

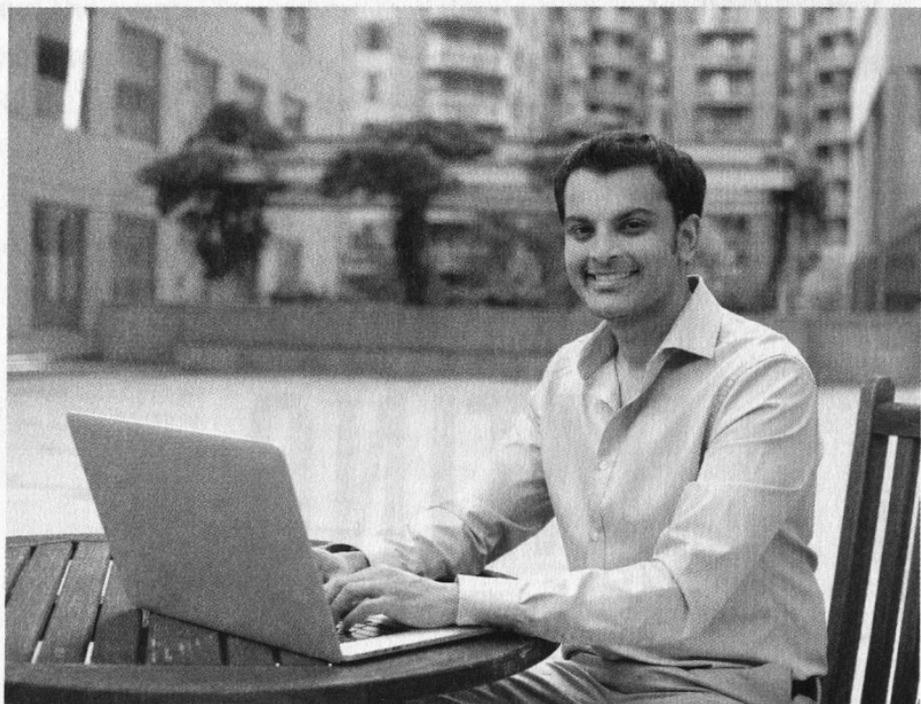
CHAPTER 3

ONLINE DATING

A

s a public figure, I have never considered doing any online dating. I always figured there was a chance someone who was a stalker type would use it as an opportunity to kidnap and murder me.

I'm not sure how the scenario would go. Maybe my stalker (probably an Indian dude) sees my profile and thinks, *Oh, here's that comedian guy on OkCupid. FINALLY, I have a way to reach out to him and slowly plot his murder.* He sends me a message pretending to be a woman. I see the profile. "She" likes tacos and *Game of Thrones*. I'm very excited.



What I imagine my Indian dude stalker looks like.*

We plan a date. I'm nervous, but in a fun way. I go to pick "her" up. He, wearing a wig, answers the door. I immediately realize this is wrong, but he knocks me out before I can react. When I wake up, I'm in a dark basement filled with dolls, and a creepy song like "The Chauffeur" by Duran Duran is playing. He then performs a face-off surgery and takes over my life.

I scream in agony and think, *I knew this would happen.*

Okay, this is probably a highly unlikely scenario, but still, you understand my hesitation. The truth is I've always thought online dating is great.

I once met someone who found his wife by using Match.com and searching—and this is a direct quote—"Jewish and my zip code." I joked that that's how I would go about finding a Wendy's. "I'd type

* **NOTE:** Since this is just a stock image of an Indian guy, I'm legally required to mention that though I have said this is what my stalker would probably look like, this guy is *not* actually a stalker. He's just an Indian guy who sometimes gets paid to pose with a laptop for stock photography.

Wendy's and my zip code and then I'd go get some nuggets." It is a little silly that that's how this guy found his wife, but to me it honestly is a beautiful and fascinating thing that this goofy search led to him finding the person with whom he will share his life.*

It's an amazing series of events: He types in this phrase, all these random factors and algorithms come together, this woman's face comes up, he clicks it, he sends a message, and then eventually that woman becomes the person he spends the rest of his life with. Now they're married and have a kid. A life. A *new life* was created because one moment, years ago, he decided to type "Jewish 90046"[†] and hit "enter."

Connections like this are now being made on a massive scale. OkCupid alone is responsible for around forty thousand dates of new couples every day. That's eighty thousand people who are meeting one another for the first time daily because of this website. Roughly three thousand of them will end up in long-term relationships. Two hundred of those will get married, and many of them will have kids.¹

THE RISE OF ONLINE DATING . . .

Online dating has its origins in the 1960s, with the emergence of the first computer dating services. These services claimed that they could leverage the new power of computers to help the luckless in love find their soul mate in a rational, efficient manner. They asked clients to fill out long questionnaires, the answers to which they would enter into computers the size of living rooms. (Well, not all the services did this. Apparently one, Project Flame at Indiana University, got students to fill out computer punch cards and then, rather than put them in the computer, the

* Less beautiful but equally fascinating: "Jewish + zip code" is also a popular search phrase on aryanhousehunters.com, the real estate site for anti-Semites.

[†] Jewish 90046 is also the name of the least intimidating Terminator model of all time.

scientists shuffled the deck and created a faked match.) The computer would chew on the data and, based on whatever primitive algorithm had been entered into it, spit out two theoretically compatible clients, who would then be sent on a date.²

These services hung around in various forms throughout the 1980s, but they never really caught on. There were a few good reasons for their failure. One was pretty simple: Not many people had personal computers at home, or even at work, and the idea that some strange machine was going to identify the perfect partner was just weird. After thousands of years of dating and mating without electronic assistance, most people resisted the idea that the answer to finding true love was to consult a bulky IBM. There was also another big reason people didn't flock to computer matchmakers: The companies that ran them couldn't show that they knew what made two people good romantic partners, and no one had evidence that the systems actually worked. Finally, there was a strong stigma attached to computer dating, and most people considered using machines for this purpose a sign of romantic desperation.

Classified ads, not matchmaking machines, were the medium of choice for singles looking for new ways to connect during the 1980s and early 1990s. The genre was actually invented in the 1690s, and by the eighteenth century matrimonial advertising had become a flourishing part of the newspaper business.³ The ads really took off after the sexual revolution of the 1960s, when men and women alike were emboldened to seek new ways to meet people. Decades before Craigslist, the "Personals" sections of daily and, especially, weekly newspapers were full of action, particularly in the "thin markets" such as among LGBT folks and middle-aged (usually divorced) and older straight people.

The ads were very brief, generally under fifty words, and would lead with a bold, all-caps heading that would attempt to grab people's attention, anything from STRAWBERRY BLONDE TO LONELY GUY! TO SURPRISE ME OR EVEN JUST MY NAME IS WILLIE!

Then the person would quickly describe themselves and what they were looking for or in search of (ISO). In order to save space,

people using abbreviations, like SWM (single white male), SJF (single Jewish female), SBPM (single black professional male), and, of course, DASP (divorced Asian saxophone player.)

You would usually get a certain amount of space for free and then would have to pay for more space. For instance, in the *L.A. Times* you got four lines for free and then paid eight dollars per line afterward.

Here are some ads from the *Beaver County Times* in December 1994, just months before the first online dating site emerged:

are looking for a loving and caring relationship, please call BOX 23580

THE YOUR ANGEL
Attractive, intelligent, black Christian woman. Seeking a friendship with a Christian male. I love movies, and many other things. Call me and let's talk. BOX 17680

BELIEFIVE LADY
Single white blonde. In my mid 40's. I have blue eyes. In search of a single or divorced white gentleman, age 40 to 60. Honesty and sincerity a must. Want a nice smoker with a sense of humor. Like good conversation, movies, walks and jazz. BOX 23519

SEARCHING WHITE FEMALE
Divorced female, 42, 5ft 8in, brown hair and eyes, enjoys, VCR movies, & pets. I am happy, honest and enjoy life. any height, weight, color or handicap welcome. Only marriage minded. BOX 23517

SINGLE WHITE FEMALE
23, with brown hair, brown eyes, looking for single white male 23 to 30. Slim to medium build, has a job, likes to dance, go to the movies, and out to eat. Hoping for a possible relationship and later on, possible marriage. BOX 23519

LIVING FOR HOLIDAYS
Divorced, white female, blond hair and blue eyes, seeking single or divorced black male, over 6' is a plus, medium to large build must enjoy R & B music, dancing and quiet evenings at home. If you want to spend the holidays with someone please call. BOX 17680

BEAVER COUNTY AREA
Sensate, single black female, age 34. Looking for a single, very tall, kind of witty, charming male, age 40 and over. Only a serious person need ap-

tion, walking, dancing, and seeing out at times. BOX 17680

BEAVER COUNTY AREA
Single white female age 48, Stand 5'4" tall with blue eyes and blond hair; full figured. Likes country music, dining out, movies, and craft shows. Seeking a single white male age 40 to 55, for a relationship; possibly more. BOX 17588

IT'S ALL GOOD
Hour-glass shape, single black female, 15, 125lbs., 5ft. 8in. I enjoy dancing, going to clubs, movies, hanging out, and listening to Rap and R & B. Looking for a single male, 15 to 25, who has the same interests. Give me a call. BOX 17584

SEEKING A HOME
Call 1-800-589-7755
\$1.99 per min.

A RARE BREED
Widower, Christian, 60, non smoker, non drinker. Like most music, walks, averages out as well as in. 5'7", brown hair and brown eyes. Seeking single white female, 40 to 62, with similar values. BOX 23589

LOVELY PUPPY
Single white male, looking for single white female, 21 to 25, to like me, hugs, out of the cold. I'm lovable, home broken and know how treat a woman, call Buzz. BOX 23588

MAN SEEKING WOMAN
Single white male, 48, looking for someone to have fun with, going to movies, grabbing a bite, taking spending overnights watching videos, eye walks, friendships and possible relationship. Alcoholics, junkies, and madags need not apply. BOX 23518

LET'S KICK IT

providing the appropriate items, to enjoy the holiday spirit with. If you enjoy the holiday spirit and want romance, call... BOX 23547

BEAVER CO. AREA
28 year old male, 5'9", 150lbs. I'm very active, creative and educated. Enjoy snow slung and sports. Non smoker seeking a single white female age 21 to 33 with similar interests. Want someone slim to medium build, for dating and possibly more. BOX 17582

CARING CHRISTIAN MAN
46, brown hair, blue eyes, 5ft 11in, attractive, huggable teddy bear. Enjoys slow dancing, movies, tennis, long walks. Seeks attractive non smoker, average build, single or divorced white lady. Age not important. BOX 23548

LOOKING FOR YOU
Single white male in search of single white female, 30 to 50, I am 42, brown/gray hair, brown eyes, 5ft 8in, 140 pounds, with many varied interests, mainly karaoke singing, dancing. If you are interested, please call. BOX 23551

BEAVER COUNTY AREA
Single white male age 50, 62", big man with a big heart, with some physical disabilities. Love the outdoors, travel, quiet evenings, music and cooking. Seeking companionship? Relationship? Age not important. BOX 23544

RELATIONSHIP SOUGHT
Single white male age 23, 5'7", 240 pounds, with black hair. Searching for a single or divorced white female age 18 to 23, for friendship, maybe a relationship. Must have a good sense of humor. BOX 23538

ATTENTION LADIES
Nice looking professional, single

WARM AND CARING
Attractive sweet white male, age 26, 5'5", 150 pounds, brown/blonde hair, brown eyes. I'm a college student and computer tech, who is tired of relationships that stop on a dime. Looking for an attractive female age 20 to 28, to become good friends with and possibly have a relationship. Non smoker. BOX 17586

BROKEN HEARTED MAN
24, white single male, 5'10", 160 pounds. Searching for white single female, 21-25, with some built to share good times with. Friendship definitely, relationship possible. Drinker's and smoker's not important. BOX 17589

SEEKING MISS RIGHT
Single white male, non drinker, 28, 5ft 8in, attractive, employed as partner. Enjoys adventure, travel, beaches, outdoor, scuba, and boating. In search of single white female, who is attractive, petite, adventurous, casual drinker OK. Weekends to burn. If possible, get wild and see the world. BOX 17593

THE NICE GUY
34 year old, 5'10", 180lb., male. Enjoy going out and having fun, staying in and sharing relaxing evenings with special lady. If you are sincere, and between 21 and 40... call. BOX 17582

MUSTANG
18 yrs. old, 5'11", long blond hair, blue eyes, 137lbs., smoker. Like quiet evenings, going out at night and having lots of fun. Seeking white female, same interest, ages 18 to 20. BOX 17572

WANTED OLDER WOMAN
White male, 47, seeking older woman.

