute to the research on Internet daters and dating. The goal of this study is to better understand gender scripts associated with initiating online relationships. Lawson and Leek (2006) found people who participate in Internet dating feel more comfortable with the Internet dating process than the traditional dating process because they are not expected to adhere to rigid gender stereotypic roles. If this is true, the initial process of Internet-mediated relationships should show less conformity to traditional gender roles. The interviews conducted in this study will focus on participant's perception of their own gendered behavior; the ways in which they behave and the ways in which they believe their date expects them to behave.

### **Research Questions**

Every culture has unique gender scripts in regard to relationship formation and dating. Although these scripts have changed over time in the United States, they are still present. These scripts are also present when individuals meet and date others with the use of Internet dating services. This research will attempt to uncover the types of scripts that are present when individuals meet online.

This research will focus dater's perceptions about gender and Internet dating relationship formation. The major focus of the interviews is how female Internet daters "do" online dating. For instance, do initiation strategies differ for women if they are

dating online versus engaged in more traditional dating styles? How do the beginning stages of Internet-mediated relationships differ from other more traditional relationships? Do women feel they are less committed to stereotypical gendered behavior online? These questions will shed light onto how and when initiation of intimate relationships occurs. For purposes of this research, initiation will be defined as a) who sends the first message online to begin communication, b) who initiates the first in-person meeting, and c) who asks for the second in-person meeting. The interviews will also hopefully uncover the implicit gendered “rules” involved in Internet dating (i.e. how many emails must be exchanged before phone numbers are exchanged, how many phone calls must be exchanged before a face-to-face date is set up, etc.).

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Sociology of Gender**

The field of sociology has progressed the understanding of gender in our society. The sociological work on gender sees gender as an institution, frame, or social structure to which everyone in society looks for behavioral guidance.

West and Zimmerman (1987) explained that people are constantly “doing gender”, and that everyone is held accountable by others to “do” gender appropriately. The authors explained that “the ‘doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production” (p.126). West and Zimmerman’s “Doing Gender” argued gender is not a set of traits residing within individuals, but something individuals do in their social interactions. This behavior involves a “complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (p.126). Gendered behaviors are therefore not rooted in biology, but are social constructs reproduced in social interactions.

West and Fenstermaker (1995) elaborated on West and Zimmerman’s “Doing Gender” in “Doing Difference”. West and Fenstermaker argued there are more complex mechanisms that can explain and produce social inequality. The authors explained that by taking into consideration race, class, and gender, a more thorough understanding of an individual’s position and behavior in society can be achieved. As the authors explained, “no person can experience gender without simultaneously experiencing race

and class” (p.13). Race, gender, and class are all accomplished in social interactions with others and we are all held accountable for behaving within these “categories”.

Risman (2004) also built upon the theory that people do gender. Risman argued that gender should be conceptualized as a social structure. She explained that by doing this, our understanding of gender will be advanced in several ways. First, it will help researchers analyze the interconnection between gendered selves, the cultural expectations that help explain interactional patterns, and institutional regulations. Second, the understating of gender as a structure will enrich theory—this concept does not attempt to override other theories, but works to compliment them. Third, it will allow us to investigate the direction and strength of causal relationships between gendered phenomenon within many different dimensions. And last, is helps us understand institutional change and individual identities. When we begin to take into consideration *how* gender inequality is being produced within each dimension, we will be better equipped to intervene and change the structure. She explains that gender inequalities are reproduced in everyday interactions, even if done so subconsciously. Furthermore, cultural gendered interactional experiences make egalitarian heterosexual relationships extremely difficult to accomplish. Using structural language will help detangle how inequalities are constructed, recreated, and deconstructed.

Also building upon West and Zimmerman’s “doing gender”, Martin (2004) explained that gender is a social institution. She argued that institutions guide the way people in a given society live and behave. Classifying gender as a social institution allows researchers to understand why people continually “do” gender, even when they are aware of it. Martin also offered several other reasons why framing gender as an

institution may be beneficial: it affirms gender's sociality, it directs attention to practices, it highlights power, it reinstates the material body, it acknowledges disjuncture, conflicts, and change, and it challenges the macro-micro separation. The notion that gender should be conceptualized as a social structure (Risman, 2004) or social institution (Martin, 2004) extended the doing gender perspective. Male and female behavior is reproduced through social interaction. Society provides its members with a blueprint on how to behave, dress, and think in accordance with their gender. Whether we refer to this social phenomenon as an institution or a structure, it comes back to West and Zimmerman's notion of "Doing Gender".

Ridgeway (2009) discussed the ramifications of societal members not behaving within their gender norms. Ridgeway believed that people use gender as a primary frame to guide their behaviors and interactions with others. Ridgeway aligns herself closely with West and Zimmerman's "Doing Gender" analysis. She explained that we "automatically and nearly instantly sex categorize any specific person to whom we attempt to relate" (p.148). These categorizations are based on gender stereotypes and help us understand them and ourselves in relation to them. If behavior is not molded into appropriate stereotypical ways, people are typically sanctioned for their "abnormal" behavior. Because our society places so much emphasis on preconceived notions of appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors, we hold these notions true and sacred. When they are not followed, our society punishes those who go against them. Similar to West and Zimmerman, Ridgeway explains that gender is almost always a background identity for individuals and, in that way, becomes a way of acting. Therefore, in order to understand particular organizational or institutional structures (on a more macro-level

approach) we must first be aware of the significance of the background effect of the gender frame: "...we cannot understand the shape that the gendered structure of society takes without taking into account the background effects of gender as a primary cultural frame for organizing social relations" (p.157). In other words, gender seems to be deeply rooted in both macro and micro spheres.

There have been many criticisms of the doing difference approach. For instance, Collins et al. (1995) asserted West and Fenstermaker treated gender as the most fundamental category of difference and then simply added on class and race. Collins stated "[The authors] lay out their theoretical argument with a gender-only framework and then generalize this argument to race and class" (p. 493). Collins also critiqued "Doing Difference" by explaining the authors' transformed "the interlocking systems of oppression of race, class, and gender that produce positions characterized by intersectionality into.... 'a difference that didn't make any difference at all'" (p. 493). She argued that conceptualizing race, gender, and class as "difference" confuses what is really occurring in terms of oppression.

Thorne (1995), Weber (1995), and Maldonado (1995) also offered criticism of "Doing Difference". Thorne explains "To grasp complex relations among gender, race, class, and sexuality, we need a range of metaphors and theories honed in many sites of analysis. By itself, the construct 'doing difference' won't stretch far enough" (p. 499). Similarly, Weber explains, "By developing a 'doing difference' approach from a critique of race, class, and gender metaphors and ethnomethodology...they obscure the central dynamics of power relations in the micro and macro structures of oppression" (p. 502). It seems the overarching critiques of "Doing Difference" is that the notion of "doing

difference” is not enough to accurately explain the complicated and deeply-rooted systems of oppression and inequality in America. In other words, it is not enough to simply say people are doing difference in regard to race, class, gender, and sexuality. Maldonado also brings up an important critique: “The authors’ positions would be strengthened in more formally acknowledging the constraints imposed by these macro level forces in the social environment” (p. 495). In particular, West and Fenstermaker should have given more attention to historical circumstances of race, class, and gender. West and Fenstermaker (1995) address this specific criticism by acknowledging that accomplishments of race, gender, and class are embedded in history. They state that viewing these things as accomplishments help us understand how social structures are reproduced at any particular sociohistorical moment.

Many of the theorists who came after West and Zimmerman built upon the idea that people “do gender”. “Doing gender” is at the heart of many theories pertaining to gender; the research to date on gender in American society seems to agree that there are clear notions of how gender should be done. When these agreed upon gendered behaviors are confused or not followed, there are consequences. These gendered behaviors are present in all interactions, yet they are often subconsciously “done”. By analyzing how and where gender fits into society, academics hope to bring attention to deep-rooted gender inequalities and behaviors. “Doing Gender” is the theoretical foundation of this proposed study. Gender is the predominant variable in this research. Using the “doing gender” approach to study Internet daters allows us to see Internet daters as more than just passive participants, but as actors in a complex process of “doing” gender. The following section of this literature review, gender and dating in



America, will focus on a variety historical events that have shaped the way dating occurs today as well as different theories that explain the dating process.

### **Gender and Dating In America**

There are a few crucial historical milestones that have shaped the way intimate relationships are viewed today. Freer dating practiced in the United States coincided with the popularization of the automobile and telephone in the early 1900s. With these technologies, teenagers were better able to meet in private without the supervision of parents. The feminist movement in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also changed the way men and women view relationships, and how gender was “done” in these relationships. The feminist movement stressed equalitarian gender performance in the family and greater freedom for women to explore their own sexuality. The movement changed many dynamics within relationships. For instance, Rudman and Phelan (2007) found that having a feminist partner was linked to healthier relationships for women. Men with feminist partners also reported greater relationship stability and sexual satisfaction. Feminist men were also consistently related to women’s relationship health; these relationships were reported to have more quality, equality, and stability.

The advent of new forms of technology—cell phones, computers, the Internet—has also shaped the structures of relationships and how relationships are initiated and maintained, and sometimes how gender is “done” within the relationship. Cell phones and the Internet have facilitated communication and the formation of intimate relationships. Discussion of these technologies will be discussed in greater depth later in the paper.

There has been much research on dating in America, which has focused on a multitude of topics. First, much research has been conducted on the role of sex in relationships. The role of sex in relationships has been changing; it has become more socially acceptable for young adults to engage in sexual behaviors early in the relationship. This newly acceptable “hook-up” culture will be discussed, as well other common beliefs about sex and relationships. Second, research has focused on gender scripts during relationship formation and during the relationship. Third, many researchers have focused on evolutionary aspects of mate selection, including the homogamy and filter theory. Fourth, research on dating has analyzed how partner perception affects relationships. This research focuses on the principle of least interest and self-perceptions in relationships. Last, some researchers have focused on the role of gender in personal advertisements or speed dating events. All of this research is relevant to the research on gender and dating. However, this particular study on Internet daters will be analyzed with the lens of West and Zimmerman’s “doing gender.” This review of literature will argue that using the “doing gender” perspective is a useful lens in which to view Internet dating practices.

### **Role of Sex in Relationships**

The first area of research revolves around the changing role of sex in relationships. Rose and Frieze (1989) explained that cultural norms for the first date are “explicit, formal, and have changed little over the past 30 years” (p.259). In other words, there are clear notions of how gender should be “done” on first dates. For instance, first dates are guided by stereotypes of gender. Men are expected to initiate, plan, and pay for the date while women are supposed to allure the man and facilitate conversation on

the first date. Older research on dating etiquette and gender norms has found the same (Westervelt, 1957; Scott, 1965; McGinnis, 1969; Allen & Briggs, 1971; Lipke, 1971; Landers, 1983; and Carlson & Fitzgibbon, 1983). However, it seems that what comes after the first date has changed substantially over the past few decades. The kind of dating that previous generations were familiar with is no longer common. Tom Wolfe (2000), and American journalist, explained,

Only yesterday boys and girls spoke of embracing and kissing (necking) and getting to first base. Second base was deep kissing, plus groping and fondling this and that. Third base was oral sex. Home plate was going all the way. That was yesterday. Here in the year 2000 we can forget about necking. Today's boys and girls have never heard of anything that dainty. Today's first base is deep kissing, now known as tonsil hockey, plus groping and fondling this and that. Second base is oral sex. Third base is going all the way. Home plate is learning each other's names. (p.7)

In other words, dating has changed from something done for functional purposes (finding a lifetime partner), to something done for recreational purposes.

Furthermore, Christopher and Sprecher (2000) found that societal values regarding dating have become more liberal in the past few decades. The authors explained that because young adults are waiting longer to be married and because there are more lenient attitudes towards premarital sex, young adults are more sexually active and have more partners than they did in the past. Men and women are waiting much longer to get married. In 2010, the average age for first marriage for males was 28.2 and 26.1 for females (U.S. Census Bureau). However, men and women are still engaging in sexual behaviors as frequently up until marriage; and studies show the genders perceive these behaviors differently, which will be discussed in greater depth below.

There has been much research focusing on the “hook-up” culture of young adults. Glenn and Marquardt’s (2001) study focused solely on college-aged women. The study yielded a few major findings: 1) Marriage is the major life goal for the majority of college women, and most would like to meet a spouse while in college, 2) Relationships between college men and women today are often characterized by either too little or too much commitment, 3) “Hooking-up” (sex without commitment) is widespread on college campuses 4) “Hooking-up” has many different definitions: to kiss, to have sex, to have oral sex 5) “Dating” carries multiple meanings for college women, 6) College women say it is rare for college men to ask them on dates, or to acknowledge when they have become a couple, 7) The culture of courtship has largely become a hook up culture with almost no shared norms or expectations, 8) The women in the study reported a wide variety of feelings about hooking up, but many women said that after a hook up they often felt awkward and sometimes felt hurt.

Bogle (2008) also looked at the “hook-up” culture and found that hooking up was the dominant script for college-student intimacy. However, these students also reported desiring a more conventional relationship in the future. Bogle explained that college campuses have become sexual arenas, and that these arenas were permeated with double standards for gendered sexuality. Bogle found that more women than men were disappointed with hookups because they desired more conventional relationships.

Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) also discussed the “hook-up” culture in college, specifically among middle-upper class females. The authors found that much behavior is guided by “gender beliefs”: “cultural rules or instructions for enacting the social structure of difference and inequality that we understand to be gender” (p.592).

Hamilton and Armstrong explain that women are often guided by a relational imperative (that normal women should always want love, romance, relationships, and marriage).

Morgan and Zurbriggen (2007) also explored how sexuality is used in heterosexual relationships. The authors explored the sexual and relational messages young adults received from their first significant dating partner. The authors found that women reported receiving messages from male partners that indicated a high interest in sexual activity as well as pressure to engage in sexual activity. Women often responded to these messages by giving in to unwanted sex. However, many women set sexual boundaries. The authors noted that whereas men often established heteromascularity through expressions of high sexual interest, female partners often balanced this approach with their own traditionally gendered displays of feminine virtue (reining in male sexual desire and setting boundaries on sexual activity). The authors concluded that traditional gender scripts are still the predominant message in the early stages of first significant relationships.

Schmookler and Bursik (2007) analyzed how gender and gender role differences influenced the valuing of monogamy in emerging adults who were currently in heterosexual relationships. The authors found that men reported greater distress with a partner's hypothetical sexual infidelity compared to emotional infidelity. Furthermore, women were found to value both emotional and sexual monogamy more than men. When male infidelity occurred, it generally occurred to satisfy sexual needs; when female infidelity occurred, it generally occurred to satisfy emotional needs. The authors also found that both men and women regarded monogamy as equally relationship enhancing. All the participants of this study were unmarried college students (the only

prerequisite to take part in the study was to have been in a relationship for 6 months or more).

Willoughby and Carroll (2010) explored the relationships between attitudes towards both marriage and cohabitation and sexual experience during emerging adulthood. They found moderate evidence that marital attitudes are related to sexual experience but strong evidence of a relationship between attitudes towards cohabitation and sexual experience. Sexually active participants were more likely to have positive attitudes toward cohabitation. However, sexual intercourse in the past and the number of sexual partners did not seem to impact attitudes towards marriage with the exception of those who stated that being married was a very important goal for them.

The research on America's "hook-up" culture goes hand-in-hand with West and Zimmerman's theory that people "do gender". With changing gender norms, notions surrounding how men and women should behave sexually are also changing. Men and women are "doing" their gender in accordance with the liberalization of our society in terms of sexuality and gender.

## **Gender Scripts**

The second area of research revolves around gender scripts during relationship formation and the relationship. Although styles of dating are changing, men and women continue to play the "game" and are continuously "doing gender" in different ways. Most of the studies on gender and intimate relationships focus predominantly on how gender is "done" in intimate relationships, how men and women negotiate relationships, and how men and women view relationships. Understanding gender as a social institution or frame from which our behavior are guided may help researchers understand the internal

workings of dating practices, whether these practices are traditional or modern (facilitated by the Internet). As was mentioned previously, men and women often guide their behavior using gender scripts provided by the society in which we live. These scripts are present in every interaction, and are especially evident in courtship rituals. This is not to say that these scripts are static and unchanging, or that everyone abides by them. These scripts are, however, evident in many cases. Below, some of the most prominent studies on gender and dating will be explored.

