Gender, Power, and eDating

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ABSTRACT

Following a review of the literature on gender, power, and eDating, this paper introduces the eDating development model and discusses a number of hypotheses that can be derived from it. Findings from a research investigation that explored the hypotheses are presented. The findings supported all the hypotheses, indicating that: (1) male and female eDaters follow different sequence of stages in their eDating development; (2) the behaviors that males and females exhibit as eDaters are different; and (3) the feedback that male and female eDaters receive from the environment is different. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications from this research to more general questions relating to gender, power, and eDating.

Keywords: Development, eDating, Females, Gender, Information Systems, Males, On-line Dating, Power

INTRODUCTION

The underlying assumption of this research is that on-line dating or eDating is a process in which gender and power issues play a major role.

We define eDating as a process that takes place on-line and that results in the establishment of a personal relationship between two individuals. eDating can be enabled by an eDating service, e.g., an on-line company that matches individuals with each other (such as Match.com, YahooPersonals, eHarmony, etc.) or it can take place in other on-line environments, such as chat-rooms, newsgroups, etc. We prefer not to use terms such as “romance” “flirting” or “courtship” to define the goal of the eDating relationship because we acknowledge that the goal of eDating relationships can encompass a range of options including cybersex and marriage.

The focus of this paper is on the “eDating career” which we define as the sum-total of all the behaviors and experiences that eDaters undergo while being eDaters. Just like a vocational career, the eDating career may involve not only behaviors initiated by the eDater but also responses that the eDater receives from the environment. These may include positive, negative or no responses at all. In the context of this research, the eDating career is assumed to be highly influenced by gender and power issues.

As a social phenomenon, eDating has existed for over two decades. It began in the early 1980’s, when e-mail was commercialized, and exploded into an extremely lucrative sub-category of e-commerce in the 1990’s and early 2000’s. According to a study conducted by the Online Publishers Association (OPA) and comScore Networks, “U.S. residents spent

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$469.5 million on online dating and personals in 2004, the largest segment of “paid content” on the web.” (Consumer Search, 2005).

At this time (2010) the eDating industry is dominated by several large companies, including Match.com, Yahoo Personals, and American Singles. They are followed by a multitude of other companies offering services for all aspects and preferences for dating, e.g., JDate.com (which advertises itself as “the largest Jewish singles network”), ChristianSingles.com, BlackSinglesConnection.com, Gay.com, etc. According to Truedating.com (TrueDating, 2010), Match.com is the world’s leading online dating website, while Yahoo Personals is a close second, both boasting over 9 million members.

The underlying assumption of this paper is that eDating is a stage process, with individuals moving from one stage to another as their eDating career unfolds. Even though the stages or steps in the eDating process are essentially the same for males and females, gender affects the process, resulting in men and women following a different sequence of stages. Thus, our eDating model, which we present in the following sections, assumes that because of cultural and environmental factors relating to gender, males initiate contact earlier and invest more effort in initiating contact than females do.

In the following sections we discuss some of the literature on gender, power, and eDating and how our eDating model fits with this literature. Next, we proceed to present our eDating model, the hypotheses that can be derived from and the empirical research that we conducted to explore the hypotheses. We conclude with a discussion of the implications from this investigation to future research on eDating and the impact that issues of gender and power have on eDating.

**LITERATURE ON GENDER, POWER AND EDATING**

The term “gender” usually refers to the socially acquired characteristics of men and women. As such, it is different from “sex”, which is understood to be related to biological characteristics (Coulthard & Castleman, 2006). The term “gender” is a political term in that its use started in the 1960’s (during the second wave of feminism) to denote that sexual characteristics of men and women are a result of arbitrary and oppressive practices that are imposed on men and women by society. According to Coulthard and Castleman (2006), the literature on gender offers three distinct explanations as to why gender makes a difference to people’s behavior and how issues of power color our understanding of gender.

**Biological Explanation**

The most important arguments as to why gender makes a difference to behavior derive from biology and evolutionary psychology (Wilson, 1978; Wright, 1994). According to this approach, complex behaviors such as women’s performance in mathematics can be linked to biological differences between men and women in skills and pre-dispositions. Thus, since there is no biological advantage to women excelling in the abstract skills that result in excellence in Mathematics, they have not been “endowed” with such skills.

The arguments against the biological explanation of gender differences have been summarized by Gould (2000), who indicated that the variability in behavior within each sex is so large that general statements that differentiate the sexes do not apply to most men and to most women or are too simplistic to explain complex behaviors such as an ability to excel in Math. Also, biologically based explanations of gender do not account for cultural changes in women’s roles nor to empirical research that can actually test them.

**Sex Differences Explanation**

Despite the difficulty in indentifying biological explanations for gender, psychologists have persisted in documenting differences in behavior between men and women. The branch of research focusing on gender differences
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