After the ads were placed, interested parties would call a toll-based 900 number and leave a message in that person's mailbox. The cost of leaving these messages hovered around \$1.75 per minute, and the average call lasted about three minutes. You would listen to the person's outgoing message and then leave your voice mail, and you even had the option to listen and rerecord if you wanted. The person who placed the ad would go through the messages and contact those people they were interested in.

With no photos and so little information to go off of, finding love through personals could be a frustrating experience. That said, occasionally newspaper personals really did lead to love connections. As it happens, Eric's dad, Ed, was an active user of classified newspaper personal ads in Chicago during the 1980s and early 1990s, and he remembers his experiences well. Ed published his ads in the *Chicago Reader*, the local alternative weekly. Fortunately for us, he saved the last, most successful one he ever posted:

SEEKING ADVENTURE??

Divorced Jewish male, 49, enjoys sailing, hiking, biking, camping, travel, art, music, French and Spanish. Seeking a woman who's looking for a long-term relationship and who shares some of these interests. Be bold—call right now! Chicago Reader Box XXXXX.

There's a lot in this ad that will look familiar to today's online daters. Ed gives his status, religion, age, and personal interests. We get a sense that he's pretty cosmopolitan, and there's even a promise of adventure if we dare to be bold. (Nice move, Ed!)

The ad above generated responses from about thirty-five women, he recalls. Those who responded had to call the designated 900 number and type in his mailbox code. When they did, they heard his personal greeting, which he reconstructed for us:

Hello! If you're seeking adventure and fun, you've come to the right ad! My name is Ed. I'm a forty-nine-year-old divorced Jewish man with two adult children. I have my own house in Lincoln Park and I've owned my own advertising and public relations company since 1969. I'm a longtime recreational sailor and I have a boat in Monroe Harbor. I also enjoy bike riding, hiking, running, camping, and photography. I graduated from the University of Michigan with an English degree, and after graduating from college I worked for six months, saved all my earnings, and attended

the Sorbonne College. During the summer vacation I hitchhiked ten thousand miles through Europe and parts of the Middle East. Obviously, world travel is a big interest of mine! I'm active in two French-language groups and I also speak Spanish. If I've caught your attention and you'd like to talk to me on the phone, please respond to this message and leave a number where I can reach you. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Damn, Ed sounds pretty badass in this greeting. Dude owns a boat and is active in not one but *two* French-language groups. Ed told us that he'd call in to check the messages about once a week—a far cry from today's online daters, many of whom check for matches every few hours or even get instant push notifications on their phone. "I listened to each of them several times, making notes about key items of information. Then I called the women who sounded most interesting, and that time, one really stood out."

Hello, my name is Anne and I really like your Reader ad as well as your voice introduction when I called you just now. I'm a divorced thirty-seven-year-old woman with no children, and yes—I am seeking adventure! I enjoy many of the activities you listed. I lived in Colombia and in Peru for a short time, so I speak Spanish, as you do. If you'd like to meet in person, please call me. I hope you do!

Ed made the call and invited Anne to meet for coffee. Often, he explained to us, these first encounters went badly, because with newspaper ads you had no idea what the other person looked like, and you were basically going off how they sounded on the phone. But he and Anne had a good vibe right away, and things quickly took off. They dated for six years before he proposed to her on a sailing trip by hoisting a self-made sail that said, "Dear Annie, I love you—Will you marry me?" She said yes, and before long they'd sailed off to California to start a new life together.

Now, the idea of meeting through a newspaper personals ad makes for a pretty great story, but for many years Anne never told it.

She's a high-achieving professional with a fancy degree from an elite university and a straitlaced family, and she knew there was a stigma attached to couples who met through newspaper ads. Anne made up a decoy story about her and Ed's meeting being a setup, for the inevitable moments when people asked how they had met. Her own friends and family didn't know the truth until her wedding day, when she confessed during her toast, at which point her family disowned her for being such a loser. Okay, that didn't happen, but wouldn't that have been nuts?

A few years before Ed and Anne found love through a newspaper ad, some entrepreneurs tried to bring cutting-edge technology to matchmaking by introducing video dating services, which gave singles a more dynamic sense of their prospective partners, including a much-needed visual component. With video dating, someone like Ed or Anne would go to a small studio, sit before a small crew, and spend a few minutes introducing themselves on camera. Every so often, they'd get a VHS cassette with short videos of prospects in the mail, and if they liked someone they saw, they could try to arrange a date.

Video dating never really caught on, but if you do some YouTube searching, you can observe some fantastic archived footage. One guy, Mike, led with this amazing notice:



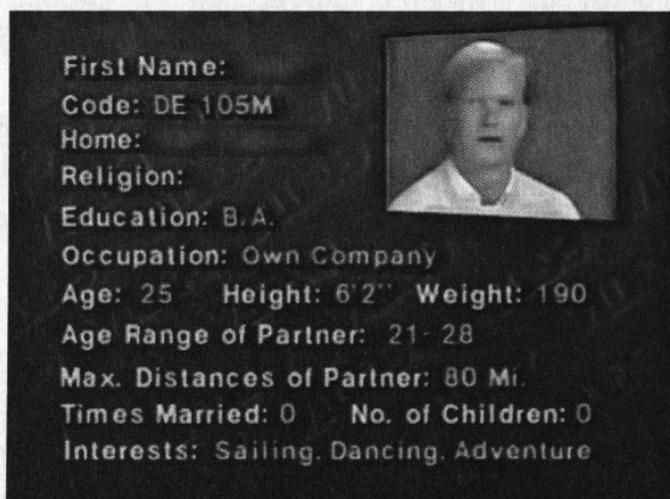
Hi, my name's Mike, and if you're sitting there watching this tape smoking a cigarette, well, hit the fast-forward button, 'cause I don't smoke and I don't like people who do smoke.

In addition to that, most of the clips I watched contained guys setting themselves up as enjoying “having fun” and looking for “someone to have fun with.” They also shared a little bit about themselves. “I like pizza,” said one gentleman. “No fatties, no alcoholics,” proclaimed another. “I’m currently cleaning up toxic waste” is how one man described his professional life, while another described himself as “an executive by day, a wild man by night,” and a third proclaimed, “I’m interested in all aspects of data processing.”

One gentleman declared no “Donna Juanitas,” which sounded like a horrifying racial slur against Hispanic women. However, I did some Internet research and found out it was actually the female equivalent of a Don Juan. Basically, he didn’t want a woman who was sleeping around. That said, if that’s the goal, shouldn’t the term be “Donna Juan” instead of “Donna Juanita”? Where does the “Juanita” come from? Why does her last name change? Seems like the person who came up with this term is under the impression that last names in Spanish have gender-specific conjugations. So a man named Jorge Lopez would be married to a woman named Ana Lopezita? My Spanish is horrible, but even I know that makes no sense. Okay, this was quite a tangent—look for my other book, *Donna Juan: The Etymology of Racial Slurs*, sometime in 2023.*

* UPDATE: I showed this passage to my friend Matt Murray, who brought up a great point. After reading this section, he wrote me this eye-opening note: “In this case, isn’t ‘Don’ an honorific, like ‘Don Julio’ or ‘Don Corleone’? So, I think the guy would be right to change ‘Juan’ to ‘Juanita.’ Weirdly the part he got wrong was the ‘Donna’ part, which should, I believe, be ‘Doña.’” Wow. Thanks Matt. Who could have ever guessed how deep this rabbit hole would go?

After each clip, the suitor's stats would be flashed on the screen, like this:



In a way, I'm kind of bummed video dating died out, because the clips I explored were really great. Peep the dude above. One of his interests is "adventure"!

The failure of video dating did not scare off the entrepreneurs who recognized how another new technology, the Internet, might revolutionize matchmaking. And in the mid-1990s, when personal computers and modems that connected users to the Internet were becoming more popular, online dating began to take off.

Match.com launched in 1995, and it wasn't just an updated version of computer dating services; it had one crucial innovation: Instead of matching up clients with an algorithm, Match.com let its clients select one another, in real time. Most people were skeptical that the service would change anything. But not Gary Kremen, who founded the company and served as its first CEO. During his first big television interview, Kremen wore a tie-dyed shirt, sat on a brightly colored beanbag chair, and boldly told the camera: "Match.com will bring more love to the planet than anything since Jesus Christ."⁴

But first it required some tinkering. Initially Match.com was hampered by the same stigma that had kept people away from previous

computer dating services. During the Internet boom of the late 1990s, though, people's relationship to computers and online culture changed dramatically, and more and more people were getting comfortable using computers for basic tasks. Over time, e-mail, chat rooms, and ultimately social media would require people to develop online personas. And the idea of using a computer to find dates became completely acceptable. By 2005 Match.com had registered forty million people.

However, once it was clear that there was a market for online dating services, competing companies sprang up everywhere, seeking out new niches and also trying to chip away at Match.com's client base. Each new site had its own distinctive branding—eHarmony was for people looking for serious relationships, Nerve was for hipsters, JDate for Jewish folks, and so forth.

But most sites shared a basic template: They presented a vast catalog of single people and offered a quasiscientific method of filtering through the options to find the people most likely to match. Whether these algorithms were more effective than the algorithms of the computer dating services is a matter of some controversy, but as computers became dazzlingly fast and sophisticated, people seemed more inclined to trust their matchmaking advice.

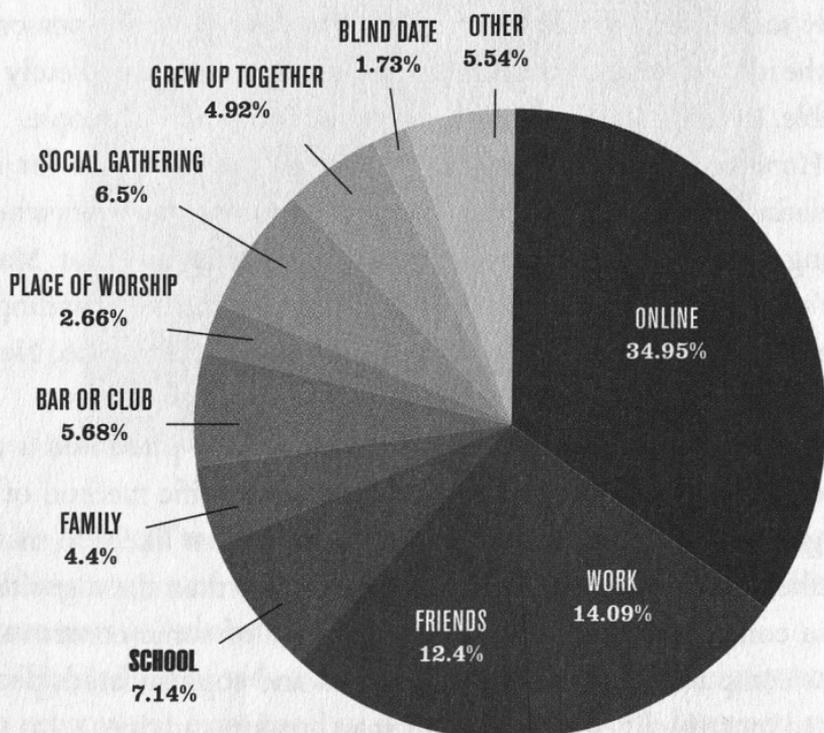
ONLINE DATING TODAY

I always knew online dating was popular, but until recently I had no idea just how massive a force it is in today's search for a romantic partner.