Research shows that men and women begin intimate relationships differently; they have different initiation scripts or “do” their gender differently during the beginning stages of a relationship. One such study performed by Clark, Shaver, and Abrahams (1999) found that men tended to be more active and direct in the beginning stages of relational development and were more interested than women in the goal of sexual intimacy. The authors also found that women used passive and indirect strategies more often than men in the beginning stages of a relationship.

Other research on gender scripts has focused on sex differences in self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is seen a personality trait (Dindia and Allen, 1992), and there seem to be notable differences in this personality trait when comparing men and women. Jourard (1961), one of the first researchers to develop a self-disclosure questionnaire, found that women disclose more than men. Jourard explained, “The male role requires men to appear tough, objective, striving, achieving, unsentimental, and emotionally unexpressive... The male role, and the male’s self-structure will not allow man to acknowledge or to disclose the entire breadth and depth of his inner experience to himself or others. Man seems obliged, rather, to hide much of his real self—the

ongoing flow of his spontaneous inner experience—from himself and others (Jourard, 1997, p.35). Dindia and Allen (1992) found that gender differences in terms of self-disclosure are not as large as previous researches suggested. They criticize the academic community for perpetuating the myth that there are large sex differences in self-disclosure. West and Zimmerman would explain these differences in gender disclosure as men and women “doing” their gender in socially appropriate ways; in our society, as Jourard (1961) explained, there are clear ideas of how men should behave. As such, men “do” their gender and do not self disclose as much as women do.

Similarly, Korobov and Thorne’s (2006) study focused on young men and how they talk about their intimate relationships. They found that most men’s casual conversations contained few unmitigated intimate stories (only 2 out of 40). Most of the romantic stories told by these men were done so because the men had serious concerns about issues such as losing their sense of independence or accepting or deflecting responsibility for mistakes or poor choices they made in their relationship. Men’s self-disclosure in this study was also minimal, as regulated by our societies standards on men’s behavior.

### **Evolution and Mate Selection**

The third area of research revolves around evolutionary aspects of mate selection. Feingold (1992) explained that empirical research has found several important qualities that influence mate selection for both genders: physical attractiveness, socioeconomic status, intelligence, honest, sincerity, charisma, expressiveness, and sense of humor. Early sociological research in the field found men focus more on physical attraction when filtering potential partners, whereas women are



more interested in socioeconomic status and ambitions of prospected partners (Feingold, 1992). Sociologists explained that these differences were evolutionary important to the human species. Women invest more energy into the rearing of children, and would like a man who is able to fiscally help. Men, on the other hand, are attracted to women who look as if they are young enough to reproduce.

For years, academics have noted the importance of personality and values in mate selection. Burgess and Wallin (1943) explained that people tend to marry those with characteristics similar to their own; a principle academics have been calling “homogamy”. Filter theory states individuals use homogamy to sift through possible mates to find ones that they are similar to (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962). For instance, we tend to date others who live in a similar geographic region, who are as attractive as we are, who are of similar race/ethnicity, religion, age, social class, and who share similar values. Winch (1952) referred to the group of people meeting our specifications as the “field of eligibles” (p.14). Individuals come into contact mostly with people who share similar characteristics. For example, people surround themselves with others who share the same religion, education, social class, and so on. Winch explained:

There is a set of variables upon which homogamy has been shown to function: race, religion, social class, broad occupational grouping, location of residence, income, age, level of education, intelligence, etc. It is my opinion that these variables function to select for each of us the sort of people with whom we shall be most likely to interact, to assure that the people with whom we work and with whom we play and with whom we otherwise associate are more or less like us with respect to that set of variables and also with respect to cultural interest and values. In the sense that these variables determine with whom we shall associate, I suggest that they define for each of us a ‘field of eligible spouse-candidates’ within which it is likely that we shall choose our spouses. (p.14)

As a result, Winch explained that individual’s propensity to date others who are similar to themselves is more a matter of our environment and not of personal attraction. Not

surprisingly, researchers have demonstrated a positive association between marital satisfaction and similarities in terms of personality, attitudes, and beliefs (Fowers and Olsen, 1993).

Theories pertaining to the evolutionary basis of mate selection can also be boiled down to people “doing gender”. Men and women growing up in America have learned that they must behave in certain ways. Women are told they must be nurturing and stay home with children, and men are told they must be sexually active and be the primary breadwinners for the family. As a result, it seems difficult to determine whether these behaviors have an evolutionary basis or whether they are simply learned behaviors.

### **Partner Perception**

The fourth area of research revolves around how partner perceptions affect the relationship. Another substantial part of the research focuses on men and women behave and negotiate their roles differently in relationships. For instance, Sprecher, Schmeekle, and Feilmlee (2006) conducted a longitudinal study on 101 couples (dating and married) to determine whether Waller’s (1938) theory of the principle of least interest was upheld. Waller’s principle of least interest predicted that a person with the least interest in the relationship has more power over the conditions of the relationship. The couples were asked who they believed to have the most amount of emotional involvement in the relationship, who they believed had more control in the relationship, and how satisfied they were with the relationship. The authors found that their results upheld Waller’s theory and found that more often men were more likely than women to be perceived as the partner with less interest in and more control over the relationship.

Similar to the Sprecher, Schmeekle, and Feinlee's (2006) study, Gagne and Lydon (2003) tested the notion that women, and not men, perceive their dating partners more favorably than their partners' self-perceptions. The authors sought to offer an explanation of this gender difference in relationship illusions. Their sample consisted of 47 heterosexual couples. The couples were given questionnaires that addressed interpersonal characteristics and relationship commitment and satisfaction. The study found that dating men low in commitment devalued their partners' virtues, whereas those high in commitment devalued their partners' virtues compared to their partners' self-perceptions. The study also found that women involved in dating relationships showed relationship illusions irrespective of their commitment. The authors concluded that men needed to identify with and then commit to a specific relationship before they exhibit pro-relationship thinking (which women exhibit as a general disposition). The authors concluded men's specific identification with their romantic relationships is associated with their relationship illusions.

### **Role of Gender in Personal Advertisements and Speed-Dating**

Lastly, before the Internet dating services became popular, American society used a variety of other tactics to meet potential partners such as placing personal advertisements, and attending speed-dating events. Goode (1996) found that there were still differences between what men and women looked for in personal advertisements. Men were far more influenced by looks and women were more influenced by success. Fisman et al. (2006) found very similar results when analyzing speed-dating events. The authors found that women put greater weight on the intelligence and race of a potential partner during speed dating events, while men

responded more to physical attractiveness. From these previous studies, it seems safe to speculate that men and women often value different characteristics in their partners; women value successful men and men value attractive women. This follows Fiengold's (1992) evolution-based theory of mate selection, as was explained above.

All of the research on gender and dating in America can be explained by men and women "doing" gender. People internalize societal standards for doing gender appropriately. These standards include a general liberalization of sexuality (although women are still expected to be less promiscuous than men), men being tough and not needing to self-disclose, women being nurturing, ideas about how men and women should initiate relationships, and what men and women should look for in potential partners. Although not explicitly stated, all of these theories can be explained by West and Zimmerman's notion that men and women are continually "doing" gender. These trends have carried on into technologically mediated relationships, such as Internet Dating. In the next section of this literature review, the history of Internet Dating will be laid out. The latest research on Internet dating, as well as how Internet daters are "doing gender" will be analyzed.

### **Internet Dating Subculture**

Internet dating has become much more common in the past decade. In 1995, a website named Match.com was started by Gary Kerman. In 2004, Guinness World Records recognized Match.com as the world's largest dating site (Match.com, 2011). Today, Match.com has online dating sites in 24 countries, in eight languages, and spans five continents (InterActiveCorp, 2009). This past June (2009), dating sites reported 27.5 million unique visitors (Comstock, 2009). eHarmony attracted 4.25 million

unique visitors in June, 2009, followed by Yahoo!Personals (4.1 million), and Match.com (3.4 million) (Comstock). Internationally, dating sites bring in about \$950 million (Comstock). It is projected that in 2011, dating sites in the United States alone will collect a whopping \$932 million (JupiterResearch, 2007).

Research shows that certain demographics are overrepresented in online dating sites. Internet daters tend to be below 35 years old, well educated, employed, and have high incomes (Brym and Lenton, 2003). They are more likely to be men than women, more likely to be single or divorced, and live in urban areas (Brym and Lenton). Madden and Lenhart (2006) reported younger cohorts, ages 18-29 are the main users of Internet dating sites, with 18 percent of all online adults in that age group having visited a dating site. Madden and Lenhart reported 11 percent of online adults ages 30-49 have visited online dating sites, while 6 percent of those ages 50-64 and 3 percent of those aged 65 and older have tried online dating sites.

Stephure et al. (2009) found that although younger people access dating sites more often, older people (+55) report more motivation in posting and responding to profiles and meeting face-to-face with potential partners: “compared to younger adults, older adults should be more motivated to invest in online dating” (p.662). Stephure et al. believed this trend is due to the fact that older adults find it more difficult to meet others through conventional means and thus invested more in less conventional means (Internet dating sites). The authors noted, “Young adults...are likely to enjoy greater access to large numbers of potential partners in their normal day to day activities than older adults who have been in the workplace for several or perhaps many years” (p.660).

Madden and Lenhart (2006) also found that most online daters tend to identify with more liberal social attitudes, compared with all Americans or all internet users: “Those who have used dating websites are more likely to describe themselves as supporters of gay marriage and identify as ‘someone who likes to try new things’ when compared to the general population of adults and all internet users” (p.12). Furthermore, individuals who have visited Internet dating sites are less likely to identify as being religious and are less likely to believe in traditional gender roles for men and women (p.12).

Despite today’s waning economy, most dating sites have reported increases in their membership. eHarmony reported a 48 percent increase in membership from last year and True.com a 33 percent increase (Comstock, 2009). Brym and Lenton (2003) explained that there are four major trends occurring in our society *today* that help explain the popularity of Internet dating. First, there is a growing number of singles in our society. These singles are turning to the Internet to help find potential partners. Second, more individuals are experiencing increased career and time pressures. Many people report working longer hours now than they had in the past. Brym and Lenton explained, “Increased pressure from work makes it more difficult to find the time to engage in conventional dating methods...People are always looking for more efficient ways of meeting. Online dating has emerged as a credible alternative” (p.3). Third, single people today are more mobile than they were in the past. As a result, many singles report that it is difficult to meet people for dating and form intimate relationships. Last, workplace romance is on the decline. Employers are becoming more sensitive to sexual harassment and taking disciplinary action when romantic relationships are

formed at work. These four trends can help explain the increased rates of membership for Internet dating sites today.

Even though meeting potential partners through the Internet has become increasingly common, most couples in the United States still first met through face-to-face encounters. Madden and Lenhart (2006) polled American partners and found 38 percent first met at work or school, 34 percent met through family or friends, 13 percent met at a nightclub, bar, café, or other social gathering, three percent met through the Internet, two percent met at church, one percent met by chance, such as on the street, one percent met because they lived in the same neighborhood, one percent met at a recreational facility like a gym, and one percent met on a blind date or through a dating service. However, Match.com (2009-2010) reported that 17 percent of couples married in the last three years met each other on an online dating site (Match.com and Chadwick Martin Bailey).

Furthermore, according to a 2009 U.S. survey conducted for eHarmony by Harris Interactive, nearly 542 people get married every day in the United States because of eHarmony; that accounts for nearly 5% of new U.S. marriages (eHarmony.com, 2011). The Pew Internet & American Life Project surveyed 3,215 adults in 2005, and found three million Americans had entered into long-term relationships or marriages with people they met on dating Web sites (Madden and Lenhart, 2006). It is important to note that there is a lack of scholarly research on these statistics; it seems most of this research is conducted by Internet dating sites or companies hired by these sites. However, even though there seems to be no “scholarly” answer as to how many marriages or long-term relationships arise from online dating, it seems safe to speculate

that the Internet is changing these trends, and we will likely see an increase of partners meeting on the Internet as more people venture towards Internet dating.

The research on Internet dating and daters have included a variety of topics, some of which will be discussed below. First, academics have begun to analyze of Internet dating applies to early theories of mate selection; for instance, the homogamy and filter theory. Second, researchers have analyzed that stated motivations of individuals to use online dating sites. Third, there has been research on the role of culture in online dating sites and dating scripts. Fourth, there has been much research on the role of self-disclosure and authenticity in online dating. These four areas of research will be examined, as well as how these research findings may be explained by one common theory: West and Zimmerman's "doing gender".

### **Internet Dating and Mate Selection Theories**

The first area of research on Internet dating has focused on how earlier theories of mate selection have effected Internet daters and online dating sites. Online dating sites have long acknowledged that there is a science that goes into matching people. Dr. Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist at Rutgers University was recently employed by chemistry.com (a division of match.com) as their Chief Scientific Advisor. Chemistry.com boasts, "She's a world-renowned biological anthropologist, author and expert in the science of human attraction. She spent the last 3 decades figuring out why love makes us go weak in the knees and causes our hearts to skip a beat. Her research has shown that we are searching for someone to complement us. And, that's why we recruited her as the brains behind our personality profile" (chemistry.com, 2010). Helen



Fisher studies the evolution and future of human sex, love, marriage, and gender differences in the brain.

Helen Fisher has also conducted research on how personality types influence mate selection ([www.helenfisher.com](http://www.helenfisher.com)). For years, academics have noted the importance of personality and values in mate selection. As was stated above, Burgess and Wallin (1943) explained that people tend to marry those with characteristics similar to their own; a principle academics have been calling “homogamy”. Filter theory states individuals use homogamy to sift through possible mates to find ones that they are similar to (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962). With the popularization of the Internet in the 1990s, social interactions and encounters began to change, specifically in regard to the meeting and filtering process of potential partners. Internet dating sites allow individuals to easily search, sort, and filter for desired demographics or personality traits of other users. These types of networking sites also allow an expansion of social networks and “[have] the ability to connect people who have never met face to face and is thus likely to transform the dating process” (Lawson & Leck, 2006, p.190). Brym and Lenton (2003) discovered many people were drawn to online dating sites because they allow one to travel outside of their normal range of potential mates. Many respondents reported that online dating created opportunities for them to meet others they would have normally never met (Brym & Lenton). Internet dating allowed them to travel outside their immediate social networks and contact others who may not necessarily live in their geographic region or take part in similar day-to-day activities.

Online dating sites paid attention to these mate selection theories and have used them to their advantage to sell memberships. The structure of online dating sites often

reflects the importance of homogamy theory in mate selection. The most common type of dating site is the search/ sort/ match system and includes profiles, search-and-match features, and private messaging capabilities (Fiore & Donath, 2004). Within this type of dating site, there are both mainstream systems and subpopulation systems. Mainstream systems include a broad base of users from a variety of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Fiore & Donath), which can be narrowed to the user's specifications with a search function. Match.com and Yahoo!Personals are examples of mainstream systems. Subpopulation systems attempt to serve a specific subpopulation. For instance, JDate.com serves Jewish singles, Manhunt.com serves gay men, Right Stuff Dating caters to academics, whereas VanityDate requires members to be beautiful, wealthy, or highly accomplished (Fiore & Donath).

Other popular dating sites are those that match personalities of members. To successfully "match" users based on similar characteristics, values, and relationship desires, personality tests have become a more popular feature. Sites like eHarmony or Tickle employ such tests and match users with others who share similar personality traits. For example, eHarmony asks users to answer questions about their demographics (age, education, income, height, ethnicity, religion), and personality (interests, energy level, likes and dislikes) (eHarmony.com Personality Test, 2009). eHarmony also asks users to rate the importance of aspects of their partner's personality: "How important is your partner's energy level?" (eHarmony.com Personality Test, 2009). These tests assume people prefer homogeneous partners, and match users based on similarities in their answers. However, a few academics have begun questioning the effectiveness of these personality tests (Houran, 2004; Finn and

Banach, 2000; Naglieri et al., 2004), stating there is no peer review to validate these tests. Houran et al. (2004) explain the importance of these findings, "...the prospect that millions of singles are making life-changing decisions based on compatibility tests that are not scientifically sound is a sobering one" (p.521). Houran et al. believe more rigorous reviews of these personality tests should take place.