According to a study by the University of Chicago psychologist John Cacioppo (not to be confused with John Cacio e Pepe, a fat Italian guy who loves pasta with pecorino and black pepper), between 2005 and 2012 more than *one third* of couples who got married in the United States met through an online dating site. Online dating was *the* single biggest way people met their spouses. Bigger than work, friends, and school *combined*.⁵

HOW AMERICANS MET THEIR SPOUSES,

2005-2012

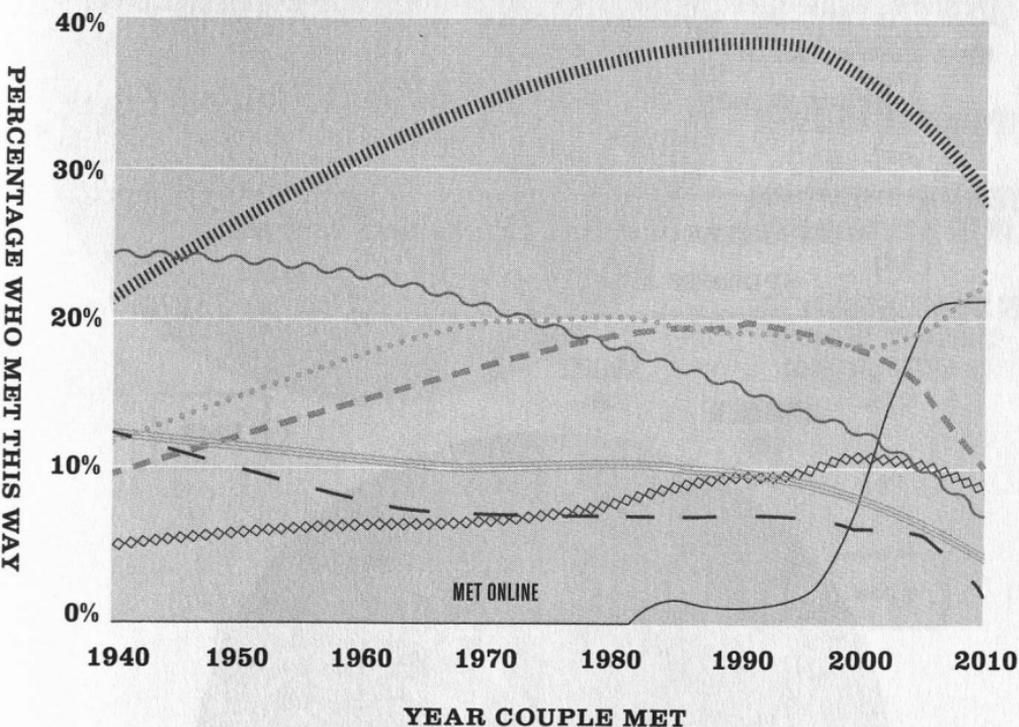


Cacioppo's findings are so shocking that many pundits questioned their validity, or else argued that the researchers were biased because they were funded by an online dating company. But the truth is that the findings are largely consistent with those of Stanford University sociologist Michael Rosenfeld, who has done more than anyone to document the rise of Internet dating and the decline of just about every other way of connecting.

His survey, "How Couples Meet and Stay Together," is a nationally representative study of four thousand Americans, 75 percent married or in a romantic relationship and 25 percent single. It asked adults of all ages how they met their romantic partners, and since some of the respondents were older, the survey allows us to see how things varied among different periods.⁶

It's especially instructive to compare things from 1940 to 1990, right before the rise of online dating, and then again from the 1990s until today.

HOW HETEROSEXUAL AMERICANS MET THEIR SPOUSES AND ROMANTIC PARTNERS, 1940-2010



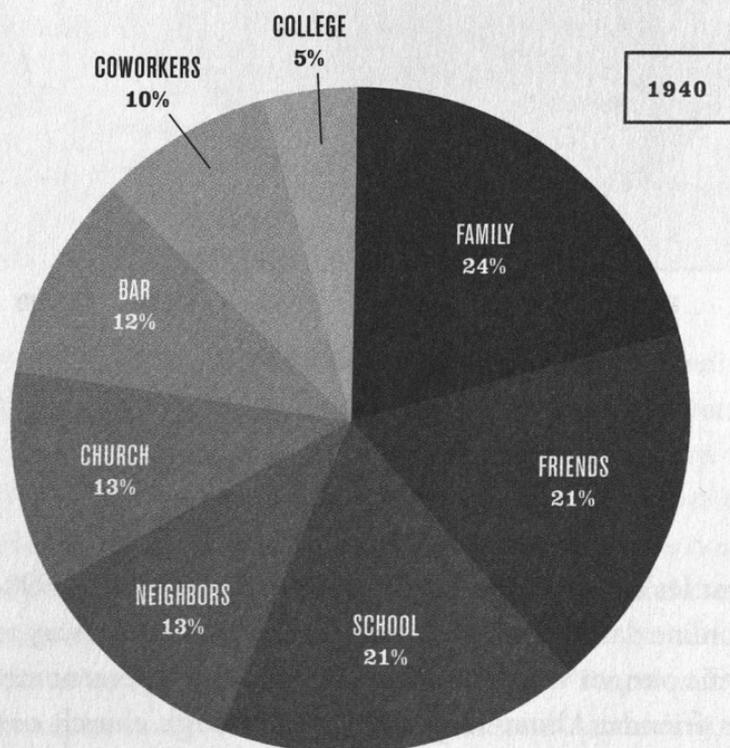
First let's look at the difference between 1940 and 1990—just before online dating arrived. In 1940 the most common way to meet a romantic partner was through the family, and 21 percent met them through friends. About 12 percent met through church or in the neighborhood, and roughly the same portion met in a bar or restaurant or at work. Just a handful, about 5 percent, met in college, for the simple reason that not many people had access to higher education.

Things were different in 1990. The family had become a far less influential matchmaker, pairing up only 15 percent of singles, as did the church, which had plummeted to 7 percent. The most popular route to romance was through friends, which is how nearly 40 percent of all couples met.

The portion of people who met in bars had also increased, going up to 20 percent. Meeting someone in college had gone up to 10 percent, while meeting in the neighborhood was just a bit less common than it had been in 1940.

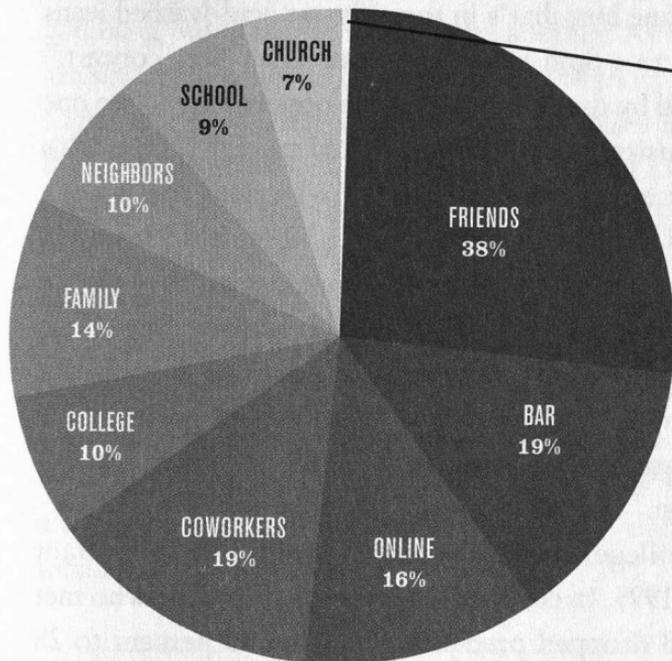
Another popular way partners found each other in 1990 was

HOW HETEROSEXUAL AMERICANS MET THEIR SPOUSES AND ROMANTIC PARTNERS*



* **NOTE:** The numbers here add up to more than 100 percent because many people reported meeting their spouse in more than one of these categories—for instance, family connections who met in school, college students who met in a bar—and they checked more than one answer.

1995



MET AT A MIATA DEALERSHIP
.19%

SAT NEXT TO EACH OTHER
AT A TAPING OF *THE CHEVY
CHASE SHOW*
.15%

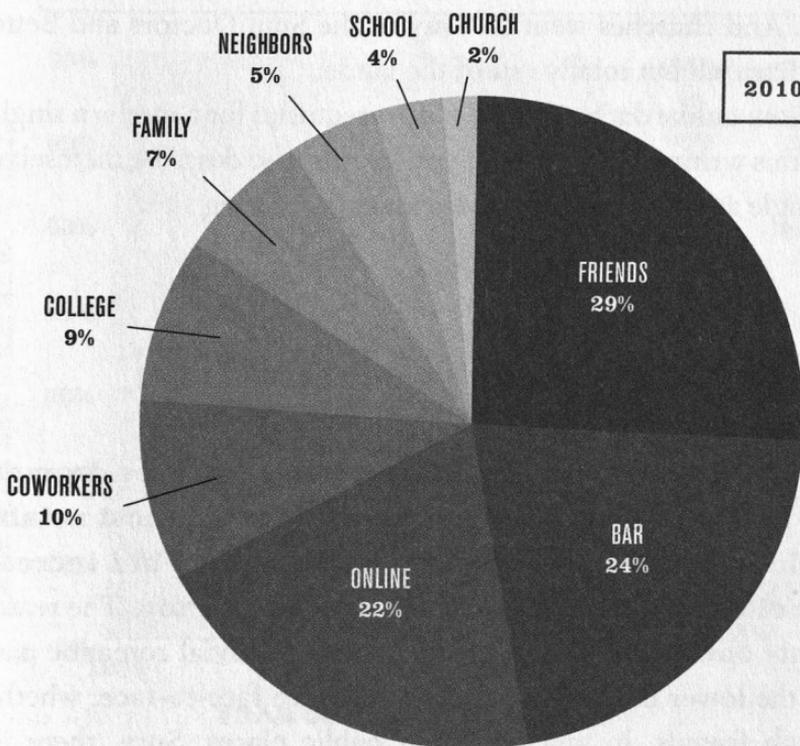
MET AT HAIR SALON WHILE HE
WAS GIVING HER A "RACHEL"
HAIRCUT
.40%

WERE LASER TAG TEAMMATES
.11%

BOTH WORKED IN THE CASSETTE
SINGLES SECTION AT THE WIZ
.13%

MET WHILE PICKETING NBC
TO BRING BACK THE RECENTLY-
CANCELLED SITCOM *ALF*
.02%

2010



when a man would yell something to the effect of “Hey, girl, come back here with that fine butt that’s in them fly-ass acid-washed jeans and let me take you to a Spin Doctors/Better Than Ezra concert.” The woman, flattered by the attention and the opportunity to see one of *the* preeminent musical acts of the era, would quickly oblige. This is how roughly 6 percent of couples formed. To be clear, this is just a guess on my part and has nothing to do with Mr. Rosenfeld’s research.

The advent of online dating sites has transformed the way we begin romantic relationships. In 2000, a mere five years after Match .com was invented, 10 percent of all people in relationships had met their partners on the Internet, and by 2010 nearly 25 percent had. No other way of establishing a romantic connection has ever increased so far, so fast.⁷

In 2010 only college and bars remained roughly as important as they had been in 1995. In contrast, the portion of people who met through friends had dropped precipitously, from 40 percent to 28 percent, and meeting through the family, work, or the neighborhood became even less common, each around 10 percent or well below. And churches went the way of the Spin Doctors and Better Than Ezra, all but totally out of the game.

Now online dating is almost a prerequisite for a modern single. As of this writing, 38 percent of Americans who describe themselves as “single and looking” have used an online dating site.⁸

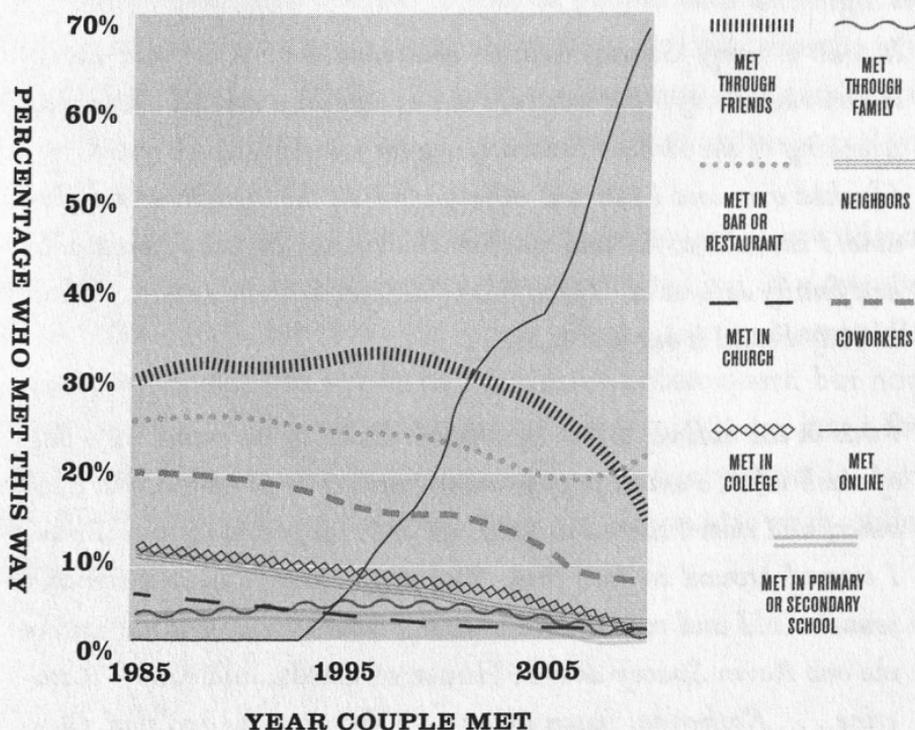
ONLINE DATING AND THIN MARKETS

Internet dating has changed the game even more dramatically in what Rosenfeld calls “thin markets,” most notably people interested in same-sex relationships, but increasingly older and middle-aged straight people too. The reason is pretty obvious: The smaller the pool of potential romantic partners, the lower the odds of finding romance face-to-face, whether through friends, in schools, or in public places. Sure, there are

booming gay neighborhoods in some cities, but the people who live and hang out there see a lot of one another. After a while those who are single have moved through their options and they're looking for something new. That's one reason why today meeting in bars or in the neighborhood is far less common among LGBT couples than it used to be, and why nearly 70 percent of LGBT couples meet on-line. (BLT couples—bacon, lettuce, and tomato couples—are inanimate objects and are not engaging in romantic pursuits.)

Back to LGBT folks: Rosenfeld's research shows that online dating is "dramatically more common among same-sex couples *than any way of meeting has ever been for heterosexual or same-sex couples in the past.*" (Emphasis ours.) And recent trends suggest that as more old people go online, Internet dating will start to dominate their world too.

HOW SAME SEX COUPLES MET THEIR ROMANTIC PARTNERS



SOCIAL STIGMA

There can still be a social stigma with online dating sites, and people are sometimes afraid to admit that's how they met their partner. Their fear is that using an online site means they were somehow not attractive or desirable enough to meet people through traditional means, but in recent years this concern seems to be declining. Occasionally we interviewed people who felt embarrassed that they had met their mates online and crafted “decoy stories” for their friends and family. I hope the prevalence of online dating that we’re reporting here will destroy the fears any readers have about it not being accepted. No matter what your friends and family say when they hear you met your special person through a website, you have plenty of company in finding your mate through these means. If you are still uneasy about it, though, and you need help crafting a decoy story, I can suggest a few for you to try:

It was a rainy Sunday winter afternoon and I decided to go the movies. Everything was sold out except for a special Christmas screening of the Arnold Schwarzenegger film Jingle All the Way. I looked over and I saw one other person in the theater. It was Janine. I sat next to her and we started chatting. By the time Arnold had finally secured a “Turbo Man” doll for his son, Jamie, we had already boned it out TWICE.

I was in the hallway of my apartment building throwing out a bag of trash when a small puppy walked up to me. We looked at each other, and then I turned around. He then tapped me with his paw. I turned around to face him. The puppy spoke, in a voice that sounded old and raspy, with a strong Southern accent not unlike the one Kevin Spacey does in House of Cards, and said, “Katherine . . . Katherine, listen to me . . . You must go and find Dan-

iel Reese. He will be your husband.” I never saw the puppy again and I never met a Daniel Reese, but that night I met Dave at a bar downtown.

I was attending a boxing match in Atlantic City, when suddenly gunshots rang out and the secretary of defense, whom I was assigned to protect, was killed. Of course, I ordered the arena to be locked down and then, using my expert detective skills, determined that the mastermind of the whole plan was none other than my own partner, Kevin Dunne. That bastard. After fighting one of the boxers myself, I was able to escape just as Hurricane Jezebel hit the boardwalk. Yup, you know what that means. Tidal wave. Eventually Dunne shot himself in front of the TV cameras once he realized his plan had failed, and that’s where I met Cindy.

NOTE: Use this story only if you’re sure your audience has not seen the Nicolas Cage movie *Snake Eyes*.

It’s easy to see why online dating has taken off so much. It provides you a seemingly endless supply of people who are single and looking to date. You have the tools to filter and find exactly what you are looking for. You don’t need a third party, like a friend or coworker, to facilitate an intro. The sites are on all the time and you can engage whenever and wherever you want.

Let’s say you’re a girl who wants a twenty-eight-year-old man who’s five foot ten, has brown hair, lives in Brooklyn, is a member of the Baha’i faith, and loves the music of Naughty by Nature. Before online dating, this would have been a fruitless quest, but now, at any time of the day, no matter where you are, you are just a few screens away from sending a message to your very specific, very odd dream man. But, of course, there are downsides with online dating as well.

THE PROBLEMS WITH ONLINE DATING

So far I've painted a pretty nice picture of millions of people finding love with a few clicks. In theory, online dating should be a big improvement over traditional methods of meeting people. It's infinitely larger, more efficient, more precise, and always readily available. Of the successful relationships in the Rosenfeld study, 74 percent of the people started as total strangers, meaning had it not been for online dating, they would never have met.

However, despite the undeniable success that the numbers above represent, the research I've done and read makes it clear that the new dating technology has created its own new set of problems. To get a real sense of the world of online dating, we had to look beyond the numbers. So we set out to try to understand the real-life experiences people were having as online daters.

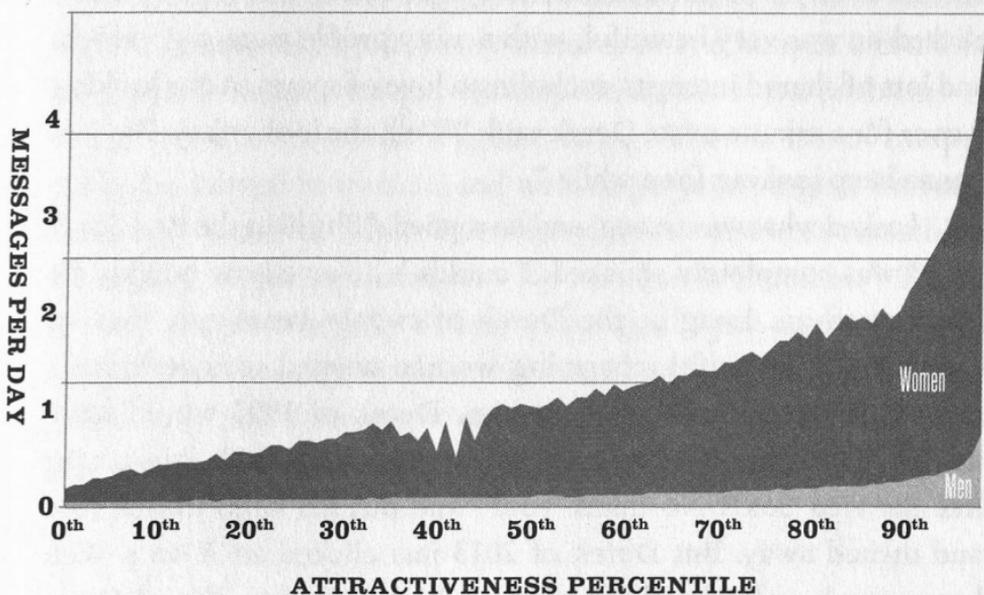
One of the most enlightening ways we found to learn about online dating was when, in a move that I still can't believe we were able to pull off, Eric and I hooked up a computer to a projector and asked young singles to log on to their accounts to show us what it was really like to be an online dater. They showed us their inboxes and what they would generally do upon logging in.

The first time we did this, at a live show in Los Angeles, an attractive woman pulled up her OkCupid account and let me project it onto a large screen that everyone in the house could see. She was receiving fifty new messages a day and her inbox was clogged with literally hundreds of unread solicitations. As she scrolled and scrolled through message after message, the guys in the audience looked on in horror. They couldn't believe the sheer volume of it all. The woman said she felt bad that a lot of the messages would probably just be deleted because she would never have time to respond to them all. The men in the audience collectively let out a pained groan. Throughout all our interviews, this was a consistent finding: In online dating women get a ton more attention than men.

In his book *Dataclysm*, OkCupid founder Christian Rudder

illustrates this stark difference in attention with the following graph of user data from OkCupid. This is a chart of messages received per day plotted against attractiveness based on user ratings.

**MESSAGES PER DAY ON OKCUPID
BY ATTRACTIVENESS**



Even a guy at the highest end of attractiveness barely receives the number of messages almost all women get.

But that doesn't mean that men end up in the online equivalent of standing alone in the corner of the bar. Online there are no lonely corners. Everywhere is filled with people looking to connect.

A guy who may have had very little luck in the bar scene can have an inbox filled with messages. The number of messages may not be as high relative to that of the most attractive women on the sites, but relative to the attention they'd get in more traditional social environments, it's huge.

Basically, every bozo can now be a stud.

Take Derek, a regular user of OkCupid who lives in New York. What I'm about to say is going to sound very mean, but

Derek is a pretty boring white guy. Medium height, thinning brown hair, nicely dressed and personable, but nothing immediately magnetic or charming. He isn't unattractive, but he wouldn't necessarily turn heads if he walked into a bar or party.

At our focus group on online dating in Manhattan, Derek got on OkCupid and let us watch as he went through his options. These were women whom OkCupid had selected as potential matches for him based on his profile and the site's algorithm. The first woman he clicked on was very beautiful, with a witty profile page, a good job, and lots of shared interests, including a love of sports. After looking it over for a minute or so, Derek said: "Well, she looks okay. I'm just gonna keep looking for a while."

I asked what was wrong, and he replied, "She likes the Red Sox."

I was completely shocked. I couldn't believe how quickly he just moved on. Imagine the Derek of twenty years ago, finding out that this beautiful, charming woman wanted to date him. If she was at a bar and smiled at him, Derek of 1993 would have melted. He wouldn't have walked up and said, "Oh, wait, you like the Red Sox?! No thank you!" and put his hand in her face and turned away. But Derek of 2013 just clicked an *X* on a Web browser tab and deleted her without thinking twice, like a J.Crew sweatshirt that didn't live up to his expectations upon seeing a larger picture.

Derek didn't go for the next one either, despite the fact that the woman was comparably attractive. For ten or fifteen minutes Derek flipped his way around the site without showing even a hint of enthusiasm for any of the numerous extremely compelling women who were there looking for romance, until finally he settled on one and typed out a simple message, leaving the others to die in his browser history.

Now, let me say that I liked Derek. He was a nice person and I feel horrible about calling him a boring white guy. My point is that he did not strike me as a stud. But wow, when you watched him comb through those profiles, he had a stud mentality. I couldn't help thinking that he and who knows how many other people like him are doing a lot better with online dating than they would in other forums. Derek

and all online daters, men and women, are being presented with more romantic possibilities than ever before, and it is clearly changing their whole approach to finding a potential mate.

There was another amazing example of this phenomenon on our subreddit. One young man wrote in to say how shocked he was to see how an attractive female friend of his fared on Tinder. “She had a 95% match rate,” he reported. “Close to 150 matches in 20 minutes. She is insanely attractive in person but I was not expecting that. She could get as many matches in one hour as I could in 4 months.” In part, this guy is complaining about the problems of being a man in the world of online dating: There’s lots of competition for attractive women, and women get much higher hit rates than men. Granted. But in the midst of this he also said something incredible: “I got approximately 350 matches in 5 months.” That’s seventy people a month. Twenty years ago, if you met a guy who said he’d met seventy women who’d expressed interest in him in the past month, you’d assume he was quite a stud. Today he can be any guy with a smartphone and a thumb to swipe right.

EXHAUSTION:

ARPAN VERSUS DINESH

Derek and all the other people like him have vastly increased their dating options, but at what price? I learned all about the toll online dating can take when I met two very different and interesting men in a focus group in Los Angeles.

It was a Saturday morning and we were conducting our interviews in an office building on the west side. I walked in from the parking garage and got into the elevator, and I saw two Indian dudes. One was Arpan. The other was Dinesh. At first I was scared: Was one of these guys my Indian stalker? Nah, they seemed cool.

If I had to guess who had the better dating life based just on our initial hellos, I would have easily said Arpan. He was dressed a

little more fashionably, he had a confidence and charm to him, and he seemed comfortable with all these strangers. Dinesh was a bit shy, not as hip in his dress, and just not as jovial. When the focus group started, though, a different picture emerged.

We began the discussion by just asking what people were looking for. Arpan slouched down in his seat and told his story.