Personality has been an issue studied in psychology. Many psychologists believe people are born with predispositions for certain personalities. Sociologists, such as West and Zimmerman, believe people learn their personality through social interactions. The nature-nurture debate has been a long-standing debate in academia for years. This paper argues on the side of nurture. Men and women learn their personality, and how to "do" their gender, through social interactions. Furthermore, men and women are trained to look for certain characteristics in potential partners. Therefore, it seems no large surprise that experts are able to zero in on personality characteristics that attract one another; they all have the training of American society as a common denominator.

### **Motivations of Internet Daters**

The second area of research has focused on the motivations of individuals to use online dating sites. Lawson and Leek (2006) outlined six stated motivations of Internet daters. First, many respondents reported that they were lonely and in need of companionship, emotional support, and communication. Second, many respondents had just got through some sort of life crisis such as a family member death or a divorce. These respondents claimed Internet dating provided them with the needed social support after a crisis; often, they reported a better quality of living after they started using the dating site. Third, Internet dating allowed respondents to control their

presentation and environment. Many women reported that they felt safer meeting men online rather than in a bar or club. Furthermore, Lawson and Leek found many women, in order to control their presentation, generally described themselves as thinner and taller than they really were in their profiles. Fourth, respondents reported feeling like they were freer from commitment and gender stereotypic roles when dating online. For instance, respondents reported that when dating online, it is appropriate for women to make the initial contact. Fifth, respondents reported preferring Internet dating because they perceived it to be an adventure. Many claimed Internet dating was more exciting than visiting a local bar or nightclub in search of potential partners. Last, some Internet daters believed online dating was a romantic fantasy. These daters claimed that in online dating, you are able to construct a fake environment where you can pretend to be someone else.

Brym and Lenton (2003) discovered several other motivations for Internet dating. First, online dating created opportunities for many individuals to meet others they would have normally never met. Internet dating allowed individuals to travel outside their immediate social networks and contact others who may not necessarily live in their geographic region or take part in similar day-to-day activities. Second, respondents reported preferring Internet dating because it is private and confidential. Users can search for potential partners in the comfort of their own home in relative anonymity. Last, Internet dating is convenient. Users can post one profile and search for as many people as they would like using certain search guidelines. Users can respond to those they are interested in and ignore others in which they are not interested.

## **Culture and Online Dating Sites/Dating Scripts**

The third area of research has focused on the role of culture in online dating sites and dating scripts. Of the seven largest Internet dating sites, four are based in the United States while the other three are based in the United Kingdom, Israel and Canada (Brym and Lenton, 2003). Based in the United States, Match.com is also known for their International sites. Match.com has dating sites for most European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK), most of Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela), parts of Asia (China, India, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam), Austria, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa (Match.com, 2011). Match.com justifies having different sites for different countries:

While love is universal, the way people meet, court and develop relationships isn't. That's why Match.com offers different approaches and features in different cultures. Match.com powers online dating for MSN across Asia, Australia, the United States and Latin America, and has been an AOL partner providing personals for Love@AOL for nearly 10 years. (Match.com, 2011)

Each country's website has their own URL. For instance, Ireland's site is ie.match.com, Japan's is jp.match.com, and because Match.com is based in the United States, United States' website is match.com.

The role of culture in dating practices is also of high importance when developing dating sites. For instance, Farrer and Gavin (2009) researched the use of Match.com Japan, focusing on Japanese communication styles. The researchers' main goal was to examine how and to what extent Japanese online daters overcame the limitations of computer-mediated communication through the use of contextual and other cues. Farrer

and Gavin explained, “The internet is not culture neutral but is shaped by local cultures of politics, community, Internet use, the social shaping of technology, and language” (p.408). They found that many Japanese focus on implicit communication such as body language, the use of silence, and implying meaning through what is not said. There is an importance placed on “catching on” quickly to these sorts of implied communications. Farrer and Gavin found, “Japanese online daters adapt their efforts to present and acquire social information using the cues that the online dating platform provides [sic], although many of these cues are specific to Japanese social context” (p.407). For example, much implicit information was conveyed by the way profiles were written. Many profiles used emoticons and other nonlinguistic symbols to hint at emotional tone or personality traits. While the use of emoticons and other nonlinguistic symbols are also seen in profiles in the United States (Lawson and Leck, 2006), they seem to hold less significance than their use in Japanese profiles.

### **Self-Disclosure and Authenticity in Online Dating**

The fourth area of research has focused on the role of self-disclosure and authenticity in online dating. Most research to date has focused on Internet dating and identity management and creation. A few studies have focused on the role of trust in Internet dating and how individuals sometimes lie on their profile in order to manage their identity. For instance, when people do lie on their profiles, it is generally about personality traits they wish to change. In other words, Internet dating profiles may represent more of whom users wish they were than who they really are. Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and McCabe (2005) called these representations, “hope-for possible selves” (p.739). The authors explained that these hoped-for possible selves

offer individuals “the opportunity not only to explore their possible selves online and offline but also to have those possible selves validated through both online and offline experiences” (p.739). In this sense, the authors believed online identity is fluid, and online profiles allow users to try on different personalities and identities.

Hardey (2004) also researched the role of authenticity in Internet courtship. Hardey explained that Internet daters often “market” themselves with the use of their photo and biographical narratives. Users’ authenticity is then ‘tested’ when potential partners decide to meet in person. Brym and Lenton (2003) discussed briefly the role of misrepresentation in dating profiles and noted, “Some people misrepresent themselves to stimulate interest” (p.7). Brym and Lenton found that over a quarter of their respondents confessed to misrepresenting themselves, especially about their age. Fourteen percent of their respondents said they had misrepresented their age, followed by marital status (10 percent), and appearance (10 percent). Lawson and Leck (2006) commented that “misrepresentation in online social interactions seems so natural that few seem to give much thought to what usually could be dismissed as a makeover of one’s persona” (pp. 200-201). They continue, “Given the limited amount of information available to the respondents about each other in Internet interactions and their transitory nature, deception is common” (p.201). Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and McCabe (2005) attempted to explain this trend by stating, “The greater level of anonymity provided by the Internet, as compared to face-to-face interactions, allows individuals to present aspects of their current perceptions of themselves that they would not ordinarily present to other members of society” (p.737). Therefore, it is the anonymity of the Internet that often allows for misrepresentations.

Similar to the research on authenticity, many studies have looked at the ways in which people attempt to build trust through the creation of their profiles. Hardey (2004) found some Internet daters open themselves up “fully” in their profiles and through initial chats in an attempt to evaluate compatibility, “for example, entering into detailed descriptions of their lives, which include details of why they are trying to meet a new partner” (p.214). Hardey explained that a “basic honesty underpins the content of email exchanges” because it is always possible you will meet the person and begin a relationship with them. As was explained above, authenticity of emails and exchanges is often tested when the initial meeting occurs. Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and McCabe (2005) also found that there is a strong desire amongst dating site users to be honest or truthful about themselves in their profiles. Still, in one study on Internet daters, 82 percent of respondents believed one of the largest disadvantages of online dating is people not telling you the truth about themselves (Brym and Lenton, 2003). In this study, women were significantly more likely than men to report this as a disadvantage. Furthermore, 72 percent of respondents in the same study believed the people they met online were hiding something. Again, women were more likely to report this being a significant disadvantage of Internet dating (Brym and Lenton, 2003). The 11 people with whom Brym and Lenton conducted in-depth interviews agreed unanimously that the number one disadvantage of online dating is that some people purposely misrepresent themselves.

Rosen et al. (2008) focused on the impact of emotionality and self-disclosure on online dating versus traditional dating. The researchers recruited 1,029 adult subjects from the Los Angeles and asked them about their demographics, use of various



communication technologies, and their experience with online dating. The results indicated that the amount of emotionality and self-disclosure affected a person's perception of a potential partner. In general, higher levels of self-disclosing messages were seen as reflecting a more positive and open person. However, online daters had a slightly higher tendency to prefer the person with the least self-disclosure. Traditional daters were split between the lowest and highest self-disclosers. Furthermore, male online daters actually preferred both high and low self-disclosures over moderate ones, whereas women preferred lower levels of self-disclosure. This study, like most the other studies on Internet dating, dealt mostly with young college educated participants. However, overall this seemed to be a strong study with good methodologies.

Merkle and Richardson (2000) researched the significance of infidelity as a source of betrayal in online relationships. The researchers found that in online-facilitated relationships, the definition of infidelity is often broadened to include more than just sexual behavior. They explained that because of the emphasis placed on emotional closeness in online-facilitated relationships, "infidelity within cyberspace is better accounted by emotional betrayal than sexual involvement" (p.190). Merkle and Richardson also noted that choosing to self-disclose to more than one person at a time was considered infidelity to some Internet daters.

Numerous researchers who have studied Internet dating have called for further research. First, Merkle and Richardson (2000) believe more research is needed to determine "how individuals in computer mediated relationships define the boundaries of betrayal, and whether infidelity is as destructive to such relationships as it is in non-computer mediated relating" (p.190). For instance, is it considered betrayal if you have

been on several dates with someone you met online and they still have their profile active on the dating site? Is it considered betrayal if the person you met online is currently chatting with several other potential partners? Second, Stephure et al. (2009) argue more research should incorporate age as an important variable in studies on Internet daters in order to understand “when, how and why age matters when it comes to matters of the heart initiated and enacted online” (p.677). Third, Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and McCabe (2005) argue more research needs to be done on the “hoped-for possible self”. What is the extent to which these changes in identity endure over time? Fourth, Fiore and Donath (2004) believe future research should consider building detailed models of which characteristics people seek most in online personals. Fiore and Donath also think an ethnographic study of a small number of users would “yield insight into the way individuals integrate online personals into their dating lives and how the systems affect their conceptions of relationships” (p.1398). There also seems to be a lack of research addressing the role of stigma in Internet dating. For instance, does shame or stigma associated with Internet dating affect relationships? These are all potential avenues for future research.

Personality, motivation, and issues surrounding self-disclosure are all psychological areas of research. It seems that most the research on Internet dating has been carried out with a psychological lens. Because this is a sociological research study, this paper will be conducted under the lens of sociological principles. It is important to note that psychology and sociology are not that different. Psychology studies the person and the mind. Sociology studies society and the impact of society on the individual. Because we are all members of a society, our behaviors and thoughts

are guided by principles of society. Therefore, the fields of psychology and sociology cannot and should not be separated, as they work together to understand the complex nature of human behavior. West and Zimmerman offer the theory of “doing gender” to analyze ways in which men and women behave in our society. This theory best encapsulates the complex nature of men and women’s behavior before and during intimate relationships. As a result, the theory of “doing gender” will guide this research and provide a lens in which to analyze participant’s responses.

### **Implications**

As was noted above, Clarke, Shaver, and Abrahams (1999) found that men tended to be more active and direct in the beginning stages of relational development whereas women used passive and indirect strategies more often than men in the beginning stages of a relationship. This study pertained to traditional (face-to-face) dating. It will be interesting to determine whether Internet daters behave similarly, or if they have broken free from the more traditional gender roles. Studies that have examined motivations of Internet daters have explained women are drawn to online dating because it provides them with more agency and freedom from stereotypical gender roles (Lawson and Leck, 2006). In other words, women are less likely to adhere to “appropriate” gendered performance (i.e. it is more acceptable for women to make the initial contact). With the security that arises from Internet dating, and the agency it provides women, it seems likely that there will be more equalitarian initiation practices in Internet relationship formation. To date, there has been no research addressing this important issue.

Furthermore, homogamy theory may be losing some credibility as Internet dating sites (and others newer forms of meeting partners) become a more popular way of meeting potential partners. For instance, Luo and Zhang (2009) found no evidence of the homogamy theory in their analysis of speed dating events. This makes sense considering Winch's argument that the perceived preference of homogamy is based more on our environment (i.e. who surrounds us) than our attraction to like-minded people. With newer ways of meeting others, many people outside our day-to-day activities are accessible. Researchers have demonstrated a positive association between marital satisfaction and similarities in terms of personality, attitudes, and beliefs (Fowers and Olsen, 1993). Because of the decreased emphasis placed on homogamy with the rise of Internet dating services, relationships formed online may report decreased satisfaction over time.

To suggest possible answers to a few of the research questions proposed at the beginning of this proposal: Results will likely find much difference in initiation strategies when focusing on gender and Internet dating. Additionally, it is likely that results will indicate that women feel they are better able to initiate relationships (are able to be more direct in their initiation) online versus in-person and that men and women are less likely to "perform" their gender in online settings versus in-person.

Furthermore, the business applications of such a study are important. Because more and more people use the Internet to begin relationships, there is a need for more research and information on Internet dating. Dr. Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist at Rutgers University was recently employed by chemistry.com (a division of match.com) as their Chief Scientific Advisor. She was asked to assist

chemistry.com in developing a personality test to match members of the site. If this study were to find men and women approach Internet dating differently, the results may help companies cater their sites to the unique preferences of their female and male members. In sum, shedding light on how men and women initiate online relationships may potentially assist in the development of Internet dating sites.

### **Justification for using Qualitative Interviews**

One major weaknesses of previous research on intimate relationships and gender is the relative lack of qualitative methods in research on intimate relationships and gender. Because of the nature of complex research questions pertaining to intimacy and gender, the use of qualitative methods should yield richer data. Furthermore, many of the research variables pertaining to intimate relationships are difficult to study. As a result, this study will employ in-depth interviews with online daters.

Using qualitative interviewing to study online dating would be beneficial for many reasons. First, dating is a private endeavor and interviews would help the researcher understand what thought process is involved in choosing partners, and what emotions are involved in the dating process. Matthews (2005) explained that because marriage and family life is generally private and not open to participant observation, understanding the intricacies of such lives could only be accomplished through interviewing. Furthermore, Clark, Shaver, and Abrahams (1999) study of initiation strategies noted that much of what happens when initiating a relationship occurs below the observational level and is therefore very difficult to study. In addition, much initiating behavior is subconscious in men and women and therefore difficult to capture with interviews and/or surveys. Second, there have not been many qualitative studies on

Internet daters or Internet dating. Because of this, using unstructured interviewing may help uncover common themes associated with online dating and Internet daters which has not been yet been explored. A few examples of Internet dating research using interviews will be provided below.

Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and McCabe (2005) used semi-structured interviews in their exploratory study on identity creation and recreation in online dating profiles. The authors explained they chose to use interviews so that respondents could express themselves freely and explain their actions. The authors used specific questions as a way to “direct the interview and obtain imperative pieces of information” (p. 740). In this way, the researchers were able to derive common themes: that the use of Internet dating services was generally triggered by an event, that respondents wanted to be honest and truthful about themselves in their profiles, and that many reported slightly stretching the truth in their profiles.

Lawson and Leck (2006) used in-depth, informal interviews to understand the motivations of Internet daters, their styles of courtship, and how they negotiated problems associated with trust and deception. These in-depth interviews were coded for themes that arose; such as trust, time, risk and need satisfaction. Because of the scarcity of previous research regarding Internet courtship, open-ended interviews were essential to pull out these themes.

Couch and Liamputtong (2008) used in-depth, online chat interviews to understand what extent online daters use Internet dating sites to meet sexual partners. The authors explained that using in-depth interviews allowed “the opportunity to probe and seek clarification from participants and it allowed participants to articulate their lived

experiences and to participate in a two-way conversation about these experiences” (p.270). The authors also believed their use of online chats enhanced the validity of the responses they received. Because online chats provide a sense of anonymity, the researchers believed respondents were more comfortable discussing private or stigmatized behaviors or activities.

## CHAPTER 3 DATA AND METHODS

### **Participants**

The analysis presented in this study is based on data from interviews with women who are currently using Internet dating sites. Interviews are focused on daters' perceptions of their experiences on the dating site (how they do internet dating), including gendered attributes and behaviors (how they do gender).

The interview sample for this study consists of never married, heterosexual women between the ages of 18-35. When recruiting participants, each volunteer was screened according to their gender, sexual orientation, age, and marital status. Furthermore, volunteers were asked to disclose which Internet dating site they use in order to determine whether their motivations are in-line with the requirements of this research. Only volunteers using Internet dating sites that advertise themselves as "dating" sites were accepted. These sites included, but were not limited to, businesses such as match.com, eharmony.com, okcupid.com, zoosk.com, perfectmatch.com, or plentyoffish.com. All volunteers had a stated motivation of wishing to find a committed relationship from their Internet dating site participation. Dating sites where people use sites for purposes of initiating physical or cyber sexual encounters were not included. There are multitudes of different dating sites, most of which were considered legitimate for purposes of this paper and research.

The data in this study resulted from 30 interviews. Saturation seemed to occur at 30 interviews. In other words, interviews yielded no new information at 30 participants. Charmaz explained, "categories are 'saturated' when gathering fresh data no longer



sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories” (p.113). Initial sampling occurred by snowball sampling, starting with ads posted around a college campus and on social networking sites (such as facebook). The ads referred to the study as an “Internet dating study”, as not to give away the gender component of the research. Volunteers were asked to email the researcher to determine eligibility and, if eligible, to set up an interview date and time. Interviews were conducted in-person or over a face-to-face Internet chat system such as Skype or iChat. If the participant preferred interviewing over an Internet chat system, an appointment was set up allowing for one hour of unobstructed face-time and the informed consent was emailed to them. In the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked to read the informed consent. In this, the participants were ensured their confidentiality would be kept: their name would not be linked to their transcribed remarks or mentioned in any report, and their information would be assigned a code number. The websites the participants used for Internet dating would be disclosed, but the specific interview data would not be linked with particular dating sites. As the first interviews were coded (discussed below), theoretical sampling occurred. Theoretical sampling sought and collected pertinent data to develop and refine the categories constructed during coding (Chamaz, 2006). For example, if codes continually found that women in graduate school report less conformity to gender stereotypes, the theoretical sampling should be guided in the direction of women in graduate school in order to explore the specific category at greater length.

## Interviews

Qualitative interviews can occur in many settings, ranging from unstructured interactions to formal interviews with respondents. The purpose of interviewing, according to Matthews (2005), is to “see a slice of the social world from the informant’s perspective” (p.800). There are many styles of interviewing: informal interviewing, unstructured interviewing, semi structured interviewing, and structured interviewing. Informal interviewing generally lacks structure. Unstructured interviews are open-ended and entail researchers asking questions and allowing conversations to ensue. Informal and unstructured interviewing are beneficial for exploratory studies. As the researcher discovers patterns in interviewee responses, he or she may want to develop an interview guide of more specific, semi-structured questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). When interviews have a very narrow focus and when interviewers are looking for specific pieces of information, a structured interview should be used (Rubin & Rubin).

For this interview, a semi-structured interview guide was used from which the interviews were guided. However, I was more interested in the story of Internet dating from the participant’s perspective. As such, I employed active interviewing. Holstein and Gurbrium (1995) describe active interviewing as a conversation between the researcher and the interviewee: “In contrast to the standardized questionnaire, which dictates the questions to be asked, the active interview guide is advisory, more of a conversational agenda than a procedural directive (p.76)”. The interview was guided by my research agenda, but remained very flexible to allow for shifts in the interviewee’s narrative. Holstein and Gurbrium explained, “An interview guide can provide the interviewer with a set of predetermined questions that might be used as appropriate to engage the

respondent and designate the narrative terrain (p.76)". Active interviewing works very well with constructivist grounded theory, the methodology discussed below. As a grounded theorist, an interviewer must ask participants to describe and reflect upon particular experiences. The interviewer, from this methodology, must listen, observe, and encourage responses to a few broad, open-ended questions. In grounded theory, as in active interviewing, the interviewer is more concerned with eliciting a narrative from the participant than sticking to a structured interview guide.

This active interview was guided by four main questions (see Box 1). The first question asked the participant how they get started doing Internet dating (how do they construct their profile and contact others). The second question asked the participants to explain how they choose other users' profiles (what they look for in other's profiles). The third question was open-ended: "Talk to me about one person you met online that resulted in two or more in-person dates. Tell me about that process". The last questions were aimed to provide respondents with an opportunity to add anything else pertinent to their Internet dating experience that has not already been covered. These four questions were designed to encourage respondents to tell their Internet dating "story". I analyzed their responses/stories to determine how they do gender as they do Internet dating. After these questions, each subject was given a brief written questionnaire asking their age, ethnicity, occupation, level of education, religion, length of participation in Internet dating, and 5 words that summarize how they wish to be portrayed in their Internet dating profile. Participants were asked about these demographics in order to take into consideration variations by race, ethnicity, class, age, and religion. As I mentioned above, race, class, and gender are all components of "doing difference", and

were analyzed when coding interviews. Furthermore, since principles of homogamy and filter theory were analyzed, I wanted to have this demographic information accessible.

The major focus of the interview was on how participants do their gender while doing Internet dating. For instance, do relationship initiation strategies differ for women when beginning an Internet-mediated relationship versus a traditional relationship? How do the beginning stages of Internet-mediated relationships differ from other more traditional relationships? Do women feel they are less committed to stereotypical gendered behavior online? All of these questions shed light onto how and when initiation of intimate relationships occurs. For purposes of this research, initiation will be defined as a) who sends the first message online to begin communication, b) who initiates the first in-person meeting, and c) who asks for the second in-person meeting.

The interviews occurred at a location and time that was convenient for the interviewee. In the beginning of the interview, the participants were asked for permission to tape the interview. If taping was permitted, I only took notes during the key points of the interview. These taped interviews were transcribed. If taping was not permitted, the participants were asked if they would feel comfortable with me taking notes during the interview. These notes were expanded later the same day. Furthermore, I wrote memos about these interviews and my experiences conducting these interviews the same day the interview was conducted. Memo writing allows the researcher to engage in the data and remain as reflexive as possible. Fonow and Cook (1991) explained reflexivity is the ability “to reflect upon, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research process” (p.3). When engaged in research it is important for researchers to reflect on their thinking and experiences “from a standpoint

that is relatively, not absolutely, outside them” (Minnich, 1990, p.30). In addition, my own demographics undeniably influenced some interviews. In the memos, it was important for me to note how my own race, class, gender, age, and ideologies may have affected the interview and my relationship with the interviewee. Because I was using constructivist grounded theory (discussed below), it was critical to engage in memo writing. In constructivist grounded theory, the theory that arises in the data *depends* on the researcher’s view of the data and research process (Charmaz, 2006). In keeping track of reflexivity, the understanding of both the phenomenon under study and the research process itself will be enhanced. Furthermore, memo writing kept track of reoccurring themes (categories) and incomplete categories in the data, which will be discussed in greater depth below. Keeping track of reoccurring themes and incomplete categories aided in theoretical sampling, which was discussed above. As the categories became saturated with data (no new properties emerge), theoretical sampling ceased.

### **Coding and Analysis**

The transcribed interviews were coded for themes that arose. The coding focused on how participants do gender and Internet dating. Many of the scholars noted in the literature review explained race, class, and gender cannot be separated when analyzing social issues. As such, race and class were considered within the context of the interview data.

Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was used to analyze interview data. Grounded theory methods consist of “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves (p.2)”. Interviews using grounded theory methodologies are particularly useful because

they permit an “in-depth exploration of a particular topic with a person who has had the relevant experience (Charmaz, 2006, p.25)”. This method of studying qualitative data began with Glaser and Strauss (1967). Glaser and Strauss argued that theories should be developed from data, instead of deducing testable hypotheses from existing data. Analysis of data occurs through a constant comparison of interview codes. The coding of interviews reveals categories or common themes in the data. The connections of these categories are documented in memos throughout the research process, forming a “story line” of the study. This story line provides a framework, from which a theory will emerge.

Grounded theory has taken on different forms since its creation: constructivist and objectivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Objectivist grounded theory resides in the positivist tradition and “assumes that data represent objective facts about a knowable world. The data already exists in the world; the researcher finds them and ‘discovers’ theory from there (Charmaz, 2006, p.131)”. Constructivist grounded theory, on the other hand, “places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data (p.130)”. Constructivist grounded theory is more concerned with the how and why of participants constructing meaning and actions in specific situations. For this reason, constructivist grounded theory approach was used in this study. Doing gender, as explained above, is reinforced through social interactions. This study is interested in *how* people do gender.

Charmaz (2006) explained that grounded theorists must continually evaluate the fit between their initial research question and their emerging data. As grounded

theorists, we should not force theory or preconceived ideas onto our data, but rather follow leads we find in the data through coding. As part of this, we should not necessarily adopt or reproduce their views as our own but instead, interpret them separately from our knowledge. Because I entered into this study having conducted a literature review on Internet dating, I was sure not to impose my preconceived ideas and knowledge onto the interviewees or data, but instead paid close attention to theories emerging *from* the data.

Coding is the first step in grounded theory data analysis and aids in synthesizing many interviews and documents to develop a grounded theory. Charmaz (2006) explained, "Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (p.43). Coding shapes the analytic frame from which a researcher builds the analysis and aims to address the first question in grounded theory, "What's happening here?" (Glaser, 1978). There are two main phases of grounded theory coding: 1) an initial phase that included naming each word, line, or segment and 2) a focused, selective phase that categorizes the most frequent codes (Charmaz, 2006).

Initial coding occurred first. Charmaz (2006) advised researchers to ask the following questions during initial coding: 1) What is this data a study of? 2) What does the data suggest? Pronounce? 3) From whose point of view? 4) What theoretical category does this specific datum indicate? (p.47). Initial coding sticks close to the data and codes for words reflecting action. In initial coding, the researcher must work quickly through the data, remain open to exploring theoretical possibilities, keep codes simple and precise, develop short cuts, preserve actions, and compare data with data

(Charmaz). Furthermore, Glaser (1978) advised coding with gerunds to help detect processes within the data.

Line-by-line coding was part of the initial coding process. Line-by-line coding helps the researcher see actions and identify significant processes within the interview data. Charmaz (2006) advised researchers to ask the following questions to aid in this process: 1) What process(es) is at issue here? How can I define it? 2) How does this process develop? 3) How does the research participant(s) act while involved in this process? 4) What does the research participant(s) profess to think and feel while involved in this process? What might his or her observed behavior indicate? 5) When, why, and how does this process change? 6) What are the consequences of the process? (p.51). The line-by-line coding should provide leads to follow. Word-by-word coding will be used to analyze participant's profiles. The line-by-line (and word-by-word) coding will help separate data into categories and see processes within the data. The coding also included in vivo codes; codes that condense meanings of widely used terms that participants assume everyone shares. In vivo codes are important because they are characteristic of the social world in which one lives.

Once I felt that there was strong analytical progress made with the initial coding, a more focused coding occurred. The most significant and frequent codes were pulled from the line-by-line coding. Focused coding helped determine which initial codes should be categorized by comparing data to data. After those codes were finished, theoretical codes were applied to the focused coding. The theoretical codes specified possible relationships between the categories established during focused coding.



## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS, PART I: CHANGING GENDER SCRIPTS AND INITIATION

Online dating has seemed to change dating and gender scripts for women. Online dating has altered what women are looking for in men and the ways they initiate relationships. Many of the women interviewed acknowledge that Internet dating is different than more traditional forms of dating in that they feel more liberated to seek the perfect match and initiate contact with men. The data supporting this claim revolves around several important findings: First, Internet dating has allowed for women to pick out very specific characteristics in men that they report being important to them in relationships. Women report these specific characteristics may not matter so much if they had met the man in a face-to-face setting. Second, the initiation process of Internet-mediated relationship is scripted by rules and expectations unlike those used in traditional dating practices. Women report these rules make the beginning stages of dating more predictable and accessible. Third, many of the women interviewed reported Internet dating is a more convenient way to meet men given their work and school schedules. It seems that this change is the result of larger social issues such as women spending more time at school and on their careers than before.

#### **Picking out Specific Characteristics**

Internet dating has made it easier for women to pick out specific characteristics in men they report being important in potential partners. As such, the data from these interviews indicated that women are very active during the initiation phases of the Internet mediated relationship. The women interviewed reported working very hard and spending a good deal of time screening the men on the dating sites and picking out very

specific characteristic, such as height, eye color, education, and employment status. As was discussed in the literature review section, a study performed by Clark, Shaver, and Abrahams (1999) found that women used passive and indirect strategies more often than men in the beginning stages of a relationship. The data from the interviews shows that women are actually very direct in their desires and are very active in pursuing their needs. The virtual atmosphere of Internet dating seems to liberate women to search and sort through men based on very specific characteristics.

Many of the women interviewed reported that they were expecting to find the “perfect” match on these dating sites. Nancy commented, “When you're paying for it, you feel that you're paying and you want to get exactly what you want.” With the ability to narrow down the exact types of characteristics one is looking for in a partner, many of the women reported expecting nothing less than perfection. Paige explained:

There are people who are looking for the perfect someone. Because you can go online, and find someone who looks like they're the perfect match on paper, and then – maybe they're not- but there's always another profile that's just a little bit better. You wouldn't do that at a bar because you know the whole package at the beginning. These people are on a search for the perfect person.

Further, the large pool of men on these dating sites makes it necessary to search for specific characteristics to make the pool more accessible. Without searching for specific criteria or limiting out certain characteristics, there are simply too many men to sort through. The following excerpts illustrate the need women feel to narrow down their search criteria:

When I got through profiles- I don't browse- I search for criteria. Like the basics- height, ethnicity, body type, educational... I would date guys shorted than 5'10, somebody who has a graduate level education, I think we'll be more compatible later on, no kids, close to where I live, not married, and I only date white guys- they're who I find attractive. And good looking. Those are the initial criteria-

otherwise there are way too many guys on the site. It narrows it down to a few hundred guys that I can sort through. (Paige)

It does really get to be the laundry list- I've really tried to get it down to my essential things- likes to travel, etc- but beyond that I try not to nit pick about the details, because you can just really get extremely picky because there's so much information. (Jean)

In the beginning, I tried to respond to all the messages. But then after a while, you get more messages and you have to filter through them... Trying to filter out lifestyle choices, what you think about sex, personality traits, what would you do in this situation, stuff like that. (Bri)

Some women explained a man's potentially negative qualities might be overlooked if they had met in person. However, a few of the women reported it is harder to overlook a man's negative qualities when sorting through their dating profiles and those qualities are clearly written out. Tristan explained, "There's so many things that you're judging people upfront for that if you met them in person would be excusable, I suppose, if you were really interested in them." This idea was echoed in several other interviews, such as Kristy's:

I think that being able to be picky and filter people out has made me that much more moody about who I want to date. I'm looking for this perfect person now- so now I'm like, this person isn't tall enough, so I'm not going to date them- but if they were face to face with me, I might actually get along with them and look past the fact they're 5'6 and not 6'1.