“I’m Arpan. I’m twenty-nine and I live in downtown L.A.,” he began. “I’m looking for something serious. I’ve been single for a few years. And you know, at the initial stages, especially when I was a little younger, like, twenty-six, it was cool. There are so many options!” For a while having easy access to a world of single women who lived nearby was exciting, and he’d spend hours online checking out profiles or casually flirting. He went out a lot too, and gradually honed his technique.

Arpan then described his descent into darkness. He said that initially he would spend a lot of time crafting enticing personal notes to women, his logic being that women receive so many messages that he had to do something to stand out from the crowd in their inboxes. Eventually, though, the return on investment was too low to justify all that time and energy. He would spend all this time being thoughtful but then felt like the women would just dismiss him based on looks or some other variable.

And even if the girl responded, it wasn’t always easy. “Then finally she responds. You’re like, *Yay!* A euphoric moment,” he said. Then he’d be drawn into a back-and-forth exchange with this person that could last quite a while and then, as he described it, “either it fades out, or you meet up with them and it’s horrible, and you just wasted all that time.”

This all started taking a toll on Arpan and he became a different person. He decided he was going to stop with the thoughtful messages because it just wasn’t worth the time. He started mass mailing what he admittedly described as “douchebag” messages.

“I’m so jaded and so tired of it that I don’t actually take the time anymore. I will send a stupid message like ‘Hey, you’re pretty. Want to grab a drink?’ Literally mass message, like, twenty,

thirty people because I'm so tired. They're going to base [their response] on looks anyway." The lack of thoughtfulness in his messages made things easier and more effective. "There's no work," he said. "And I get more response rate, which is so weird."

Weird, yes, but also true. In *Dataclysm*, Christian Rudder used actual user data from OkCupid to show that writing a standard message and then copying and pasting it to initiate conversations is 75 percent as effective as writing something more original. Since it's also way less demanding, Rudder says that "in terms of effort-in to results-out it always wins."

So Arpan did game the system to his advantage a little, but he didn't just standardize his initial messages; he also developed a template for his dates. When he started online dating he would often take women out to dinner, but at a certain point he decided this was a "rookie mistake." If he didn't hit it off with this person, he was in for the long haul, stuck in a seemingly endless dinner, so he decided to switch to drinks. He also felt that investing time in picking a fun place to go was too much effort considering that most of the dates ended up being a bust, so he narrowed his date spots to a few bars that were walking distance from his apartment.

So: just drinks, minimal effort on his part, *and* you have to travel to him. Ladies, are you getting sexually excited just reading this?!

We asked him where he took his last two dates, both of whom he found through online sites. "Volcano, five blocks away from my house." And the other? "Lucky Strike Lanes, six blocks away from my house." Any potential ladies that got excited about a bowling date quickly would have their dreams crushed, though. According to Arpan, "It's actually bowling, but there's a lounge/bar area, so I don't do the bowling." Ouch. Quite a bait and switch. "Hey! Let's go bowling! Just kidding, let's just get a drink at the lounge."

On that note, it is fairly common knowledge that nothing gets a girl more turned on than a bowling lounge. Between watching fat guys tossing bowling balls and the dulcet tones of *The Simpsons* arcade game, I can't imagine those encounters not ending in a marathon boning session.

“Dating is tiring, without a doubt,” Arpan told us. “It’s a lot of work. And you know, now I’m so jaded and, like, so tired of it that I don’t actually take the time anymore. I’m at the point where it’s just like, ‘Find me somebody! Make it happen!’” But as far as I could tell, his techniques were not working out.

Arpan, who at first glance comes off as a vibrant, confident guy, has been so beaten down by dating that the very mention of the topic leads him to slouch down and spin tales like a weary war veteran. The rigors of the online dating world transformed this once-excited young single man into a sad lug whose idea of a date is to not bowl at a bowling alley that he can get home from as quickly as possible.

Others in our focus groups commiserated over the fact that sorting through this new sea of options available through online dating was almost becoming a second job. The word “exhausting” came up in every discussion we had, and after hearing people’s experiences, it made sense.

All the work that went into finding even one date—reading through messages, finding a message you like, clicking the profile, sorting through the profile, and then, after all that, STILL having to engage in a series of back-and-forths to gauge rapport and then plan a real-world meet-up—was taking its toll.

Some had even reached a breaking point. Priya, twenty-seven, said she’d recently deleted her Tinder and OkCupid accounts. “It just takes too long to get to just the first date. And I feel like it’s way more effective utilizing your social groups,” she said. “It’s like I would rather put myself in those social situations than get exhausted.”

For Priya, as for so many of the online daters we met in different cities, the process had morphed from something fun and exciting into a new source of stress and dread.

Now, what about Dinesh, the other Indian guy?

Dinesh had a completely different approach to dating. “I’m not on any dating sites,” he announced to our group that morning, looking a bit perplexed by the conversation.

“What was the last first date you went on?” I asked.

“I met a girl at church and we went to a movie just recently,” he said.

The way he said it was so confident and badass. Compared with what Arpan had just said, Dinesh’s “church and a movie” sounded like “motorcycle race and some sport fucking.”

“What about the last girl before that who you met?” I continued.

“I met her at a volunteer thing,” Dinesh replied.

The guys in the room seemed mesmerized by the fantasy of dating a beautiful girl who also does heartfelt charity work.

Before that, he reported, he’d met a girl at a holiday party. “I have a bunch of really good groups of friends, kind of across L.A., so I meet tons of people.”

The key, Dinesh said, is to have friends who hang out in different groups in different places, and to mix up the nights so that you’re spending some time with all of them. Whether it’s in church, with volunteer groups, at office parties, or on a sports field, it’s always a place where people meet organically.

“There’s a lot of cool stuff going on in L.A. at all times,” he explained. “I think it’s fun and interesting to meet new people, and if I meet people in person, they’re more willing to open up their schedules. I am too. I’m more willing to, like, go to work super early and then be home by, like, five or six to make something happen.” He looked over to consider Arpan and then turned back to us. “And no, I’m not exhausted.” Fortunately, Arpan at this point was so slumped in his chair that it blocked his ears and he didn’t even hear this.

Dinesh had a Zen vibe to him that wasn’t matched by anyone else in the room. While the other singles assembled that morning seemed jaded and frustrated, Dinesh seemed more comfortable and at ease with dating. Was it because he avoided online dating? Or was it that those who were dating online were actually pretty bad at it?

After several lengthy conversations with experts, I would guess the latter was a significant factor.

MOST PEOPLE STINK AT ONLINE DATING

Online dating is like a second job that requires knowledge and skills that very few of us have. In fact, most of us have no clue what we're doing. One reason is that people don't always know what they're looking for in a soul mate, unlike when they're picking something easier, like laundry detergent (big ups to Tide Mountain Spring—who doesn't want their clothes to smell like a fresh mountain spring?!).

While we may think we know what we want, we're often wrong. According to Dan Slater's history of online dating, *Love in the Time of Algorithms*, the first online dating services tried to find matches for clients based almost exclusively on what clients said they wanted. The client would usually fill out a survey indicating certain traits they were looking for in a partner. For example, if a man said he was looking for a tall, blond woman with no kids and a college degree, the company showed him everyone who fit this description. But pretty soon online dating companies realized that this wasn't working. In 2008 Match.com hired Amarnath Thombre as its new "chief of algorithms." Thombre set about figuring out why a lot of couples that Match.com's algorithm said were a perfect fit often didn't make it past the first date. When he began digging into the data, he discovered something surprising: The kind of partner people said they were looking for didn't match up with the kind of partner they were actually interested in.

Thombre discovered this by simply analyzing the discrepancy between the characteristics people said they wanted in a romantic partner (age, religion, hair color, and the like) and the characteristics of the people whom they actually contacted on the dating site. "We began to see how frequently people break their own rules," he told Slater. "When you watch their browsing habits—their actual behavior on the site—you see them go way outside of what they say they want."¹⁰

When I was writing stand-up about online dating, I filled out

the forms for dummy accounts on several dating sites just to get a sense of the questions and what the process was like. The person I described that I wanted to find was a little younger than me, small, with dark hair. The person I'm currently dating, whom I met through friends, is two years older, about my height—OKAY, SLIGHTLY TALLER—and blond. She wouldn't have made it through the filters I placed in my online dating profile.

A big part of online dating is spent on this process, though—setting your filters, sorting through many profiles, and going through a mandatory “checklist” of what you think you are looking for. People take these parameters very seriously. They declare that their mate “must love dogs” or that their mate “must love the film *Must Love Dogs*,” which stars Diane Lane as a newly divorced woman who's encouraged by her friend to start an online dating profile that states her dates “must love dogs.” (Shout-out to the *Must Love Dogs* Wikipedia page for helping me recall the plot.)

But does all the effort put into sorting profiles help?

Despite all the nuanced information that people put up on their profiles, the factor that people rely on most when preselecting a date is looks. Based on the data he has reviewed, Rudder told us that he estimates that photos drive 90 percent of the action in online dating.

PROFILE PHOTOS:

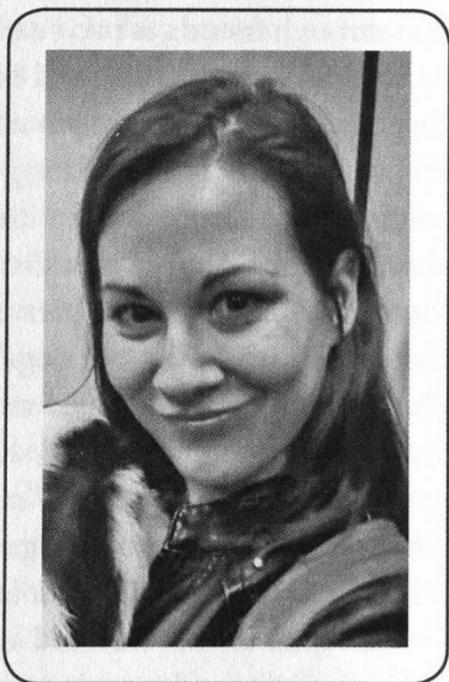
WHY YOU NEED TO GO SPELUNKING WITH A PUPPY ASAP

If 90 percent of your fate as an online dater depends on the photos you pick, this is an important decision. So what works? Rudder examined which kinds of images proved most and least successful on the dating site OkCupid, and he made some surprising discoveries.¹¹

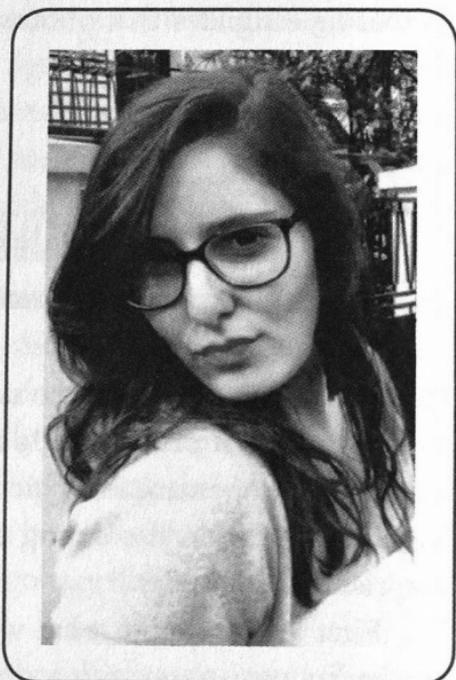
First let's examine what works for women. Most women (56 percent) choose to go with a straightforward smiling pic. But the 9

percent who opt to go with a more “flirting to the camera” vibe are slightly more successful. See the examples below:

THE STRAIGHTFORWARD SMILING PIC



THE FLIRTING TO CAMERA PIC

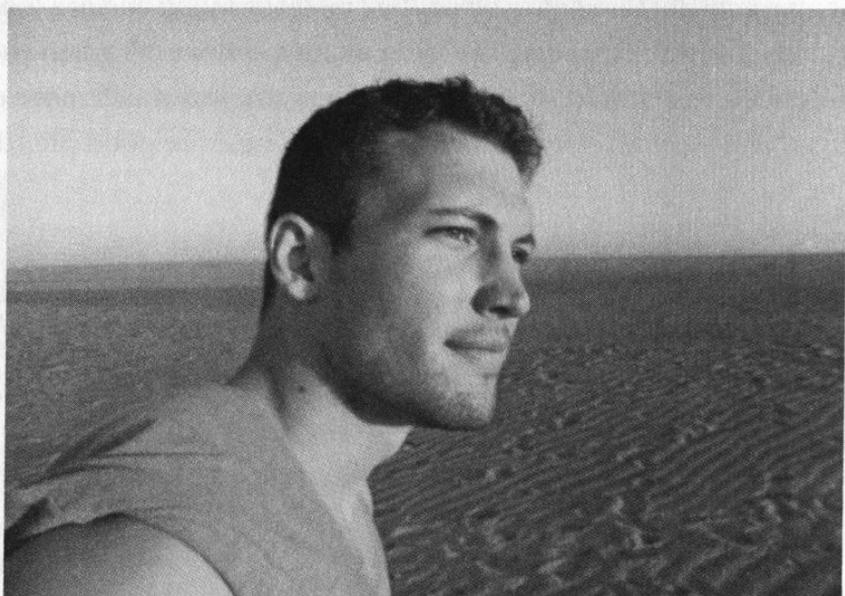


Now, those results are not very surprising, but what's weird is that men actually fare better when they are *not* smiling and are looking *away* from the camera. Whereas women did worse when they didn't make eye contact, for guys, looking away was much more effective. This seems really counterintuitive. These are good photos? What are they looking at?