The ability to search and sort through the thousands of Internet dating profiles has made women much more picky about who they date and much more active in seeking a "perfect" partner. They want the man with all of the characteristics they have always hoped they would find in a partner. The pool of eligibles has become much larger with Internet dating sites, and as a result, women are now able to be much more specific about their desires and expectations in a partner. The following excerpts from a few interviews illustrate the extent of these expectations:

Well for me, it's more about beliefs and religion. Height. I'm tall, so... I don't want someone who is shorter than me. I guess what they're interested in. I'm looking for someone with a Christian faith. I'm into art, so anyone who's interested in art. Traveling. That's something everyone says- traveling. Anyone who is the creative type. I want someone who has a job. If they're out of work, I'm not interested. I filter out by their picture- that helps. I think it would be mainly pictures, height, religion, those are the main ones. (Catherine)

When I search for people I put in a filter for only 6' or higher. They have to fall within slim to average or athletic. They can't be a few pound over or overweight. They have to be active and workout 3-4 times per week. They have to have a job, yeah. Um, and preferably never married. I look for that first. And I'm pretty picky about whether or not they have kids. And if have cats, they're done. No cats. If they have cats only, it weirds me out. If they have cats and dogs, that's okay. But just cats, no. Obviously, [the picture is] the first thing you look at, but then you have to read their profiles. Picture first, and I look at the picture... They have to have nice teeth, and if they're not smiling in any of their pictures, then they're out. I think it's weird if people don't smile in their pictures. And you're out if you take dorky pictures like with your shirt off in the mirror, or next to your car. Any guy standing next to their car, they're really materialistic, and they're out. I'm like "yuck". Or in front of the mirror. (Sandy)

If someone has a spelling error – like if they write “to” instead of “too”- any sort of spelling error, that's a complete turn off and I don't care how perfect you are. If you don't know how to spell - that's just the biggest turn off. And I think that's kind of like – not that I haven't dated guys that didn't know how to spell or write very well, or were avid readers- it's just that when you get on this site, all of a sudden, you can be that picky person. You actually may to find someone to date, so you need to be picky. I've gotten much more picky since I've been given the opportunity to be more picky on these sites. (Kristy)

Women also reported enjoying being able to know facts about the men before they committed to go on a date. Many of the women explained that it was nice being able to filter for all of the characteristics they desired in a man and *then* decide to invest time in a date with them. The dating profiles offered many facts about men: their occupation, income, height, eye color, educational level, religion, political stance, astrological sign, whether or not they have children or pets, and many more facts. Knowing these characteristics upfront made it easier for women to decide whether they would meet this man in a face-to-face setting. The following excerpt illustrate the importance of this:

You have a chance to think about it before making a decision. You also get to screen them. I feel when you meet someone out, you really have to go with your instinct, and sometimes your judgment is impaired at the time. So this is a little more like, you can actually sit there and think about it a little bit before getting yourself into something. That's number one. And number two: you can ask them questions more blatantly. Because it's obvious that you're both trying to screen each other out. So I feel like you can be more honest about what you want. (Mandy)

Mandy appreciated that she was able to think about whether she would like to pursue a man further before she made a decision. Dating online offered her this convenience, which she valued. Further, she felt more liberated to ask more questions in an online setting than in a face-to-face setting. Dating online opens the door to more obvious screening methods, including "blatant" questions. Paige voiced similar beliefs about online dating and the capability to screen more easily online:

It's hard to go out and meet people in a more conventional setting. I look at it as online shopping. I get to look specifically for things that are important to me that I'm not going to be able to compromise on. And if I can make those decisions at the beginning and not spend time on people who aren't compatible. (Paige)

Paige viewed online dating as "online shopping", where she was able to pick and choose specific characteristics she wanted in a potential partner. She was able to make her initial decisions based off these characteristics and not have to waste time trying to decide if the man had all of these specific traits. Online dating, therefore, made it easier for Paige to filter (or "shop") for characteristics she deemed as important in potential partners. Samantha reiterated the appreciation for knowing a man's specific characteristics upfront:

At a bar, you don't know, you meet someone because they approach you and they have something good to say or you find them attractive. But you don't know their educational background, or their political affiliation, that may make you incompatible- more substantial than a one night conversation. At a bar, you meet

people primarily on physical attraction and over time I don't think that's a solid base for a relationships. (Samantha)

To Samantha, basing a relationship off of specific characteristics such as their educational background or political affiliation was much more stable than basing it off of physical attraction. Online dating allowed her to filter for those specific characteristics, ultimately leading to a more stable base on which to build a relationship. Chelsea echoed these concerns:

Maybe you don't want to have sex before marriage so you're going to click that on your preferences and the site will only match you with people who have also clicked that. So that right there helps you narrow stuff down- and you cant do that in real life. That's a nice feature as well. I think now a days, in the modern era, people have different expectation and levels of experience, so when you're just meeting someone its really awkward to –you don't know what you're getting yourself into always- whereas on the site you can kind of know more what you're getting yourself into. (Chelsea)

Chelsea appreciated that she was able to know what she was getting herself into before she went on a date with a man. She was able to filter for characteristics she deemed were important, making her more compatible with men she chooses to date. With the advent of Internet dating, women feel like they are better able to be picky about the men they want to date. Further, women are careful to screen for many of the characteristics they deem important or necessary in potential partners.

Many of the women interviewed also noted the importance of a man's appearance. The profile pictures are generally the first, and most important, part of a man's profile at which the woman looks. Two interviewees explained why:

Just because there are so many profiles- I sometimes feel kind of shallow- bc I don't really look at profiles without pictures. You're already sorting through so much information. You're trying to start a relationship... or start talking with someone when you don't even know what they look like. It's just too much. (Jean)

I'm pretty shallow- One of the first things I filter is religion, and then I filter for education and income. I specify the Catholic part. If it's Christian, I'll click on that, or any denomination of Christian, I'll put down those to widen my search. But I prefer someone who is Catholic. And then I will do the income thing and it's 100,000 + and then education is like higher education. But if you filter someone through education, then the income kind of follows to where they make a decent income. And then the physical features and characteristics. What their hobbies are comes later than what do they look like, how tall are they. After I filter for religion and then education I tend to be super shallow and just scroll down to look at pictures. And I'm like no, no, no. (Kristy)

Sorting through the men's profile pictures once an initial search is completed is the first screening done by women in most cases. Once the men get through this first screen, the women will read his profile.

These interviews made it clear that women were engaging in a filtering of potential partners. Filter theory can be applied to what these women were doing when they were searching the Internet dating sites for potential dates. Filter theory states individuals use homogamy to sift through possible mates to find ones to which they are similar (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962). For instance, we tend to date others who live in a similar geographic region, who are as attractive as we are, who are of similar race/ethnicity, religion, age, social class, and who share similar values. Murstein (1970) also wrote about filter theory, stating individuals filter out potential mates through a three stage process referred to as Stimulus-Value-Role. The first stage, stimulus, consists of filtering through visual, auditory, and non-interactional means. These female online daters engage in this stage when scanning through the images and profiles of the men. The second stage, value, consists of filtering through verbal interactions. The female online daters engage in this stage when talking with the men on the phone prior to the date, and then while on the initial dates. The third stage, role, involves the ability of the

couple to function well in mutually assigned roles. Since this study is primarily interested in relationship formation, this third stage of the filter theory was not explored.

Furthermore, it seems that because these women are paying monthly dues for being part of their dating site, they believe in imposing rigid filters when looking for dates. The women feel this way partially because the dating sites make it easier for them to filter using specific parameters, and partially because they feel like they are paying to find a perfect partner that meets all their expectations. The dating sites host huge numbers of men. Women see themselves as the consumers, and become incredibly picky because they have so many options; they want their “product” to meet all their expectations, or they will just look elsewhere.

The role of women in the United States has been changing in the past several decades. Women are taking more initiative for their education and careers, and as these results indicate, their partner selection as well. West and Zimmerman (1987) explain that doing gender is unavoidable since the allocation of power and resources is present in the domestic, economic and political domains, as well as in the broad arena of interpersonal relations (p.8). As a result, in all situations, a person is performing their gender. West and Zimmerman also note that social movements, such as the feminist movement, provide the ideology and impetus to question these performances. The feminist movement weakened the social accountability of people to perform their gender. During the feminist movement, women were offered more freedom to stray from traditional notions of femininity. In doing so, women took more initiative in pursuing their educations and careers, something that was viewed as acceptable behavior (or gender performance) before the feminist movement. The results of these interviews indicate



that women are also taking more initiative in choosing their romantic partners. With the rise of online dating sites, and the changing gender norms and expectations in our society, women feel more liberated to search and filter for specific characteristics they desire in potential partners.

It is clear that what women are looking for in potential partners is changing, partially due to their changing roles in society; women seem to think they are doing gender differently than they have done it in the past. However, as West and Zimmerman pointed out, one can never truly opt out of doing gender. Although much has changed for women over the past few decades, women are still doing gender when choosing their ideal man. The women interviewed were still quite bound to hegemonic ideals when filtering out traits. The women were looking for good looking, tall, educated men with good jobs that paid well. So, although women feel as if they have more agency and are taking more initiative in finding the “perfect man”, they still seem quite concentrated on hegemonic ideals.

### **Scripted Rules and Expectations**

From the interviews, it is clear that the initiation process of Internet-mediated relationship is scripted by rules and expectations specific to Internet dating. Women report these rules and expectations make the beginning stages of dating more predictable. Many of the women interviewed women reported enjoying the week or two of email exchanges getting to know one another and the initial coffee date. Further, if a woman decides she is not interested after a few email exchanges or dates, she is simply able to cut off contact. It seems, however, that there is some confusion over what

should be done with your profile if you do decide to date someone. This will be explained below.

Many of the women interviewed reported there is an understood process to relationship formation online. Usually, contact is made with the person of interest and this contact is followed by getting to know one another virtually. This process generally results in a long lead up or introductory period that allows women to slowly get to know the man in which they may be interested. This process helps women decide whether they really want to meet the man face-to-face. Paige explained:

I think its because I do end up emailing back and forth before I actually meet someone. And you can kind of get the idea if someone is off when you email back and forth- usually 3-4 conversations back and forth. The contact is important before you meet someone. I meet with people if I have this amount of contact which can take 3-4 days to a few weeks.

A few women reported phone screens as being an important part of their screening/introductory process. Linda explained, "I made the rule to myself to always talk on the phone before I meet somebody." Beth argued phone screening is the best way to test compatibility before you meet the man face-to-face, "Some people try and do a phone screen before they meet....I've actually talked to people on the phone prior to meeting and had a lot in common with them and then you know within the first 5 minutes whether you're compatible." These women report that phone screening is a common, and often important, first step in the online dating process.

Many of the other women reported virtual communication prior to a face-to-face face was standard and expected by both parties. Generally this communication occurs off the dating site. Chloe explained that after initial contact was made on the dating site, the two exchanged more personal information, "So I gave him my real name and he

added me on Facebook. So we became Facebook friends. Whenever I would see him online, we would chat.” Other virtual communication occurs via personal email:

There’s a similar pattern with most people I’ve gone out with- one, two, or three emails is about standard. And then, someone usually gives the other person their phone number. He called me, I think we spoke a couple times- maybe for like a half an hour. And then he asked me when I was available, we set up a date, and then I went out with him. So that’s kind of the usual progression of these things.  
(Jean)

Jean explained that email communication was a common first step in the online dating process. Beth had a similar experience:

We would send an email back and forth every day- one person would send one one day and the other person would send on the next day. So this went on for a good week and a half to two weeks, to the point where I was like wondering when we were going to leave the Internet and actually meet in person (Beth)

This process of virtual communication prior to the initial face-to-face meeting is fairly standard, according to the interviews. The women interviewed reported this communication prior to the initial date helped the relationship progress and allowed for them to feel more comfortable with the initial meeting.

The initial face-to-face date also tends to follow an agreed upon process. Generally initial dates occur in public places and include brief meetings where the women can decide whether they would like to invest more time in this man. Linda explained, “It really has changed the dating culture. You used to be asked out to dinner. Now, it’s ‘let’s go and meet for coffee to see if I want to spend more than 10 minutes with you’”. Sandy employs this dating style when Internet dating, “We have multiple conversations on instant chat multiple nights in a row. And then we started texting and then we decided to meet for coffee.” Even after two months of chatting online, Nancy

thought it would be necessary to meet in a public place to allow for a quick getaway if they decided they were not attracted to one another face-to-face:

We talked online for a while- about a month. We actually just corresponded through the website, then we exchanged yahoo names. And we chatted on yahoo for another two months. So we met at grand station in New York- very public. That way, if we didn't like the way we looked in person, we could just go our separate ways.

This brief initial face-to-face contact seems fairly standard according to the women interviewed. The briefness of the date allows women to feel less committed to the date and better able to cut short the meeting if they feel as if they are not truly compatible with the man.

The women interviewed explained that there is also protocol for cutting off communication with a man you discover you are not interested in after chatting with online or after several dates. Nancy explained, "Usually, you exchange contact info. And then you start texting, and then when it doesn't work out, you just stop texting." Cutting off communication with someone you met online proves much easier because the women report not really "knowing" the man anyway:

I didn't want to have to tell him he wasn't my type- it was just easier for me to just ignore someone since I met him not face to face anyway and it was just so impersonal that I felt like shutting him out that way wasn't that rude. (Kristy)

More complications arise when you have been on more than one date with someone. For instance, a few women reported not knowing when to remove their profile from the site once they started dating someone in person. These women wondered whether it was standard protocol for them to talk to their dating partner before they remove it. Kristy explained these complications and the reasons for these worries:

If you're dating someone, don't you think you should close your account? Why are you still on this? I feel like that's kind of insulting to the person you're dating, especially if you've been dating for a while. Maybe they're unsure of the person they're dating, so they continue to be active on the site. I feel like men and women both do this. I wonder if it's a common practice. What is good dating etiquette? If you're dating someone, do you offline then? Because you're dating someone? And how long do you have to be dating someone to be like an okay time to bring that up to the other person: "You're still on match.com and we've been dating for 3 months"? Is that ok? Or not okay? I just wonder what the etiquette is behind that. If I found someone that I dated for a few months, I would probably go off the site. Two weeks, two dates- I'd still be on it. Maybe it's the seriousness of the person and how much you connect- maybe its not the time but the actual relationship- the connection and the chemistry of the relationship. Maybe people stay on or don't stay on because of the degree of commitment in the relationship. But I wonder how that works? You know, is there online dating etiquette? Like when you're dating someone? How do you know – maybe if it's an agreement between the two people to go off the site at the same time. Because if I met someone and a week later they were like "I'm going off the site" and I'm like, "well I'm not interested in you like that". That's like the reverse of what I want. But it's a nice gesture, but I wonder how that works.

Although it seems like there is a scripted protocol for the initial contact and dates resulting from Internet dating sites, it appears unclear about what to do with your profile after you have started seeing someone on a regular basis. Since the dating process is quite different online than in person, it appears that some of the women interviewed are still trying to navigate through the "rules" of online dating. Online dating provides these women with initiative and independence, and it seems unclear how that translates into the beginning stages of a relationship. For instance, Kristy reported wanting the decision to pull her profile from the site to be her decision, but struggles with the idea of whether she should consult her new partner first. Women feel liberated to make their own decisions about partner selection and dating online, and this choice seems compromised when a new relationship forms.

As was mentioned previously, the women interviewed feel liberated to filter through partners and initiate dates. They reported appreciating the online dating

process, in that it gave them more freedom and authority to initiate interactions with men they thought would be a good match as well as cut off contact with men in which they were no longer interested.

When studying traditional, or face-to-face, dating, Clarke, Shaver, and Abrahams (1999) found that men tended to be more active and direct in the beginning stages of relational development whereas women used passive and indirect strategies more often than men in the beginning stages of a relationship. These research findings do not indicate that is the case. This may possibly be due to the virtual interactions associated with the online dating process. Women seem to feel less accountable to traditional gender scripts when dating online. The way women are doing gender in a virtual setting is different than the way they would do their gender in a more traditional (face-to-face) setting. Studies that have examined motivations of Internet daters have explained women are drawn to online dating because it provides them with more agency and freedom from stereotypical gender roles (Lawson and Leck, 2006). Korman (1983) noted in her research that dating has traditionally implied certain tacit norms and cues that define the behavior of those engaged in the dating process. Some of these norms include male-controlled date initiation. Korman noted, in 1983, that these norms were beginning to shift into more egalitarian roles in the dating process. Korman also attributed these changing norms and ways of doing gender to the feminist movement.