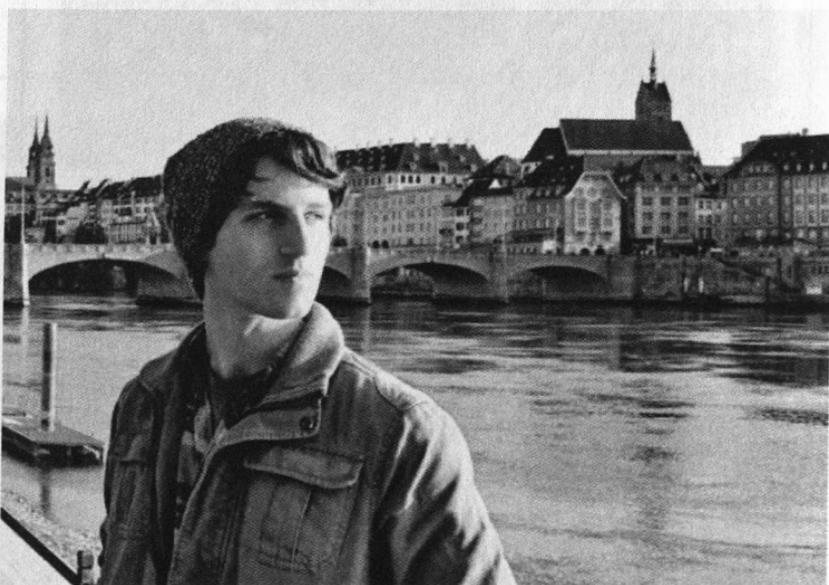
THE NOT SMILING, LOOKING AWAY PIC



"Oh shit, is that a raccoon in my kitchen?"



"I'm staring at my brother, whose leg I just ate. I've been lost in the desert for three weeks without food or water. Also, I like photography and playing guitar."

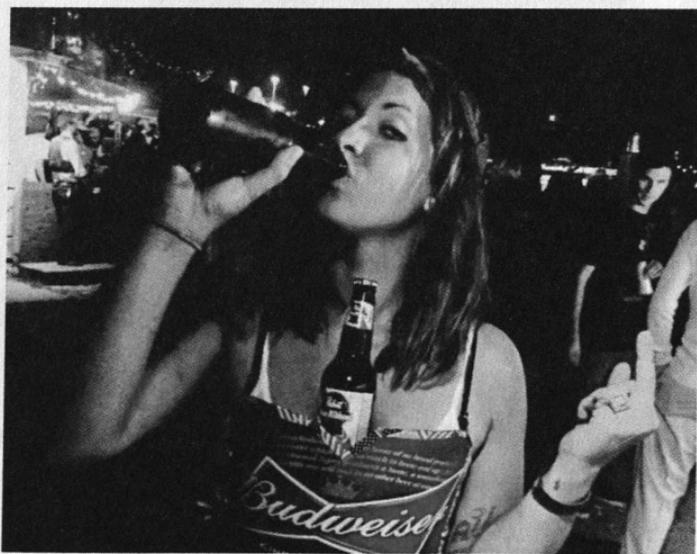


"Just grab a photo of me in front of this bridge—oh whoa, is that a bee? Quick! I didn't pack my EpiPen!"

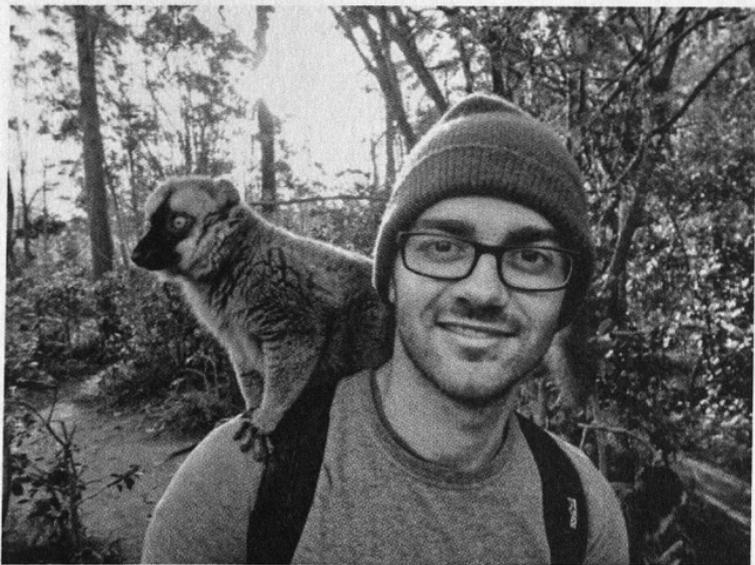
The second thing Rudder discovered is that, for women, the most effective photo angle is a straightforward “selfie,” shot down from a high angle with a slightly coy look.



When scanning through profiles, we saw a trend of people picking certain templates for their photos—hanging with friends drinking, outdoors near a mountain, etc. Rudder’s data shows that for women, the high-angle selfie is by far the most effective. Second is in bed, followed by outdoor and travel photos. At the lower end, the ones that are least effective are women drinking alcohol or posing with an animal.



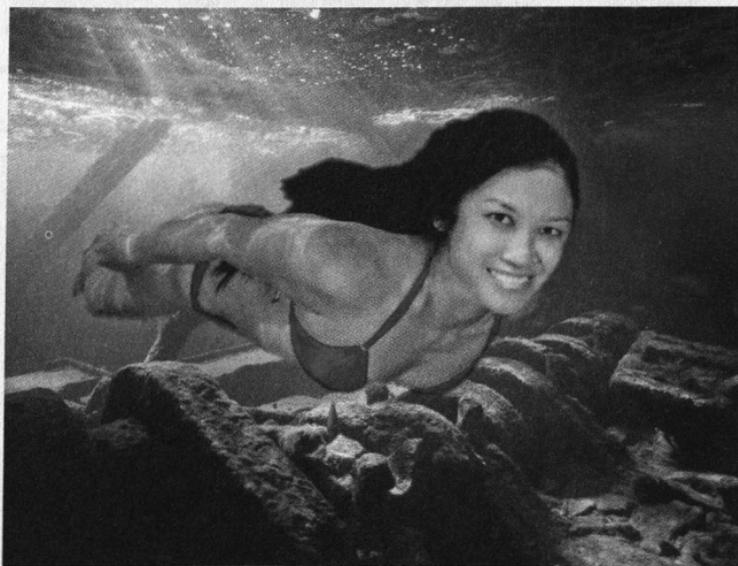
Oddly enough, for men the most effective photos are ones with animals, followed by showing off muscles (six-packs, etc.), and then photos showing them doing something interesting. Outdoor, drinking, and travel photos were the least effective photo types.



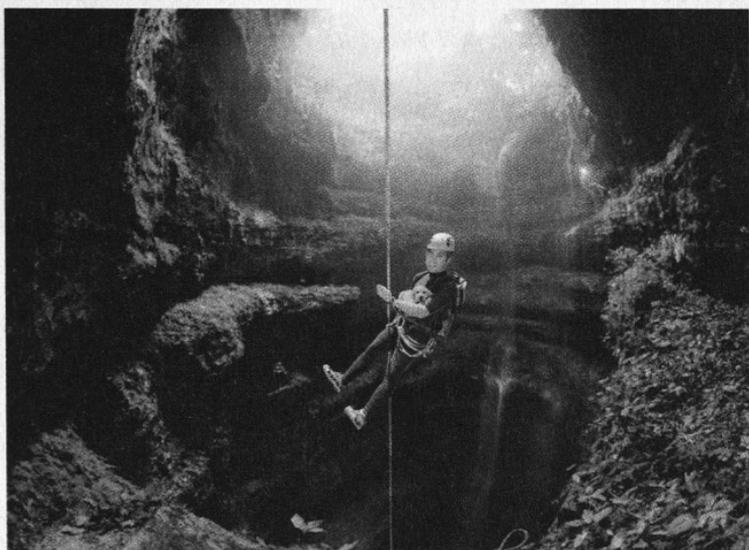
Most intriguing to me, though, was when Rudder looked at the data of what photos led to the best conversations. Whereas “cleavage” shots of women got 49 percent more new contacts per month than average, the images that resulted in the most conversation showed people doing interesting things. Sometimes faces didn’t even need to appear. A guy giving a thumbs-up while scuba diving. A woman standing in a barren desert. A woman playing a guitar. These photos revealed something deeper about their interests or their lives and led to more meaningful interactions.

OPTIMAL PROFILE PHOTOS

So based on these data, the answers are clear: If you are a woman, take a high-angle selfie, with cleavage, while you’re underwater near some buried treasure.



If you are a guy, take a shot of yourself holding your puppy while both of you are spelunking.



MESSAGING STRATEGY

So let's say the person is intrigued by your photos. Now what? The messages begin.

As with text messages, there are all sorts of strategies people use when communicating on a dating site. Unlike with SMS texts, though, with these messages we actually have data on what works.

According to Rudder, the messages that get the best response rate are between forty and sixty characters. He also learned something by analyzing how long people spent on the messages. The ones that received the highest response rate took only around two minutes to compose. If you overthink it and spend too much time writing, the response rate goes down.

What about the Arpan strategy of copying and pasting? The problem with Arpan's message is that it's clearly a copy-and-paste message with little thought and no personal touch. What really seems to be effective is taking the time to compose a message that seems genuine and blasting it out en masse. Here's a message that one guy blasted out to forty-two people:

I'm a smoker too. I picked it up when backpacking in may. It used to be a drinking thing but now I wake up and fuck, I want a cigarette. I sometimes wish that I worked in a Mad Men office. Have you seen the Le Corbusier exhibit at MoMA? It sounds pretty interesting. I just saw a Frank Gehry (sp?) display last week in Montreal, and how he used computer modelling to design a crazy house in Ohio.

At first glance it's a bit random, because there are so many references to so many different interests. But when you take it all in, it's clear that the guy was looking for a girl who smoked and was into art, and his generic message was specific enough to resonate with at least five of the women who read it, because that's how many replied.

ALGORITHMS

What about the algorithms that are supposed to help you find your soul mate? They're no doubt useful for helping online daters find their way into a pool of potentially compatible partners, and for that reason they can be useful. But even the designers who do the math that drives them acknowledge that they're far from perfect.

In 2012 a team of five psychology professors, led by Eli Finkel at Northwestern University, published a paper in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* arguing that no algorithm can predict in advance whether two people will make a good couple. "No compelling evidence supports matching sites' claims that mathematical algorithms work," they wrote. The task the sites have set out for themselves—to pick out mates who are uniquely compatible—is, they conclude, "virtually impossible."¹²

Much of online dating, Finkel and company argued, is based on the faulty notion that the kind of information we can see in a profile is actually useful in determining whether that person would make a good partner. But because the kind of information that ap-

pears on a profile—occupation, income, religion, political views, favorite TV shows, etc.—is the only information we know about that person, we overvalue it. This can actually cause us to make very bad choices about whom we go on a date with.

“Encountering potential partners via online dating profiles reduces three-dimensional people to two-dimensional displays of information,” the authors wrote, adding, “It can also cause people to make lazy, ill-advised decisions when selecting among the large array of potential partners.” Sheena Iyengar, a Columbia University professor who specializes in research on choice, put it to me another way: “People are not products,” she said bluntly. “But, essentially, when you say, ‘I want a guy that’s six foot tall and has blah, blah, blah characteristics,’ you’re treating a human being like one.”