### **Convenient way to Meet Men**

It seems that the women interviewed acknowledge that Internet dating is different than more traditional forms of dating in that it is much more accessible to them. It seems that this belief is the result of larger social issues such as women spending more time at

school and on their careers than before. Women report Internet dating being more convenient in terms of meeting potential dates because they are so busy. Mandy explained, “For me, I’m just so busy, that when I do go out I don’t want to have to think about meeting somebody.” Mandy’s feelings were echoed in several other interviews:

The job that I had didn’t give me a lot of down time where I could go out to bars and clubs and things like that. I wanted to meet somebody but I didn’t have the time to go out and meet anybody. A friend told me about it and I looked it up and it wasn’t that bad. I just went from there. I just didn’t have to time actually go out and meet somebody. (Nancy)

Nancy did not want to allocate time to sifting through potential partners in a traditional setting. Meeting men online was much more convenient and time effective for her.

Paige echoed this feeling:

I started because the hours that I work- when I have free time I’m generally trying to not meet new people, but to spend time with people who are important in my life. It’s hard to go out and meet people in a more conventional setting. (Paige)

Paige spent most of her free time outside of work getting together with established friends. She felt it was an inconvenience to try and meet men in the little time she had outside of work. She also felt that it was difficult to meet men in a traditional (face-to-face) setting. Sandy reiterated this belief:

So when I was 19, I was working full time and going to school full time and there was no way to meet new people. And now, being in [in this city], being a graduate student, and working out as much as I do, I have a hard time connecting with people outside of the social groups I am already in. (Sandy)

A few of the women interviewed felt that it was harder to meet men in larger cities.

Sandy, in particular, was having difficulty meeting people outside her social circle.

Online dating opened up doors to other social circles, allowing her to meet a wider variety of men. For these women, most of their time is spent at work or in school.

Meeting men in a more traditional face-to-face setting simply is not realistic for them.

Further, as was noted above, a few of the women interviewed said that it was especially difficult to meet men in big cities, specifically others in your age group. Catherine noted, “I live in a big city, where it’s hard to really meet people. [Internet dating] is a good way to meet people and get out there.” Chelsea eloquently explained how Internet dating has made it easier for her to meet men in the big city in which she lives:

So I guess I think that’s cool because I think it has great potential to be a really great and useful tool in such the globalized world that we live in. Especially in a big city I think it is really difficult to meet people and it is a good way – or it has the potential to be a really good way to meet people that you wouldn’t normal ever come across.... A lot of people were saying it’s not as weird anymore to do online dating. The stigma is lessening and it’s just more realistic for people in a big city where you’re outside of that college atmosphere and it’s less easy to meet people your age that are single and interested in a relationship.

The inability to meet men in a traditional face-to-face setting was noted as a matter of concern for many of the women interviewed, whether or not they live in a big city. Other women reported that they simply have a difficult time meeting people face-to-face in a traditional way. These women report Internet dating being helpful in allowing them to meet potential partners. As Bri noted, “Well, what do I have to loose? I’m not meeting guys actively. I’m single. You know what, I’m just going to wing it. Why not?” Chelsea also explained that it was difficult for her to meet men in a face-to-face setting given her life circumstances:

So I moved to DC after I graduated college in may and I had been in the city for maybe like 6-7 months and I noticed that the social scene is much different once you get out of college. So a big thing was that I lived in a groups house and I had coworkers- so I had a very set group of friends. But I just found it difficult to meet people outside of those social groups. So, all my coworkers are female and the people in my house I just wanted to live with. Yeah, I just kind of felt that it was difficult to find avenues just to meet someone randomly. Because yeah, I would go out and I went and did things in college. But the biggest thing was that in the past, the people I have dated, have been introduced through a mutual friend. And now that my social circle was sort of different and that also my coworkers are a



lot older and it's not like they're really connected to like guys are in my age bracket or people that I would be interested in.

Beth had similar arguments surrounding her use of Internet dating sites. She had just moved to a city where she did not know anyone and was not meeting people outside of her immediate circles at work:

So I've done Internet dating three different times. The first time I was living in Portland OR and I wasn't interested in meeting people at bars, but I wasn't really meeting people outside of my circle. So that's when I started Internet dating. Then I was living in India, and when I moved back last year I was living at home and I didn't know tons of people in Milwaukee so I started internet dating for three moths and then I actually met someone outside of internet dating so I stopped then.

Nancy explained that she had been doing Internet dating for such a long period of time that it actually felt strange for her to try and meet men in a more traditional setting, "When I meet people in person, sometimes its just weird. I'm just so used to meeting people online, that it's weird when I meet people in person because I've been doing online dating for so long. I get awkward." Further, Sandy argued that many women are turning to Internet dating because it is difficult for them to meet men in a traditional face-to-face setting that meet their standards, "There's a really large population of educated single women- especially in my department. All these amazing people- it just doesn't line up between what we want and what's available."

As was previously discussed, women are changing the way they do their gender. This change has stemmed from the feminist movement and societal notions and expectations about femininity. In the past, women were expected to put their energy into their families- to "do" the role of mother and wife. Now, women are spending more pursuing school and careers and investing more energy into non-romantic relationships. Because of this, women are left with less time to meet men and pursue romantic

relationships. Online dating offers women a time effective and convenient way to meet men amidst all the other responsibilities they have in their life.

### **Conclusion**

Regardless of their reasoning, it seems as though Internet dating has allowed for a safe space where women may search, sort, and filter through many men's dating profiles to find their perfect match. Women are very active in this process and seem to be expecting to find perfection in a partner since they are investing their time and (sometimes) their money into these Internet dating sites. The dating scripts which guide the process seem to be of comfort to these female internet daters, as it allows for time to think about their potential date and gives them an opportunity to dodge commitment if that is what they desire.

Women's roles in the United States have been changing drastically since the feminist movement. Women are spending more time and expending more effort on their education and careers, as well as non-romantic relationships. Women are also taking more initiative for their partner selections, not settling for less than what they report wanting. As was noted above, West and Zimmerman (1987) explain that doing gender is unavoidable and a person is performing their gender in all situations. They note that social movements, such as the feminist movement, provide the ideology and impetus to question gender performances; the feminist movement weakened the social accountability of people to perform their gender. These results are indicating that women feel more liberated to stray from traditional gender and dating norms, and that the advent of online dating is helping this feeling of liberation. Women report feeling liberated to search and filter for specific characteristics they desire in potential partners.

Further, online dating offers women a time effective and convenient way to meet men amidst all the other responsibilities they have in their life. In addition to these changes, the women interviewed reported appreciating the online dating process. The process allows more freedom and authority to initiate interactions with men the women thought would be a good match as well as making it easier to cut off contact with men in which they were no longer interested. Women seem to feel less accountable to traditional gender scripts when dating online. The way women are doing gender in a virtual setting is different than the way they would do their gender in a more traditional (face-to-face) setting.

## CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS, PART II: DATING EXPECTATIONS HAVE REMAINED THE SAME

Although the women interviewed made it clear that dating practices have changed with the advent of Internet dating, there were still a few dating expectations that remained the same. First, the notion that romantic relationships begin with initial “chemistry” has remained the same, even though dating practices seem to be changing. Although the convenience of Internet dating was dually noted in most interviews, many of the women said there was no good replacement for the initial chemistry one feels when they first met someone face-to-face. Even though many of the men looked great on “paper”, when the women finally met them in person, they reported there was no “chemistry”. Second, even though women reported appreciating the predictability of the initial stages of Internet dating, many said it made dating online seem "artificial" and "scripted". Many women spoke of the importance of desiring to meet someone "out and about", but not having the time to do so. Further, many women reported that the spontaneity of meeting someone face-to-face was desirable. Third, many women reported that no matter how they go about dating, most the men they meet are only interested in sex. These women reported that was not what they were looking for, and avoided dating sites that were known for being "hook-up" sites (okcupid, plentyoffish, zoosk).

### **The Importance of “Chemistry”/ the “Spark”**

Many of the women interviewed reported that even though the men on the dating site would look great in their profile and pictures, there was still a sense that something was “missing” when they met face-to-face. The idea of “chemistry” has been around for

a while. It seems that the advent of Internet dating has not changed the idea of “chemistry” or women’s expectations for it. Bri explained:

I don’t know, you feel like you’d be able to talk with him because we have so many similar interests. But then you start talking with him and I feel like our life’s aren’t really as lined up as I thought. I try to stay open minded- I don’t want to be so picky about what a guy might have and be able to offer. With this other guy, we were talking about different stuff- I don’t know if we’d be as compatible down the line- I don’t know if it was because our lives were at different points because he was in grad school and I’m still trying to figure out what I want to do. But yeah, I just didn’t feel that spark. (Bri)

The man with whom Bri was communicating online had many similar interests as she did, leading her to believe they would be compatible in a face-to-face setting. However, when they met, they were not as compatible as she had believed. Bri defined the missing component as a “spark”. Linda defined this missing variable in the same way: “And the guy I went on two dates with- he was a really nice guy, but there wasn’t that spark”. It is the face-to-face meeting that seems essential in determining whether there will be enough of a “spark” to continue communicating with the man. Paige explained, “I’ve had everything from a few dates to a relationship that lasted 5-10 months. They people you meet, there’s a lot of hit or miss. Because you just don’t know if you’re really compatible until you actually meet them”.

Other women interviewed described this invaluable component as “chemistry”. Beth noted, “I guess what I found in the past was that internet dating- you could have a lot in common with someone on paper and then you get in person and there’s just no chemistry”. It seems that the man’s profile and his profile picture are not enough to determine whether the women will actually be attracted to the men. Mandy eloquently illustrated this problem:

And he was really nice, but we just didn't have any chemistry. And that something that's really funny for me about online dating- is that someone can seem really compatible, but your interactions with them have no chemistry. I knew the first time I met him it wouldn't go anywhere- our interactions was too friendly and safe. For me, he didn't intrigue me in any way. (Mandy)

Mandy seemed to be confused about how a man can appear really compatible in their profiles, but then have no chemistry in a face-to-face setting. She reported knowing the first time she met her date that there would be no "chemistry" between them. Chelsea furthers this point:

The funny thing is that even on paper, these guys looked great, there's always that ok, this is still over the internet and you really don't know this person- you've never seen this person... And then with the other guy, there just wasn't any physical chemistry. So for me that's where I think that I'm not really into the online dating thing because I think that for me, the first thing that is the most important for me is that initial – you have chemistry- you hang out with this person and you enjoy their personality the kind of energy and vibe they give off. And you can also tell their maturity level. Those are the things that are the most important. And I could honestly care less about their interests, like even if their interests were the exact same as mine- if they lack maturity and there's no chemistry between us then, yea- there's no hope. I think this is the downside of Internet dating and opposed to meeting in real life. I def prefer just meeting someone and having there be this natural chemistry between us. (Chelsea)

For Chelsea, the initial "vibe" you receive from someone can only occur in a face-to-face setting. For her, this initial "vibe" told her whether she would have "natural chemistry" with her date; therefore, the presence of this "natural chemistry" could only be determined in a face-to-face setting.

There has been much sociological literature focusing on initial attraction and dating. Burleson, Kunkel and Birch (1994) focused on initial attraction during speed dating events. The researchers found that similarity in communication values influenced how satisfied people were in their dating relationships and how attracted they were to their partners. More specifically, similarities in affectively oriented communication skills

increased partner attraction. These skills included comforting communication patterns, ego support, conflict management, and regulation. Other studies have determined that specific traits such as extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, positive affect, self-esteem, low neuroticism and low negative affect improve relationship quality (Gattis et al., 2004). This style of communication and the presence of these specific traits would be difficult to determine in an online setting, which is why many of the women in this study reported not knowing whether they had a “spark” with their date until they met in a face-to-face setting.

There has also been a great deal written on attraction in the initial stages of relationship formation. Early sociological research found men focus more on physical attraction when considering potential partners, whereas women are more interested in socioeconomic status and ambitions of prospected partners (Feingold, 1992). Sociologists explained that these differences were evolutionary important to the human species. Women invest more energy into the rearing of children, and would like a man who is able to fiscally help. Men, on the other hand, are attracted to women who look as if they are young enough to reproduce. Further, Goode (1996) found that there were differences between what men and women looked for in personal advertisements. Men were far more influenced by looks and women were more influenced by success. Fisman et al. (2006) found very similar results when analyzing speed-dating events. The authors found that women put greater weight on the intelligence and race of a potential partner during speed dating events, while men responded more to physical attractiveness.

Luo and Zhang (2006) also found that the strongest predictor of initial attraction was a partner's physical attractiveness. However, the researchers noted that this preference for beauty was *equally* as true for women as it was for men in their speed-dating study. They noted that this finding was inconsistent with the widely accepted findings in evolutionary research that there is a sex difference in preferences for long-term partners. Interestingly, the authors made a distinction between a woman's rational, conscious mind and their behaviors in real life encounters. For instance, if a woman was asked to think about their preferences for a potential mate, they would likely give priority to characteristics such as earning potential. However, their actual, real life behaviors would place more of an emphasis on physical attraction of a potential mate; these behaviors may be irrational and not necessarily in their best reproductive interests, according to the authors. It seems likely then, that with the rise of women's rights, independence, and more dating freedom that women are consciously choosing physical attraction ("chemistry") over traits such as earning potential, which is contrary to what the evolutionary studies on dating and mate selection suggest.

Although women are placing more emphasis on the "chemistry" they have with a potential partner, they are still doing gender and sexuality in traditional ways. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that no one can opt out of doing gender. Times and gender roles may be changing, but men and women are still doing gender. Women are doing gender when they aspire to a "spark" or to "chemistry". Scholars have written about the idealized notion of heterosexuality (Ingraham, 1999; Cameron and Collins, 2000; Cott, 2000). Singles are looking for soul mates; someone with which they feel chemistry and someone they with which they can marry and share a future. People's desires for this



idealized notion of heterosexuality comes from society's expectations of gender and sexuality. As such, women in these interviews who reported the importance of the "spark" or of "chemistry" were still doing gender, even if the doing of their gender is slightly different than it was in the past.

### **Internet Dating is Artificial**

Another theme that arose in the analysis of the data is that many of the women felt Internet dating was artificial. Even though women reported appreciating the predictability of the initial stages of Internet dating, many said it made dating online seem "artificial" and "scripted". Many women spoke of desiring to meet a man "out and about", but not having the time to do so. Further, many women reported that the spontaneity of meeting someone face-to-face was desirable. Many of the women interviewed thought the process of Internet dating was backwards; they knew everything about their date before they decided to go on a date with them. Kristen explained:

I've talked to people about this before. The problem with internet dating is- well, if you met someone you would get more a sense of their personality and attraction- so you wouldn't necessarily really know whether they were married before or whether they have children or what religion they were. But with Match, and other dating sites, you know all of that up front. You're judging people way beforehand. It's a whole different situation. I don't necessarily think that being that informed upfront is a good thing- or really all that helpful. I think sometimes it's just too much information- where you're casting judgment on people based on criteria that really- if you met them before hand and if there was chemistry, some of those things you'd just overlook. (Kristen)

Kristen believed that having so much personal information about her date upfront was not helpful. In fact, she thought that having so much information prior to the initial date may actually harm a potential relationship by causing a premature judgment of the man. Callie also discussed this problem:

The last guy I went out with, we decided to meet at a local bar and it... I feel like so far- it's almost like its forced. You have this expectation. You obviously liked the person enough to want to meet up with them. It's kind of weird because you don't really know the person, but you know as much as their profile tells you. So you have this perception. But you don't actually know the person. So it's a little different (Callie)

For Callie, having so much information upfront makes the initial date awkward since she had read so much about who he was, but had never spoken to him face-to-face. Later, she went on to explain that the perception she gathered from reading men's information was often different than the perception she came away with after meeting the man face-to-face. Amanda explained that this discrepancy in perception may be the result of misrepresentation in online dating profiles:

Its weird because you're kind of trying to sell yourself so you know its going to be sort of – not totally genuine—but its still sort of awkward to say “hey, this is who I am”. So I try not to judge them too harshly, by looking at what they wrote. But you can kind of get a sense – at least on the superficial level about what someone is like- at least about what they like, their hobbies (Amanda)

Amanda seemed aware that much of what was written in online dating profiles was a man trying to “sell” himself. She hoped to take away just the facts from the profiles, and not develop any sort of perception of a man prior to a date.

Hardey (2004) researched the role of authenticity in Internet courtship and explained that Internet daters often “market” themselves with the use of their profiles. Brym and Lenton (2003) also discussed the role of misrepresentation in dating profiles and noted, “Some people misrepresent themselves to stimulate interest” (p.7). Brym and Lenton found that over a quarter of their respondents confessed to misrepresenting themselves, especially about their age, marital status, and appearance. Lawson and Leck (2006) commented that “misrepresentation in online social interactions seems so natural that few seem to give much thought to what usually could be dismissed as a

makeover of one's persona" (pp. 200-201). They continued, "Given the limited amount of information available to the respondents about each other in Internet interactions and their transitory nature, deception is common" (p.201). Many of the women interviewed had acknowledged that this sort of deception was common in their Internet dating experiences. These experiences made the process of Internet dating feel more artificial and led to many awkward initial dates.

The idea that Internet dating was artificial was wide spread in many of the interviews. The face-to-face encounters these women experienced with men from these sites were often described as "awkward", "forced", or "artificial". Amy noted, "I started with OkCupid, but it was really awkward and sketchy". Becky concurred, "It [the process] just felt very artificial". Callie had similar problems with dates with men on these sites, " I felt like the conversation was really forced and not casual enough. It wasn't any better on the second date". It seemed that transitioning from an Internet mediated relationship to a face-to-face relationship often felt unnatural or forced for these women. Jessica explained:

It's a really weird way of dating, in my opinion. Its not very natural....I just think its weird because its very popular but it isn't a very natural way to meet people. That's just from me, I do better in group settings or if I meet somebody out if a coffee shop or a bar or party... There's a lot of pressure to meet. It's really hard to make the thing work. (Jessica)

Jessica felt that meeting people via the Internet was not "natural", and as a result, lead to awkward and pressured face-to-face encounters.

Lawson and Leck (2006) found similar results in their research on Internet daters. The researchers explained, "The simplification of the perception of online partners resulted in many respondents reporting that they built inaccurate pictures in their minds

about the type of people they were interacting with before they met them” (p.198). As a result of these inaccurate perceptions, respondent in their study felt that face-to-face meetings were often not as imagined, and lead to an artificial sense of intimacy. The authors concluded that Internet dating is therefore nothing more than a “romantic fantasy” played out by both parties online. The women in this study reported communication going smoothly up until the initial face-to-face encounter. At that point, the “romantic fantasy” of the Internet mediated relationship was broken, as well as the artificial sense of intimacy that came with in.

In the Chapter 4 it was noted that many of the women interviewed felt Internet dating was much more convenient and time efficient than meeting men “out and about”. Much of this belief stemmed from the fact that the women interviewed were all very busy with their school and careers, and had very little time to meet new potential partners. It seems that although women appreciated the convenience of Internet dating, they still preferred and valued more organic or traditional ways to meet men. Meeting men online was, to many, an artificial process that led to awkward face-to-face encounters.

### **Men are Just Looking for Sex**

Many of the women interviewed reported no matter how they went about dating, most the men they meet were only interested in sex. These women reported casual sexual partners was not what they were looking for, and steered clear of dating sites known for being "hook-up" sites. Women reported that avoiding men who were looking

for hook-ups was a serious concern of theirs when on these dating sites. Sandi explained:

Everyone else I've met with- actually I don't think I've met anyone who isn't just after sex. I don't know why. I don't know if it's because they think I'm desperate. So, they'll approach me for that. Granted, I've gone out with 4 people now. And 3 of the 4 people have exclusively been, "I just want to get into your pants". (Sandi)

Sandi felt as if most of the men on these sites were only interested in "getting in her pants". As a result, she developed ways to determine the motives of these men before she went on dates with them:

And you knew that he just wanted to hook-up. I'm not interested in dating you or getting to know you, I'm interested in getting into your pants. (Do you get that a lot on these sites?) Oh yea. People I've met up with they'll say whatever they need to say and you're like "I'm not stupid, you realize I'm an educated person and I know exactly what you're doing". And they'll be like "I can just see you being my girlfriend", but not "I want you to be my girlfriend", "I can SEE you being my girlfriend". And it's really all about wanting to hook-up. Which, if that's what you're looking for, that's not a problems but it's really hard to filter out someone who is on there seriously versus someone whose seriously on there. Like you can kind of guess- guys with their shirts off as their profile picture: I'm not digging on that. (Sandi)

Sandi found herself reading into the things that men would say to her and ways in which they would present themselves on dating sites to try and determine their true motivations. She would listen for key phrases ("I can see you being my girlfriend") and analyze their self-presentation (shirtless profile pictures) to stay away from men she perceived as only wanting sex. Chloe also learned to look out for key phrases that may imply a man is just interested in sex:

These different kinds of people who will send me messages, but usually I just ignore them. People who send "hello, beautiful, can I buy you a drink?" or "hi, how are you doing, do you want to hang out tonight?" Very casual. So I normally just ignore it. There were people who would send me messages and introduce themselves. The way I judge whether or not to get in contact with these men is whether or not you're writing seriously to me. I'm not that causal person who will

hang out with anyone. If people send me messages saying who they are, how they're doing, etc. I usually write back. (Chloe)

Chloe was able to assume a man's intent by listening to what they wrote to her in their initial email message. She reported ignoring messages she believed were too "casual".

Bri experienced similar problems dating online:

You get a lot of people who focus on things that you're not focused on- so if a guy is really focused on sex, I know it won't work. I've had a couple guys message me just for that, and I'm like "no". I honestly had one guy message me because he was going to be in Gainesville for one weekend and asked me if I was interested in a quickie. I responded N-O. Are you serious? Stuff like that. (Bri)

Bri, Sandi, and Chloe all explained that there were many men on these sites only interested in sex. Nancy reiterated, "A lot of people online are really just looking for sex- and that makes it hard, too". Other women discussed needing to maintain strict boundaries with men, and some of the confusion that results from enforcing boundaries:

Basically, if you don't give it to them the first night, you never hear from them again. I've had guys say lets go back to your place, lets watch a movie. And I say, no I don't know you that well, I'm not comfortable with that. They're like ok, but they'll be very persistent about it. You think you have this great date, you tell all your friends about it, and then you never hear from them again. (Kat)

Many of these women developed ways to determine if men are only interested in sex (by looking at their narrative summary or their profile picture), or ways to establish boundaries with these men. Other women simply avoided dating sites they thought were known for being hook-up sites. Linda explained, "I realized eHarmony was discreet and because of that there are a lot of men who are looking for a mistress- that was my experience with eHarmony". She went on, "I haven't ever done plenty of fish, but from what I've heard, plenty of fish and okcupid are sort of more for hooking up and casual encounters are more prevalent there". Mandy avoided Zoosk for similar reasons,

“Zoosk was really sketchy because a lot of them were really old and sending me kind of inappropriate messages”. Beth agreed that some dating sites were more about hooking-up:

When I moved back to the states, I talked to a few friends who were internet dating and depending on the city people lived, there were different connotations associated with all of them. So, my stepsister lives in Chicago- and I’m not sure if it was her or my friend in Seattle, but something to the effect that Match.com is for hook ups. So you would go on match if you wanted to have promiscuous relationships. (Beth)

Beth believed that dating sites all had different connotations attached to them, and she avoided dating sites that were known for being hook-up sites. Mandy voiced similar beliefs:

On Zoosk, men are very blatant about it. On this site, it seems like men have to respect you a little more when they know you’re also a student. But on Zoosk, I’d get very random: wanna meet up for sex? Like really blatant hook up requests. I’d never respond to those- I’d just delete them. I heard there’s sites when you can go just for that. I always put my preferences on my profile- I say I’m not looking for hook ups or no-strings attached. I always put that I want something in between marriage and a hook up. (Sam)

The women interviewed used various tactics to try and avoid men online who they thought were only looking for sex: reading the personal narratives or emails and watching for key phrases or words, avoiding shirtless profile pictures, and avoiding websites known for being hook-up sites.

Some of the women interviewed were more understanding of the plethora of men online just looking for sex. These women believed that *all* men are only looking for sex, but the Internet makes it easier for them to be upfront about their desires. Nancy explained, “A lot of times, online dating people are just looking for a hook up and they’ll tell you that online, but in person, you don’t know that”. Linda had a similar understanding on men:

But I think having that gap- the digital gap-definitely does change communication. People are a lot more bold than they would be in real life. I had a guy on match once, before he even told me his name, wanted to know whether I was into anal. It's definitely the communication that's way different. There's no way that man would have approached me in real life, in a bar, and asked me that. (Linda)

Linda believed the virtual nature of Internet dating allows men to feel freer expressing their desires. Linda believed that men have these same desires whether or not they are dating online, but the digital gap changes communication in a way that they feel bolder to express their interests.

There has been an abundance of literature on the new "hook-up culture" of young adults. Glenn and Marquardt's (2001) found that the ultimate life goal for many college-aged women was marriage, yet many college-aged women still partake in hook-ups. Bogle (2008) also looked at the hook-up culture and found that hooking up was the dominant script for college-student intimacy. However, these students also reported desiring a more conventional relationship in the future. Bogle found that more women than men were disappointed with hookups because they desired more conventional relationships. Hamilton and Armstrong discuss "hook-up" culture in college, specifically among middle-upper class females. Hamilton and Armstrong looked at how both class and gender shape the way "hook-up" culture works in college. The authors found that much behavior is guided by "gender beliefs": "cultural rules or instructions for enacting the social structure of difference and inequality that we understand to be gender" (p.592). Hamilton and Armstrong explain that women are often guided by a relational imperative: that normal women should always want love, romance, relationships, and marriage.



The literature on the hook-up culture to date seems to focus largely on how women are finding a balance between this new hook-up culture and wanting more conventional relationships in the future. Most of the women interviewed in this study desired a more substantial connection to their date than a hook-up. As was noted above, women are more independent and sexually free than they have been in the past, and yet it seems clear from these interviews that they continue to refrain largely from hook-ups. This finding could possibly be explained by Morgan and Zurbriggen's (2007) study on how sexuality is used in heterosexual relationships. The authors explained that women often report receiving messages from male partners that indicate high interest in sexual activity as well as pressure to engage in sexual activity. Women often responded to these messages by setting sexual boundaries. The authors noted that whereas men often established heteromascularity through expressions of high sexual interest, female partners often balanced this approach with their own traditionally gendered displays of feminine virtue (reining in male sexual desire and setting boundaries on sexual activity).

These findings coincide with West and Zimmerman's theory that people "do gender". With changing gender norms, notions surrounding how men and women should behave sexually are also changing. Men and women are "doing" their gender in accordance with the liberalization of our society in terms of sexuality and gender. However, the women interviewed still seem to be holding onto the value that women should not readily engage in hook-ups.

## **Conclusion**

This Chapter outlined three important themes that arose in the coding of the interviews. These themes seemed to suggest that although many gender scripts and

initiation strategies have changed with the advent of Internet dating, many dating expectations have remained the same. First, the notion that romantic relationships begin with initial “chemistry” has remained the same. It seems likely that with the rise of women’s rights, independence, and more dating freedom, that women are placing a large emphasis on the initial physical attraction (“chemistry”) to their date. Second, many women felt dating online was "artificial" and "scripted". Although women reported appreciated the convenience of Internet dating, they still valued more conventional ways to meet men. Meeting men online was, to many, an artificial process that led to awkward face-to-face encounters. Third, many of the women reported being concerned that men online were only looking for hook-ups, and reported avoiding dating sites that were known for being "hook-up" sites. The women interviewed explained the hook-up culture was widespread, but that they desired more than just a hook-up from the men they met online.

CHAPTER 6  
FINDINGS PART III: DISCOMFORT/STIGMA/TABOO ATTACHED TO INTERNET  
DATING

You can't be scared. A lot of people who find out that I met my ex online, it's a taboo thing. They're just scared. Don't be scared.

-Jan

Chapters 5 and Chapter 6 analyzed the ways Internet dating has altered the dating landscape for women, and how women, despite these changes, continue to do their gender throughout the partner selection process. Chapter 4 focused on how Internet dating has changed gender scripts and relationship initiation. Chapter 5 examined how some dating expectations have remained the same, even with the advent of Internet dating sites. Women seem to be navigating through murky waters, trying to balance their independence with societal notions about how women should behave in the dating world. Internet dating has changed the dating world for many women, placing the power of relationship initiation in their hands. Perhaps because of this reason, many of the women interviewed spoke of how there was a societal stigma attached to Internet dating. Some of the women felt shame for participating in Internet dating. Sandy explained, "I feel like there's a stigma to it. And maybe it's just my insecurities, but I feel like there's an 'oh you had to resort to online dating- how are you failing in life?' I don't think that's the case for me, I think it's a very gendered stigma."

Other women acknowledged that although Internet dating was once very taboo, American society is beginning to understand the significance these sites play in the dating world: "Its so prevalent now- it used to be taboo (Linda)." Beth also agreed that Internet dating was becoming more acceptable: "I think its more common now than when I did it 5-6 years ago. People seemed to have warmed up to the idea, maybe".

Because Internet dating is becoming so common, a few of the women explained that it was losing its stigma:

(Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add about Internet dating that we have not discussed?) Yea, for one thing, the stigma. There's so many students- UF students- on there. And it's just like- it can't be a bad thing. It's just a really easy way to meet people. There's so many people around here that there's no way in hell you'll be able to meet all of them. Just walking around here there's all these great guys around here- why am I not able to meet them as easily as all my friends are? So I think it's a great way to meet people and facilitate the connection.... There's really nothing to be ashamed of. If you have one, you have one. You're using it, so talk about it! (Bri)

I started gosh about 7 years ago. I first started internet dating when it was still a little taboo. I started with eharmony because I thought it was a little more discreet and I was embarrassed about it. (Linda)

For Bri, Internet dating is becoming less taboo since so many people are using these sites to find partners. Beth explained that she had not considered Internet dating until a few of her friends ended up getting married to people they met online: "I actually know three or four people who have been married off of match. For all the bad, there's also a lot of good that comes from it". Mandy had a similar experience:

And that's around the time my friend got engaged to a boy she met on Match.com and she was like I promise, its not weird, just try it. So I did, and at first I didn't respond to any messages- I just lurked. But then I realized it was pretty normal. (Mandy)

Once these women were able to experience what the dating site was like, they lost much of the fear and feelings of shame that they had prior to their experience. Mandy explained that part of the reason she became more comfortable with the process of Internet dating was the progress the sites have made in safety technology: "But now a days, with the sites that control for certain things, it's a little bit safer. Especially for people who are really busy". The sites allow women to search for specific traits in which

they are interested. Knowing that their potential date has similar interests often put women at ease when meeting them in a face-to-face setting:

So [we had the] same interests, studies—so I can go in [to the dating site] and search for people who are only interested in studying law. So it's really cool. And it's really safe... He knew all the same professors I did- so I thought it was really safe. I was like ok- ill try it. So we went to Starbucks on campus. Which was a little less sketch for me too. (Mandy)

Mandy was on a dating site that allowed for her to choose from men at her particular university. She was able to search her university for men who were studying the same thing she was and who had the same professors as she did. This familiarity put her at ease when meeting the men face-to-face. She was also able to meet the men on the Starbucks campus, in a place they both knew very well.

A lot of the initial fear regarding Internet dating seems to come from women's worry about the safety of being on the sites:

I have some friends... I remember my freshman year, it was kind of talked about as a taboo. And people warned us against doing it because people were worried about older men preying on younger girls, and that their intentions would be bad. I think it's much less dangerous and much more normal now than it was in the past. You still have to be careful. I always meet guys in public places, or near campus where it's extra safe. (Mandy)

Many of the women had a preconceived notion about the safety of Internet dating sites before they signed up as members. This preconceived notion often tainted their initial view of the process, but once they got going, they realized it was safe and not so "weird":

So eventually when I heard about online dating I was like "heck, no" I would never do that. I had a stigma against it. I thought it was creepy and weird. I was just like no, heck no. But its funny because once I got out here I started talking to a couple of my coworkers who had done online dating and they were like talking all about it. (Chelsea)

Chelsea warmed up to the idea of Internet dating when she realized many of her friends were on these sites. Once she became engaged with the process, she became more comfortable and open to the idea of Internet dating.