It’s a good point, but at the same time, people doing online dating have no choice but to filter their prospects in some way, and once we accept that it’s reasonable to select for, say, location and job, who’s to say that it’s superficial to select for a doctor who lives in your area? Even if you believe Iyengar’s argument that sometimes online dating sites encourage people to treat one another like products, what choice do you have?

Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist who advises Match.com, says the answer is to avoid reading too much into any given profile and to resist the temptation to start long online exchanges before a first date. As Fisher sees it, there’s only one way to determine whether you have a future with a person: meeting them face-to-face. Nothing else can give you a sense of what a person is actually like, nor whether you two will spark.

“The brain is the best algorithm,” Fisher argues. “There’s not a dating service on this planet that can do what the human brain can do in terms of finding the right person.”

This was probably the advice that resonated with me the most. I wouldn’t know how to search for the things I love about my current girlfriend. It’s not the kind of stuff you can really categorize.

When I’ve really been in love with someone, it’s not because they looked a certain way or liked a certain TV show or a certain

cuisine. It's more because when I watched a certain TV show or ate a certain cuisine with them, it was the most fun thing ever.

Why? I couldn't type out why.

That doesn't mean I'm skeptical of online dating; on the contrary, the research we've done has convinced me that millions of people have used it to find what they're looking for, from a one-night stand to marriage and a family. But our research also convinced me that too many people spend way too much time doing the online part of online dating, not the dating part. After years of observing people's behavior and consulting for Match.com, Fisher came away with a similar conclusion, which is why she advises online daters to keep their messaging to a minimum and to meet the person in real life as quickly as possible.

"This is one of the reasons that it's a misnomer that they call these things 'dating services,'" she says. "They *should* be called 'introducing services.' They enable you to go out and go and meet the person yourself."

Laurie Davis, author of *Love at First Click* and an online dating consultant, advises her clients to exchange a maximum of six messages before meeting off-line. This should provide enough information to let them know whether they'd have any possible interest in dating the person. Everything after that is usually just postponing the inevitable.

"Online dating is just a vehicle to meet more people," she says. "It's not the place to actually date."

For some people, mostly women, this advice wasn't convincing. As they see it, the Internet makes connections happen too fast, and their concerns about safety make them reluctant to go out and meet someone in person before they feel like they really know them. Many of the people who spoke to us in focus groups described texting or messaging a potential partner for weeks without actually going on a date. One woman in New York City named Kim showed us an exchange she'd had with a man on OkCupid that she'd ended because he asked her out for coffee after just a few messages within a twenty-minute span.

The two were involved in some funny instant messages, and Kim commented on how awkward meeting people online can be. The guy wrote back, “I would much rather connect with you in person than this online thing because just like you I think this is ‘awkward.’”

This made Kim incredibly anxious.

“Unfortunately I don’t drink coffee,” she wrote. But then she wrote her real concern: “I actually don’t know that you’re not a serial killer.”

The guy responded quickly. “I’m not sure you’re not one either, but doesn’t that make it more exciting. I’m willing to take a risk if you are. What about hot chocolate?”

Seems like this wouldn’t be a huge deal. She’s on the dating site to meet people and date them. They’d be in a public place drinking hot chocolate. He wasn’t like, “How about we meet at that dumpster behind the Best Buy on Two Notch Road?”

But Kim was not having it. She ended it. “I don’t know. The more messages you get, the more of a good feeling you have for that person. You don’t want to go on a bad date. So if you have these messages going back and forth and you connect with each message, you like them more and the chances of it going well are higher.”

No doubt there are many women who share Kim’s perspective, and with all the creepy dudes out there who actually do harass women, I can’t really fault them. As Helen Fisher sees it, though, all these messages aren’t going to do much to assuage a person’s deep concerns. Ultimately, meeting in person is the only way to know whether something is going to work.

SWIPING:

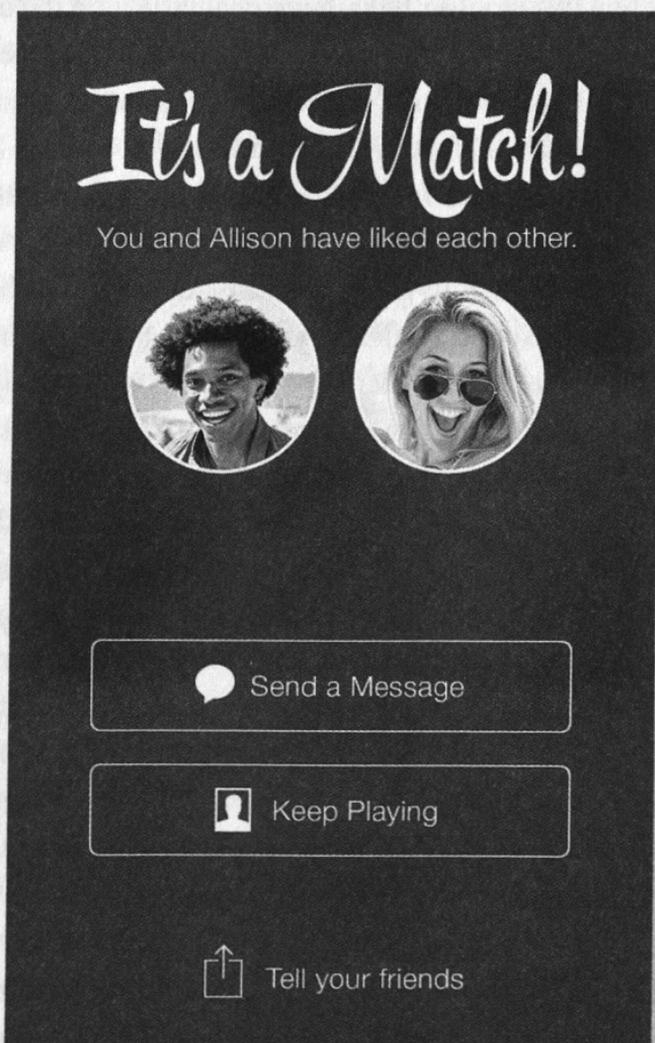
TINDER AND BEYOND

One of the tough parts of writing a book like this is you have no clue how the landscape will change once you’re

done, but as of this writing, nothing seems to be rising faster than mobile dating apps like Tinder.

Contrary to the labor-intensive user experience of traditional online dating, mobile dating apps generally operate on a much simpler and quicker scale. Right now, Tinder is by far the industry leader and has spawned imitators. For our purposes, we'll use it as an example to describe the phenomenon in general.

Signing up for Tinder is almost instantaneous. You download the app and simply link in through your Facebook account. No questionnaires or algorithms. As soon as you sign in, Tinder uses your GPS location to find nearby users and starts showing you



a seemingly endless supply of pictures of potential partners. After you glance at each photo, you swipe the picture to the right if you're interested in the person or to the left if you're not. You can explore the profiles more and see some very basic information, but generally the user experience involves seeing someone's photo and swiping left or right pretty quickly depending on whether you are attracted to them. If you and another user are interested in each other, meaning you both swiped right on each other's faces, then the app informs you that you've found a match and you can begin messaging each other in private within the app to arrange a date or hookup or whatever. As of October 2014, the app has more than fifty million users and the company is valued anywhere from \$750 million to \$1 billion.

Tinder was conceived in 2011 by Sean Rad and Justin Mateen, two University of Southern California undergrads who set out to create an online dating experience that didn't feel like online dating. Modeling their interface on a deck of cards, Rad and Mateen wanted Tinder to seem like a game, one a user could play alone or with friends. It was low stakes and easy to use, and, if you played it well, you might hook up with someone in a matter of hours—the polar opposite of a tense, emotionally draining quest for a soul mate. “Nobody joins Tinder because they're looking for something,” Rad told *Time*.¹³ “They join because they want to have fun.” And because his name is Sean Rad, he probably said that quote to *Time* and then tossed on a pair of cool shades, hopped on a skateboard, and blazed on outta there.

Like Facebook, Tinder's birthplace was college. But while Facebook began its rollout in the Ivy League, Tinder aimed for famous party schools like USC and UCLA.

Quick side note: In numerous interviews Mateen is identified as someone with a background in party planning, which is a ridiculous résumé item.

“Are you fit for the position?”

“Yes, I have a strong background in party planning. I promise you, *I can get this party started.*”

Mateen wanted to build buzz not through traditional advertising but by getting the app into the hands of “social influencers” who could spread Tinder by word of mouth. He personally tracked down and signed up the kind of people who didn’t need to date online—models, sorority girls, fraternity presidents, and the like. Mateen and Tinder’s then vice president of marketing, Whitney Wolfe, went door to door through the schools’ Greek system, preaching the gospel of smartphone hookups. After Tinder’s launch in September 2012—celebrated with a raging party at USC—the app took off and spread like wildfire across campuses. Within weeks, thousands of users had signed up, and 90 percent of them were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four.

For a while Tinder was treated as the solution to a long-standing dilemma facing the online dating industry: How do we make a straight version of Grindr?

Grindr was a revolutionary app that took the male gay community by storm after its release in 2009, attracting more than one million daily users within a few years. A precursor to Tinder, it was the first major dating site that was primarily a mobile app that used GPS and a basic profile with a photo to match people.

Years before I heard of Tinder, I once sat with a gay friend in a sushi restaurant and was floored when he turned on his Grindr app and showed me a profile of a handsome guy. “It says he’s fifteen feet away. Oh, shit. Look, he’s right over there,” he said, pointing to a guy sitting at the sushi bar.

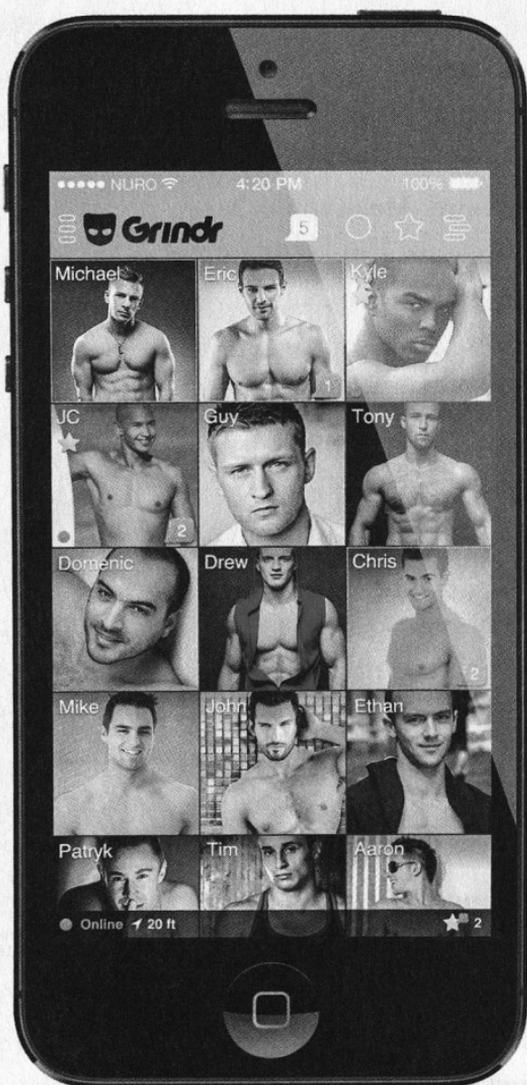
It was mind-blowing, but companies struggled to replicate it for the straight world. The conventional wisdom was that straight women would never use a Grindr-type app, for reasons ranging from safety concerns to lack of such strong interest in casual sex with strangers. The Grindr team attempted it with an app called

Blindr, but it didn't catch on.

But Tinder added a key feature that Grindr—and Blindr, for that matter—didn't have: the mutual-interest requirement. This is the term I just made up to describe how, on Tinder, you can't engage with another user unless you both have swiped right, indicating interest in each other.

After our previous discussions of online dating, the appeal seems obvious. Take Arpan. No longer does he have to worry about writing a long message only to get dismissed based on his looks. The only people he can message are people who have already indicated interest in him. On the reverse side, for women, a dude can't bother you unless you have swiped right on him. Women were no longer getting harassed by an infinite user base of bozos; they were engaging only with people they chose to engage. This change alone was enough of an improvement that, in October 2013, *New York* magazine proclaimed that Tinder had solved online dating for women.¹⁴

Also, the stress of weeding through profiles, à la our friend Derek, is gone too. You are just swiping on faces. It's like a game. This aspect of Tinder's user experience is huge.



Even the fact that signing up is so easy is a game changer. I remember signing up for a dummy OkCupid account, just to see what the site was like. It took forever. There were so many questions that I eventually just had an assistant answer them. It felt like a chore. Meanwhile, when researching Tinder, I was in the back of a cab and I quickly signed in through a Facebook account. Within seconds, I was swiping and enjoying the app with a friend. After each photo, my friend and I debated our thoughts on a particular person or checked to see if they had more pictures. Sometimes a user would come up with mutual friends, and that would spark a dialogue.

There was no denying it. There was something weirdly entertaining and gamelike about Tinder. When the app first started popping up, people in all our focus groups described signing up for amusement or as a joke and swiping profiles with friends in a group setting. They said using the app was actually fun and social, which was simply unheard of in all our conversations about other online dating sites.

At the same time, though, people's attitude toward Tinder was strange. When we first started asking people about it in late 2013, they wouldn't say they were on it looking for dates or even sex. They would say that they had signed up on a lark. They treated it like a party game. Anyone who was a serious user was basically using it as a hookup app for sex.

Here are a few exemplary quotes from a focus group we held in December 2013:

Hi, I'm Rena. I'm twenty-three and I signed up for Tinder, like, three months ago, just because I was drunk and with a friend.

Hi, I'm Jane. I'm twenty-four and I have a similar experience with Tinder where I was, like, at a party with friends and they were like, "This is the funnest game ever. Let's play this." And I downloaded it. And then, like, started seeing way too many people I knew. So I deleted it.

Those who did acknowledge that they'd actually used Tinder felt a little self-conscious about it. "I'm not gonna marry a guy from Tinder," one woman said. "Yeah, Tinder's very, like, hookup," added another.

What, we asked, would you do if you met someone you actually liked on Tinder? One woman said she'd be embarrassed to tell people she'd met someone on Tinder, whereas another site, like JDate, would have been fine.

But by late 2014 people's attitudes about Tinder were dramatically different, especially in the big cities where it first got popular. People we spoke with in New York and Los Angeles were using Tinder as *the* go-to dating app. It wasn't just a sex app. It wasn't a game. People were using it to meet people for relationships and dating because it was quick, fun, and easy. The change in perception was startling.

In October 2014 we asked people on our subreddit to tell us about their experiences with Tinder and other swipe apps. Sure, we got some stories about people using the site for drunken hookups, but we also got a lot like these:

*I live in Atlanta, and when Dragon*Con came through I figured it would be the perfect opportunity for some hilarious stories. I started using it with my best friend and we'd send each other screenshots of our weird and scary messages and profiles we'd seen. Then I started matching with some legitimately cool dudes who I had shared interests with and had nice conversations with and I started taking it a lot more seriously . . .*

I'm actually currently dating a guy I met off Tinder, we've been exclusive for about a month now? It's going well, I like him a lot and we're very happy. I deleted it after we agreed to be exclusive.

Based on the responses we got, it seems like many people who start on Tinder for laughs wind up finding something more meaningful than they expected. One man wrote:

The first time I had seriously used Tinder I ended up meeting [someone] who's now my girlfriend. I wasn't particularly looking for a serious commitment or anything, but I was just kind of going with it. It's weird because I always thought that I've done tinder wrong because it didn't end up in just a hookup and now I'm actually dating this girl. I haven't used the app since we started dating in the beginning of the summer.

Clearly, Tinder is working for people. Just two years after it was released, Tinder reported that it was processing two billion swipes and generating twelve million matches a day. And not just on college campuses. Today the average user is twenty-seven, and it's quickly becoming popular throughout the world.¹⁵

Near the end of 2014, Tinder claimed that the average user logged on eleven times per day and spent approximately seven minutes on each session, meaning they are there for more than 1.25 hours each day. That's an amazing amount of time to do anything, let alone move your fingers around a tiny screen.

There are also imitators. OkCupid developed a swipe-type app for its users. There is a popular start-up called Hinge that matches people Tinder style, but users have to have mutual friends on Facebook. Other new apps are surely on the way.

Swipe apps like Tinder definitely seem to be where online dating is headed. Weirdly, these apps have also come to signify a strange sense of wonder about what it means to be single today. In our interviews, people in relationships in their thirties or forties lamented the fact that they weren't able to experience the single life in the "age of Tinder." The app symbolizes the opportunity to meet/date/hook up with beautiful people whenever you want.

Is that the reality? In a sense, yes. The app is almost magical in the way you are so quickly exposed to exciting and beautiful pos-

sibilities for your romantic life. To think, just twenty years ago we were buying ads in a fucking newspaper!

One gentleman we interviewed told us that he literally could not get off the app, so overwhelmed was he by the enormous number of single women who were suddenly accessible. “I was literally addicted to it,” he recounted. “I had to delete it.” Another woman recalled being so hooked on Tinder that she was on her way to a date and swiping to see if there was another more attractive guy out there to meet up with in case her existing date was a bust.

But, like any dating trend, swipe apps have their pitfalls. The user base isn’t exclusively attractive singles looking to have a good time; there is plenty of riffraff as well. Despite the mutual interest factor, you can find plenty of Tinder conversations on Straight White Boys Texting filled with matches who are spouting filth. Countless guys have also been lured to engage with women who were bad news or, worse yet, bots and/or prostitutes.

The biggest criticism of swipe apps is that, with their reliance on purely physical attraction, Tinder and the like represent increasing superficiality among online daters. (“Tinder: The Shallowest Dating App Ever?” asks the *Guardian*.¹⁶)

But I think that’s too cynical. Walking into a bar or party, a lot of times all you have to go by is people’s faces, and that’s what you use to decide if you are going to gather up the courage to talk to them. Isn’t the swipe app just a HUGE party full of faces that we can swipe right to go talk to?

In the case of the girl I’m currently dating, I initially saw her face somewhere and approached her. I didn’t have an in-depth profile to peruse or a fancy algorithm. I just had her face, and we started talking and it worked out. Is that experience so different from swiping on Tinder?

“I think Tinder is a great thing,” says Helen Fisher, the anthropologist who studies dating. “All Tinder is doing is giving you

someone to look at that's in the neighborhood. Then you let the human brain with his brilliant little algorithm tick, tick, tick off what you're looking for."

In this sense, Tinder actually isn't so different from what our grandparents did, nor is the way my friend used online dating to find someone Jewish who lived nearby. In a world of infinite possibilities, we've cut down our options to people we're attracted to in our neighborhood.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO GAIN ROMANTIC FREEDOM

For those who don't live in a world of infinite options, digital technology provides another benefit, and I hadn't thought about it until we interviewed people in one of the world's most unique dating cultures: Qatar.

The benefit is privacy. The secret worlds of the phone and the Internet provide single people a degree of freedom and choice in less open societies.

Needless to say, the singles scene in Qatar is not quite like what we observed anywhere else in the world. Those from religious and traditional families are literally prohibited from casual dating. Flirting in public places gets a young person in serious trouble, and it's especially dangerous for young women, who are expected to be chaste until marriage and risk bringing terrible shame to themselves and their parents if they are caught courting a man.

One online guide warns: "No public displays of affection: Kissing, hugging, and some places even holding hands . . . The result is jail time."¹⁷

That's a pretty grim prison story.

"Hey, man, what are you in for?"

"Doing five years for holding hands in the park."

"You?"

"Doing life . . . for smooches."

Since casual dating is prohibited, families—mainly the mothers—do the matchmaking in Qatar. Marriages are arranged, and for the women we interviewed, the incentives to tie the knot are oddly reminiscent of those expressed by the older American women we interviewed in the senior centers.

A twenty-seven-year-old named Amirah told us, “The main thing you need to understand about marriage here is that the parties to the contract are rarely the man and woman entering it. It’s the families; it’s the group.

“There’s, like, a mating season,” Amirah said, “and it’s the mothers who do the initial screening. The mothers of boys go from one house to the other. They’re looking for women who are suitable based on family background and education. They’re looking for *na-seeb*, their family’s destiny for marriage.

“The other thing to know about marriage,” Amirah continued, “is that it’s attractive to young girls because they want to move out and get their freedom.” Her friend Leila, a twenty-six-year-old lawyer who was also on the video chat, nodded in agreement. “When I first came back to Doha after I graduated from university, I went to visit [Amirah’s] house,” she began. “My mother called me and said, ‘It’s going to be nine P.M.; you should come home.’ They’d always call me when I was out to find out where I was and ask when I was coming home. If I went shopping, they’d say, ‘Stop. We have a maid who can do that!’ If I was with a friend, they’d say, ‘Come home!’ They just didn’t want me out.”

After college, Leila couldn’t tolerate this level of parental supervision. “I didn’t want to be at home with my family all the time,” she told us. “I wanted to have my freedom back. But women from traditional families can’t live alone in Qatar. The only way you can leave your family’s home is to get married or die.”

I told Leila that this brought up another point: that *Get Married or Die Trying* would be a great name for her debut rap album.

Eventually Leila decided to get married. She told her mother that she was ready for a husband, and her family quickly found a

suitable man. They spoke by phone and had a few visits with each other's families, though not any private time together. Leila was nervous. But she had the impression that "he really loved me." More important: "He was offering me a chance to start my own life."

Unfortunately, the new life he offered wasn't much of an improvement. The husband was basically as controlling as her parents. He would get upset when she went places without telling him. Leila was ready to be a modern, independent wife, but her husband wanted something more traditional. Neither Leila nor her husband was happy with the situation, and one day he came home and announced that he wanted a divorce. "The decision wasn't mine," Leila said. "And it wasn't easy. My parents kept things hanging—they wouldn't let me sign the divorce papers, because they had an idea that we might get back together. I had to move back in with them. I had a curfew again, around eleven P.M., depending on my dad's mood. I had to report where I was going. They called me all the time."

Leila was stuck in limbo. Her husband didn't want to be with her. Her parents wouldn't help her find another man because they didn't want her to get divorced. "So I actually waited for them to leave town and then I went to court and got divorced without them knowing," she explained. "They were furious, and they basically grounded me. I was on house arrest for months. Now the guy I was with is getting remarried, and my parents are willing to move on too."

Grounded? You realize I haven't been grounded by my parents since I had a bed frame that was shaped like a bright red race car. I couldn't imagine being under such strict supervision. I would do anything to get out of it—and so would the Qataris.

Qatari women's stories about feeling trapped at home and lacking basic adult freedoms sounded surprisingly similar to the stories we heard from the older American women we interviewed at the senior center in New York City. And, as for the Americans, for Qatari women marriage offered a way out. But the contempo-

rary Qataris also have another option for getting a taste of freedom: digital technology.

With the rise of smartphones, social media, and the Internet, young Qataris are using technology to flout these repressive rules. For instance, socializing with the opposite sex in public is not allowed, so Qataris are using the Internet to organize small private parties in hotel rooms. One of the young women we met told us that hotels are a big part of Qatari culture, because that's where you find bars and restaurants, and these days it's not uncommon to receive a group message that tells people who know one another to meet in a certain room. Once they arrive at the hotel lobby, the cover provided by the females' burkas allows them to wander in anonymously and go wherever they need to go. By blending something old, the burka, and something new, the Internet, Qatari youth have created their own novel way to connect.

Qataris are not getting all the benefits of the Internet. Online dating sites have yet to take off. Instagram is starting to spread, but the culture frowns upon taking photos of all things personal, so instead people shoot and share interesting objects that they see in public life. "We've always been a photophobic society," one of the Qataris we interviewed told us. "People don't want any record of themselves in public. Especially when people are out in clubs or malls. Their families could get very upset." The record of such photos would be potentially scandalous.

Then came Snapchat. The app works on the promise that the image you send will disappear from users' phones after a few seconds. The app has allowed young Qatari singles to take risks in the privacy of their phone world that would be unthinkable otherwise.

"People send all kinds of photos, from explicit to casual," a young woman explained. "The technology is making people more ballsy. It gives people a way to connect." Occasionally things go wrong, of course. Sadly, "guys sometimes get photos of girls [through screengrabs] that would dishonor them and then use that

to extract things from them,” we learned. But overall, the young people we met argued, social media is giving people in Qatar and in the United Arab Emirates more new ways to meet and express themselves.

In the Emirates, and pretty much everywhere, social media and the Internet are introducing all kinds of new options into social and romantic life. And while it’s exciting, sometimes even exhilarating, to have more choices, it’s not necessarily making life easier.