Perhaps a large reason why many women reported being initially uncomfortable with the idea of Internet dating is that many women still believe it is not a completely natural way to meet men. This idea was discussed in depth in Chapter 5. When asked to explain how Internet dating differs from traditional dating Mandy noted, "I've never meet them, it doesn't matter- they don't know who I am. We don't have like mutual friends- it's not someone I actually know. It's like they're not real." Meeting men online felt artificial to many of the women interviewed, as was noted above. The artificial nature of these meetings added to the discomfort associated with the process of Internet dating for these women.

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 discussed the ways in which Internet dating has altered the way women date and the expectations they have in regard to dating. This Chapter has discussed women's perceptions of Internet dating and some of the worries they had pertaining to Internet dating. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that one can never truly opt out of doing gender. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 discussed ways in which women are doing gender differently when they engage in Internet dating versus traditional dating. The change in the way women do their gender has seemed to cause turbulence in these women's self-perceptions. Because Internet dating challenges old ways of doing gender, there seems to be near universal discomfort, or at least acknowledgment of this discomfort, when it comes to Internet dating. West and Zimmerman (1987) explained that people are held accountable for doing gender: "... societal members

orient to the fact that their activities are subject to comment. Actions are often designed with an eye to their accountability, that is, how they might look and how they might be characterized” (p.12). It is possible that the women interviewed are holding themselves accountable for the traditional doing of their gender. The women are aware that the way they engage in Internet dating is different from the way they engage in traditional dating. Because much of the way these women engage in Internet dating is not “proper” (or traditional) gendered behavior (West and Zimmerman, p.14, 1987), they may feel a sense of guilt or shame for participating in Internet dating. West and Zimmerman explained that this dilemma occurs readily when women engage in behaviors usually associated with being male. However, the authors are also careful to point out that even when this routinization is challenged, a woman’s gender is something that is still being done on a different level to prove that she is an “essentially” feminine being, despite any appearances to the contrary.

This contradiction may be why many of the women interviewed reported feeling shame or embarrassment for partaking in Internet dating. Furthermore, this contradiction may be why many of the women interviewed were careful to explain that they were not just looking for sex- a trait traditionally associated with male gender performance. These women were experiencing accountability to act in accordance with their gender.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

My central goal of this study has been to add to the scholarship on West and Zimmerman's "Doing Gender" and explore how Internet dating has (or has not) changed the way women do their gender. West and Zimmerman (1987) explained that people are constantly "doing gender", and that everyone is held accountable by others to "do" gender appropriately. West and Zimmerman's "Doing Gender" argued gender is not a set of traits residing within individuals, but something individuals do in their everyday social interactions. As such, gendered behaviors are not rooted in biology, but are social constructs reproduced in social interactions. The way that women "do" gender has, in some ways, changed dramatically with the use of Internet dating. However, there is still an obvious adherence to traditional gender roles for many female online daters.

Using qualitative interviews with 30 heterosexual women between the ages of 18 and 35 who were currently engaged in Internet dating, this study explored the ways in which women were doing gender when involved in Internet dating. Interviews focused on daters' perceptions of their experiences on the Internet dating site (how they do internet dating), including gendered attributes and behaviors (how they do gender). Interviews were analyzed using grounded theory and coding of the interview data focused on how participants did gender and Internet dating.

This Chapter will provide a summary of the significant findings, some limitations of the study, and ideas for future research. Further, I will discuss ways in which this study contributes to existing scholarship on "Doing Gender" and Internet dating.



## Summary of Significant Findings

Chapter 4 analyzed the ways Internet dating has altered the dating landscape for women, and focused on the ways in which women have altered their gender performance as a result of these changes, specifically in regard to gender scripts and relationship initiation. Chapter 5 examined how some dating expectations have remained the same, even with the advent of Internet dating sites. Women seem to be navigating through murky waters, trying to balance their independence with societal notions about how women should behave in the dating world. Internet dating has changed the dating world for many women, placing the power of relationship initiation in their hands. Perhaps because of this reason, many of the women interviewed spoke of how there was a societal stigma attached to Internet dating, a theme that was discussed in Chapter six.

Chapter 4 focused on how gender scripts and relationship initiation have changed with female Internet daters. Many of the women interviewed acknowledge that Internet dating is different than more traditional forms of dating in that they feel more liberated to seek the perfect match and initiate contact with men. The data supporting this claim revolved around several important findings. First, Internet dating has allowed women to pick out very specific characteristics in men that they report being important to them in relationships. Women report these specific characteristics may not matter so much if they had met the man in a face-to-face setting. The pool of eligibles has become much larger with Internet dating sites, and as a result, women are now able to be much more specific and picky about their desires and expectations in a partner. The women interviewed explained that because they were paying monthly dues, they felt

they should impose rigid filters when looking for potential dates. Because they say themselves as the consumers, they were incredibly picky because they had so many options. They wanted their “product” to meet all their expectations, or they would simply look elsewhere.

With the rise of Internet dating sites, and the changing gender norms and expectations in our society, women feel more liberated to search and filter for specific characteristics they desire in potential partners. It is clear that what women are looking for in potential partners is changing, partially due to their changing roles in society; women are doing gender differently than they have done it in the past. However, as West and Zimmerman pointed out, one can never truly opt out of doing gender. Although much has changed for women over the past few decades, women are still doing gender when choosing their ideal man. The women interviewed were still quite bound to hegemonic ideals when filtering out traits. The women were looking for good looking, tall, educated men with good jobs that paid well. So, although women felt as if they have more agency and were taking more initiative in finding the “perfect man”, they still seemed quite concentrated on hegemonic ideals.

Second, the initiation process of Internet-mediated relationship is scripted by rules and expectations unlike those used in traditional dating practices. Women reported these rules make the beginning stages of dating more predictable and accessible. For instance, the women interviewed reported virtual communication prior to the initial date helped the relationship progress and allowed for them to feel more comfortable with the initial meeting. In general, the women interviewed reported appreciating the online dating process, in that it gave them more freedom and authority

to initiate interactions with men they thought would be a good match as well as cut off contact with men in which they were no longer interested. Women seemed to feel less accountable to traditional gender scripts when dating online. The way women initiate dating in a virtual setting is different than the way they would in a more traditional (face-to-face) setting. Based on these findings, it is possible that women are drawn to online dating because it provides them with more agency and freedom from stereotypical gender roles.

Third, many of the women interviewed reported Internet dating is a more convenient way to meet men given their busy schedules. They acknowledged that Internet dating is much more accessible to them than more traditional forms of dating. It seems that this change is the result of larger social issues such as women spending more time pursuing school and careers and investing more energy into non-romantic relationships. Because of this, women are left with less time to meet men and pursue romantic relationships. Meeting men in a more traditional face-to-face setting simply is not realistic for many women. Online dating offers women a time efficient and convenient way to meet men amidst all the other responsibilities they have in their life.

Regardless of their reasoning, it seems as though Internet dating has allowed for a safe space where women may search, sort, and filter through many men's dating profiles to find their perfect match. Women are taking more initiative for their partner selections, not settling for less than what they report wanting. These results indicate that women feel more liberated to stray from traditional gender and dating norms, and that the advent of online dating is helping this feeling of liberation.

Chapter 5 focused on how dating expectations have largely remained the same with Internet dating, specifically in regard to the partner selection process. Although the women interviewed made it clear that dating practices have changed with the advent of Internet dating, there were still a few dating expectations that remained the same. First, the notion that romantic relationships begin with initial “chemistry” has remained the same, even though dating practices seem to be changing. Although the convenience of Internet dating was dually noted in most interviews, many of the women said there was no good replacement for the initial chemistry one feels when they first met someone face-to-face. Even though many of the men looked great on “paper”, when the women finally met them in person, they reported there was no “chemistry”. This finding coincides with scholarship on the idealized notion of heterosexuality (Ingraham, 1999; Cameron and Collins, 2000; Cott, 2000). Singles are looking for soul mates; someone with which they feel chemistry and someone with which they can marry and share a future. People’s desires for this idealized notion of heterosexuality comes from society’s expectations of gender and sexuality. As such, women in these interviews who reported the importance of the “spark” or of “chemistry” were still doing gender, even if the dating practices are slightly different than they were in the past.

Second, even though women reported appreciating the predictability of the initial stages of Internet dating, many said it made dating online seem "artificial", "scripted", or “unnatural”. Many of the women interviewed felt Internet dating was much more convenient and time efficient than meeting men “out and about”. Much of this belief stemmed from the fact that the women interviewed were all very busy with their school and careers, and had very little time to meet new potential partners. It seems that

although women appreciated the convenience of Internet dating, they still preferred and valued more organic or traditional ways to meet men. Meeting men online was, to many, an artificial process that led to awkward face-to-face encounters. This key finding may have been due to the fact that deception was reported as being common in women's Internet dating experiences. One of the women interviewed explained this was the result of men trying to "sell" themselves to the women on the site. As a result of men's inaccurate representations of themselves on these sites, women felt that the initial meeting was often not as imagined, and lead to an artificial sense of intimacy.

Third, many women reported that no matter how they went about dating, most men were only interested in sex. These women reported that casual hook-ups were not what they were looking for, and avoided dating sites that were known for being "hook-up" sites. As was noted above, women are more independent and sexually free than they have been in the past, and yet it seems clear from these interviews that they continue to refrain largely from hook-ups. These finding coincided with West and Zimmerman's theory that people "do gender". The women interviewed still seem to be holding onto the value that women should not readily engage in hook-ups, and doing gender in accordance with this value.

Chapter 6 focused on the discomfort, stigma, and taboo attached to Internet dating. Some of the women reported feeling shame for participating in Internet dating. Many of the women interviewed had a preconceived notion about the safety of Internet dating sites before they signed up as members. This preconceived notion often tainted their initial belief of the process, but once they began participating in the site, they realized it was safe and not so "weird". Perhaps a large reason why many women

reported being initially uncomfortable with the idea of Internet dating is that many women still believe it is not a completely natural way to meet men. Meeting men online felt artificial to many of the women interviewed, as was noted above. The artificial nature of these meetings added to the discomfort associated with the process of Internet dating for these women. Some of the research findings explained above indicated that women are doing gender differently when they engage in Internet dating versus traditional dating. The change in the way women do their gender has seemed to cause turbulence in these women's self-perceptions. Because Internet dating challenges old ways of doing gender, there seems to be near universal discomfort, or at least acknowledgment of this discomfort, when it comes to Internet dating. It is possible that the women interviewed are holding themselves accountable for the traditional doing of their gender. Because much of the way these women engage in Internet dating is not "proper" (or traditional) gendered behavior (West and Zimmerman, p.14, 1987), they may feel a sense of guilt or shame for participating in Internet dating. West and Zimmerman explained that this dilemma occurs readily when women engage in behaviors usually associated with being male. This may also be a reason why many of the women interviewed were careful to explain that they were not just looking for sex- a trait traditionally associated with male gender performance.

In summary, it seems clear that although the way women are doing gender while participating in online dating is changing, women are nonetheless continuing to do gender. The way that women do gender has been altered by the increased use of Internet dating, but these women continue to adhere to many of the traditional components of dating, including searching for the hegemonic ideal and the "spark" with

their potential partner. West and Zimmerman explained that no one can opt out of going gender. Although the women interviewed reported doing dating differently with the use of the Internet, doing gender is still a pertinent theme in many of these interviews. Furthermore, many of the women interviewed reported feeling held accountable for doing gender appropriately, even while engaged in Internet dating.

### **Areas of Future Research**

Qualitative research methods generally rely on smaller sample sizes than other empirical methods. This qualitative study had a sample size of 30. This allowed for a greater in-depth understanding of research findings. However, because of the small sample size, the research findings may not be generalizable to all women participating in Internet dating. Future research should interview women over the age of 35 in order to provide a more in-depth analysis of the experiences of other age groups female Internet daters. Age may be an interesting variable when considering how gender is “done” in regard to Internet dating. Older women may not be as comfortable shedding traditional gender roles as are women under the age of 35.

Secondly, this study helped to determine whether Internet daters behave similarly, or if they have broken free from the more traditional gender roles. Studies that have examined motivations of Internet daters have explained women are drawn to online dating because it provides them with more agency and freedom from stereotypical gender roles (Lawson and Leck, 2006). In other words, women are less likely to adhere to “appropriate” or “proper” gendered performance (i.e. it is more acceptable for women to make the initial contact). With the security that arises from Internet dating, and the agency it provides women, it seems likely that there will be

more equalitarian initiation practices in Internet relationship formation. To date, there has been no research addressing this important issue.

Furthermore, male Internet daters should also be interviewed. This study focused on how women behaved in regard to their gender. It would be interesting to determine whether Internet dating has altered the way men “do” their gender, or whether it has changed men’s perceptions of how they believe women should “do” their gender.

Lastly, there also seems to be a lack of research addressing the role of stigma in Internet dating. Stigma and shame was an important theme that arose in many of the interviews in this study. It would be interesting to determine whether *both* men and women perceived shame and stigma as being an integral aspect of Internet dating.

### **Significance and Contributions of this Study**

Women’s positions in American society have changed. Women’s heterosexual relationships have become more egalitarian and women are spending more of their time and energy at school and in their careers. As such, the way they “do” their gender while dating has changed, but it has not changed completely and it is quite clear that they are still doing gender in a particular way. West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that one may not opt out of doing gender. The results of this study indicate that these women have altered their gender performance, specifically in regard to gender scripts and relationship initiation. However, women continue to do gender throughout the partner selection process. Women have continued looking for their “perfect” true love, while fighting off men that are simply trying to “hook-up” by selling themselves as something more than they are.



Further, it seems that America's new hook-up culture is also significant to help explain the new ways that women "do" their gender as well as explaining some of the challenges women experience with Internet dating. The hook-up culture in America has made it difficult for women to date without feeling pressure to become sexually active with their dates early on in the relationship. The Internet is a place where women feel they can sort out men who are serious about dating and those who simply want to hook-up. Online dating may be as successful as it is because the hook-up culture has diminished the traditional dating culture. In addition, the gendered dynamics discussed throughout this research are also characterized by class. The female respondents of this study are outlining a middle class experience of online dating and the hook-up culture. Most of the research to date on the hook-up culture has focused on women in college or middle-class women. All of the women in this study were either in college or right out of college and in professional careers. It seems that the findings of this study coincide with other studies focusing on the new hook-up culture. However, this study takes it one step further by looking at how Internet dating may impact the new hook-up culture by which many middle-class women report being affected.

Lastly, the business applications of such a study are important. Because more and more people use the Internet to begin relationships, there is a need for more research and information on Internet dating. These research results may help companies cater their sites to the unique preferences and beliefs of their female members. Shedding light on how women initiate online relationships may potentially assist in the development of Internet dating sites.

APPENDIX  
INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

Box 1: Interview Question Guide

Open-ended Questions:

1. Tell me how you get started with Internet dating.
2. What sort of things do you look for in other people's profiles?
3. Talk to me about one person you met online that resulted in two or more in-person dates. Tell me about that process
4. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't talked about yet?

Probes:

1. How do you construct your profile?
2. Which pictures do you choose to display?
3. What is important to you in other people's profiles?
4. Why do you look for certain things in other people's profiles?
5. How do you filter through people who you are interested in you?
6. Do you think you look for different things in others when you are involved in more traditional dating?

Questionnaire:

1. Age:
2. Ethnicity:
3. Occupation:
4. Level of education:
5. Religion:
6. How long have you been using Internet dating?
7. Please list 5 words that summarize how you wish to be portrayed in your Internet dating profile.

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Katie Schubert graduated from the University of California, Irvine with three Bachelor of Arts in psychology, criminology, and anthropology. In 2008, she graduated with a Master of Arts degree in sociology from the University of Florida. In May 2014, she obtained her second Master of Arts in clinical mental health counseling from Adams State University. In 2014, she received her PhD from the University of Florida in sociology, with a specialty in sexuality and gender, and a certificate in women's studies. She is currently an instructor in the sociology, anthropology, and criminal justice department at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls.