



From traditional to online dating: its application on the couples therapy

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ABSTRACT

The study examined how participants transitioned from being in a traditional dating setting to an online dating setup when the pandemic struck. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed to explore and provide meaning to the experiences of eight Filipinos who used online dating through social media to pursue romantic relationships. The study highlighted that the participants experienced both happiness and connection, which led them to become better people because of the online relationship. The participants adapted themselves to the use of technology to express their interest, feelings, and care for the other person by exerting efforts to know the other person, spending quality time with each other, and making sure that communication is always there to make sure the other person will feel assured, cared for, and loved. They have overcome challenges, but there were issues concerning a lack of trust and poor-quality relationships like those of traditional daters in the pre-pandemic period, for which specific approaches to couples therapy have been recommended.

RESUMO

The study examined how participants transitioned from being in a traditional dating setting to an online dating setup when the pandemic struck. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed to explore and provide meaning to the experiences of eight Filipinos who used online dating through social media to pursue romantic relationships. The study highlighted that the participants experienced both happiness and connection, which led them to become better people because of the online relationship. The participants adapted themselves to the use of technology to express their interest, feelings, and care for the other person by exerting efforts to know the other person, spending quality time with each other, and making sure that communication is always there to make sure the other person will feel assured, cared for, and loved. They have overcome challenges, but there were issues concerning a lack of trust and poor-quality relationships like those of traditional daters in the pre-pandemic period, for which specific approaches to couples therapy have been recommended.

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Introdução

Dating or courtship, whether traditional or online, has always been seen as a prerequisite for marriage in the Philippines. Traditionally, dating entails showing interest through visits at home, spending quality time together, going on dates, giving gifts, and sending love letters. Although with the advent of technology, love letters have been replaced by emails, text messages, and pick up lines. Online dating, on the other hand, entails either the use of social media to pursue one's love interest or the utilization of dating apps (Apps) to locate a potential partner. Dating is a significant component of teenage years and early adulthood. Being in an intimate relationship enhances a person's psychological and physical well-being, meets the developmental needs of a young adult who wants to be close to someone, and heightens a person's feeling of social engagement (Blair & Madigan, 2016).

However, uncertainty and the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic called for a "new normal" in everything— dating or courtship included. The COVID-19 pandemic imposed safety restrictions, hence, there was greater resort to technology to pursue romantic relationships, relying heavily on the use of social media and internet dating apps to meet people. According to Chisom (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions caused boredom and desolation for couples who were separated, hence, they had to resort to using online dating through their gadgets out of boredom.

Adults and some minors utilize online platforms to explore romantic relationships, showing their gender identities through cyber flirtation and dating, which are seen as enjoyable experiences. In the case of young people, however, they rely more on social media to start romantic relationships as it is more widely available and popular, and they are afraid to use dating apps, which they believe are risky (Lykens, et al., 2019). Online dating has been ubiquitous among young adults and adult members of the Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual (LGB). Most of them enjoyed using online platforms in dating particularly the ease of finding partners that are physically pleasing, share the same aspirations, and they intend to see in real life (Anderson, et al., 2020)

While adults enjoy online dating, it also has detrimental effects in the relationship of a couple. Reed, et al. (2015) found that attachment anxiety and avoidance are significant predictors of electronic intrusion (EI) perpetration, or the constant use of social media to invade the dating partner's privacy, keep track of his or her movements and activities, and put pressure on the dating partner to stay in touch constantly. These behaviors affect the quality relationship of a couple because one of them becomes skeptical of the fidelity of the other. Furthermore, a common disadvantage of online dating is lying about the identity of a person which leads to frustration on the end of the seekers of romantic partners. Moreover, women users below the age of thirty-five and users of online dating apps and websites can become a target for sexual harassment. Online dating has not only revolutionized more traditional methods of finding love, but it has also caused a change in social attitudes around marriage

and cohabitation as more people choose to delay getting married or remain single. The idea that these platforms encourage flimsy relationships rather than lasting ones adds to the negative impact of online dating. These evolving facts have led to a more thorough study of how online dating affects romantic relationships in America. Most Americans (50%) claim that dating websites and apps have had no significant impact on relationships or dating, either good or bad, while smaller proportions (22%) and (26%), respectively, believe the opposite (Anderson, et al., 2020).

Given the contrasting studies, the lack of local literature in online dating and limited information in the problem of traditional daters who resorted to online dating, this study aims to start a conversation on the effects of online dating on traditional daters by examining this phenomenon through the lived experiences of people used to traditional dating but are now compelled to resort to online dating through the use of social media to date or court the people they wish to have a romantic relationship with. This study will utilize the Triangular Theory of Love (TTL) by Robert Sternberg (1986) which explains love in close relationships by examining its vertices: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy is the act of sharing feelings and experiences with others while enhancing self-disclosure, allowing both partners to experience warmth in a loving relationship while passion is an erotic interest in another and a strong desire for union and commitment involves choosing to stay with the other and postponing interactions with others (Harvey & Weber, 2002). Sternberg's commitment, passion, and intimacy concepts help couples communicate effectively in traditional and online settings.

This study will delve into how people have transitioned from traditional to online dating. The research is geared toward comprehending the transformations in typical dating within the context of today's "new normal." The results of this study will have a significant impact on our understanding of online dating practices through social media and the experiences of those used to traditional dating but are compelled to engage in online dating, sans the use of dating apps, under the new normal because of the pandemic. As far as methodology is concerned, this research is important because the experience of traditional daters resorting to online dating due to the pandemic is investigated qualitatively. The study results should provide evidence on how traditional daters are able to adapt to the new normal - online dating through social media and may become a basis for therapists to formulate a couples therapy for couples who experience challenges under such online dating relationships. The conclusions of this study will be crucial in the implementation of couples therapy.

Hence, this study aims to scrutinize the experiences of participants as they navigate the dating world and exchange information about their romantic encounters. Specifically, the study aims to know (1) the traditional dating experience of the participants, (2) how traditional daters describe their lived experiences doing online dating during the pandemic, (3) the

advantages and disadvantages of online dating, and (4) the application of couples therapy to address the issues in online dating.

Methodology

Research design

The research uses a qualitative approach, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), to explore the traditional daters' experiences, feelings, behavior, and perceptions of online dating using social media in the new normal and its impact on their relationship with the people they desire. IPA is an interpretative interaction between the researcher and the researcher; it is customary practice for researchers to choose a small, homogenous sample within IPA to examine the shared viewpoints on a particular phenomenon of interest (Larkin, et al., 2019). IPA allows these researchers to examine how the experiences affect traditional daters, as online dating is subjective and accessible through interpretation. The idiographic approach of IPA facilitates a thorough investigation into the potential effects of various phenomena on a traditional dater's relationship with their pursuing partner. The researchers collected accounts from individuals who were into traditional dating but who were, under the pandemic, compelled to resort to online dating using social media just to pursue the people they desire, and thus, the data and accounts that the researchers gathered came from various angles and levels of expertise.

An extensive, semi-structured interview is a part of this qualitative investigation. Data collecting was done as a component of broader phenomenological research that looked at how conventional daters would fare in the new normal of internet dating.

Subjects and study site, instrumentation

The research involved purposive and snowball sampling from November 5 to November 15, 2022. Participants aged twenty-one and older were eligible for the study, as the pandemic forced them to turn to online dating for courtship, regardless of their traditional dating preferences. Participants should not utilize dating apps like Tantan, Grinder, Bumble Dating, or Tinder. The researchers invited their acquaintances engaged in online dating to participate in the study, providing details thereof. Those who refused were then requested to refer the researchers to their friends who may be willing to be interviewed.

Eight individuals agreed to participate; all of them were known to the researchers. They were personally interviewed individually at their preferred date and time. The sample consisted of eight individuals, four (4) male and four (4) female, and in an online dating relationship as early as March 2020 and as late as July 2021. Of the eight (8) participants, two (2) are into an online dating relationship as a couple with the other person who they have not even personally met.

Table 1.

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation	Highest Educational Attainment	Nationality	Residence Location
A	26	Male	Government employee	Postgraduate	Filipino	La Union
B	25	Female	Government employee	Postgraduate	Filipino	La Union
C	31	Male	Carpenter	High school graduate	Filipino	Rizal
D	23	Female	Nanny	Senior high school graduate	Filipino	Rizal
E	24	Male	HR specialist	College graduate	Filipino	Mandaluyong
F	22	Female	Freelance model	College graduate	Filipino	Batangas
G	28	Female	Accountant	College graduate	Filipino	Manila
H	31	Male	IT consultant	College graduate	Filipino	Batangas

Data gathering procedure

A semi-structured interview questionnaire was used for each participant, consisting of twenty-three questions. The researchers collected sociodemographic information, such as age, gender, occupation, and previous relationships. Participants were asked about their experiences, feelings, and behavior with online dating, and their ability to cope with the change in dating preferences. Each interview, with an average interview time of 37 minutes, was digitally recorded.

Data analysis

The researchers identified vested interests, firsthand experiences, cultural considerations, preconceived notions, and biases that could affect how they look at the research data. To ensure that a general understanding of the participants' accounts was acquired, empathically dwelling with the participants' experiences, the recorded interview was listened to, transcribed, highlighted the individual natural units, and read several times. Emergent themes were first discovered from the natural units, which were later refined as related themes were clustered together as central themes and subordinate and superordinate themes were discovered. Each transcript was examined individually for patterns and connections. After each transcript was incorporated into the final analysis, a master table of themes was produced. The researchers then sent the analyses to the participants via email for their review and/or comments.

Trustworthines

The study used credibility, transferability, and consistency criteria to establish the data's trustworthiness. Researchers used bracketing to uncover potential impacts on their interpretation, such as vested interests, prior experiences, cultural norms, preconceptions, and hunches. They kept their reflexivity by thoroughly analyzing interview transcripts, comparing codes to raw data, and cross-checking results with participant viewpoints. Following the development of primary codes, members checked the extracted codes against their beliefs and experiences. To guarantee conformability, a peer review was done, with one qualitative researcher providing code categories for external evaluation. Beyond that, the transcribed data compared to existing studies in the relevant literature.

Ethical consideration

Before participating in the research project, all participants had to sign an informed consent form. This form was sent to each participant's official email address one week before their planned interview. During the data collection process, the researchers made sure to follow the agreed-upon conditions outlined in the informed consent form. The researchers used various online platforms, such as Zoom and Google Meet, as well as face-to-face interviews, to record the interviews. Each participant's interview was recorded for transcription purposes and was deleted when the research was completed. The responses of the participants were solely used for generating conclusions for the study topics indicated and any other uses of personal information were strictly restricted in adherence to the Data Privacy Act.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed five (5) superordinate themes in relation to the participants' traditional and online dating experiences (see Table 2).

Table 2.
The superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
Traditional dating experience	
Online dating experience	
Showing that you care	Exert efforts to make the other feel special Know the real person Communicate
Cons of online dating	Challenges Poor relationship quality Lack of trust
What online dating brings	Becoming a better person Commitment

Traditional dating experience

All the participants were into traditional dating prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their relationships with previous partners were short-lived due to infidelity, personal growth, and pandemic restrictions. Most regretted the failure of traditional dating relationships, with participant G regretting the relationship itself due to the pain it caused her; she narrated, “It was good until it became traumatic because of the betrayal.” While participant A’s previous traditional dating relationship was also his first relationship, he described it as, “a learning experience with ups and downs.”

For the participants, traditional dating prior to the COVID-19 pandemic entails getting to know the other person, spending quality time with the other person, and giving gifts. Participant A said, “It is the stage where couples get to know each other” while participant F shared, “I was happy and enjoyed my past relationship because I was able to get to know my partner.”

The participants express interest in others by exerting effort for the person they are interested in, such as being friends, visiting home, going on dates, showering them with gifts, and spending quality time together. Participant E said, “My concept of traditional dating is just like my parents.’ The guy should formally court you by visiting you at home to meet your parents.” Participant F narrated, “Traditional dating for me is spending time with the person physically where I can hold her hand, see her reactions when I tell jokes, or I surprise her with handmade gifts such as a booklet where I wrote love letters and also origami.” Participant C said, “It is fulfilling in the end once you get a ‘yes’ because you know you exerted effort for that person.”

The online dating experience

Traditional daters began online dating during the pandemic, using various social media platforms like Facebook, Messenger, Viber, Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp, and calls and text messaging. Some had met their current partner before the pandemic, while others had just met them.

The participants described online dating as a happy and exciting experience. For most of them, traditional dating does not differ much from online dating-- there were no major changes thus transition was easy. According to participant G, “It is not that hard except that I miss the dates.” Participant C said, “I think there is no difference between traditional dating and online dating except that online dating is more convenient.” As stressed by participant B, however, “Online dating is as good as traditional dating as long as both of you are sincere.” While participant D appreciates online dating and finds the transition to online dating as relatively easy, she still prefers the traditional dating set-up and said, “Online dating is fine, but I prefer traditional dating because you could actually feel that you are being pursued and you could see that you are loved because he spends time with you personally.”

Participant E describes the online dating experience as challenging; he said, “It was challenging for me, like getting into a war or gamble where I will risk whatever I have because I don't really know the person in real life. There was a time that I doubted whether the person I am talking to online is real because he sounded like he is too good to be true.” According to participant F, considering that one is unable to see the real reaction of the person he or she is talking to, then there is uncertainty as to that person’s sincerity; he quipped, “You cannot readily say that a person is sincere because you don’t get to see the reaction while communicating with you. You really need to see the visual cues to find out if the person is sincere with what he or she said.” Participant A said that in online dating, one engages in candid conversation with the other person who you cannot see, but he commented, “I am happy because the person I get to talk to seems like a nice person, good conversationalist and mature in thinking.”

Most of the participants agree that it is easy to be misled and some people will lie about their intentions in an online dating; as participant F said, “It’s crazy, sometimes since you do not know the person yet, the courtship happens via text messages so you will fall for the person but eventually find out that the person turned out to be dishonest and was just fooling you, so tendency is for both of you to just fool around with one another.” Participant E expressed her apprehension, “To be honest, I was afraid at the start because I was used to seeing the other person, his looks, his reactions. In an online courtship, it is more on understanding and critical thinking, a mind game because you rely on your imagination on how the person says things to you, the tone of the voice and the delivery. Somehow, it is exciting yet scary and challenging because I am not used to not seeing the person I communicate with, so even if it is a video call, it is still not the same.”

The participants decided to engage in online dating mainly because of the pandemic regulations which provide restrictions to ensure safety of everyone so they could not date the traditional way, but other reasons include accessibility, convenience and flexibility of social media, boredom, and motivation. Participant A said, “It’s practical, very accessible to reach the person and to date online while doing other stuff, convenient because you just check if they’re online and you don’t need to be there physically.” Participant C pursued the person he is currently dating online out of boredom; he said, “I didn’t have a girlfriend, had nothing to do and was so bored.” Both participants F and H resorted to online dating as they he wanted to pursue the person they desire; participant F said, “I need to do it so I can move forward, and I would never know if it is the right thing to do if I didn’t try” while participant H averred, “I have been wanting to court her but the pandemic came so, no matter what happens, I told myself I wouldn't take no for an answer. A lot of people were trying to court her and if I did not act fast, I might lose her.”

Showing that you care

All the participants exert efforts for the person they wish to have a relationship with, whether in a traditional dating or online dating. They identified the ways they express their feelings to the other person in an online dating-- through exerting efforts to make the other person feel special, getting to know the other person, and effective communication.

Exert efforts to make the other feel special

For the participants, if one wants to pursue a relationship with the person he or she desires, there is a need for the online dater to exert effort for his or her beloved just like a traditional dater would do. As participant A said, "It can be expressed by sending gifts, exchanging photos, and love messages. I give her random notes and flowers." Participant H said, "I became her friend, always there to comfort her, talk to her, and make her feel special" while participant E said, "It is difficult to exert effort to make her feel extra special. I am just lucky that whatever trivial things I do for her, she readily appreciates. My first love language is time. I always texted her, greeted her good morning, and said goodnight." Participant F said, "We create our own GIFs. She is important to me, so I do everything to show it."

The participants would send sweet messages to the other person. Participant F averred, "Sending quotes, love messages, checking how that person is doing" while participant A said, "Sometimes I send a text message asking if she has eaten or I send reminders for her to eat or rest once in a while." Participant C is bolder as he said, "I send her pick up lines, I text her hello every now and then, ask what she is doing and when it is time to go to sleep, I call her to say I love you."

The participants make the other person feel special by words of affirmation. According to participant H, "I tell her every day that I support her in everything" while participant A said, "I show that I care and tell her that I understand and support her every decision."

As traditional daters engaged in online dating, when the participants want to express interest in a person, they spend quality time with the other person. According to participant H, "We laugh at each other's jokes, we watch movies simultaneously using our respective gadgets while we talk. We talk every night, sometimes we just let the gadget on, we will not say anything, we do our respective tasks and can only hear what the other person is doing, just knowing that the other person is at the other line is enough." Participant D averred, "I answer his calls and spend more time talking to him when my ward is already asleep. Sometimes we talk until wee hours in the morning." While lack of time is one of the challenges in online dating for most of the participants, they make sure that they spend quality time with the other person as much as possible. Participant C alleged, "We make sure that if we have time, we spend it together with each other."

The participants also make sure they are present during the other person's tough times and are always there for them. According to participant G: "I show him how important he is to

me by always being at his side, although virtually, especially when he is down, when he has problems at work or with his family.”

Know the real person

As a traditional dater, participant A said that when he wants to express interest in a person in an online dating, he tries to know her details: “All starts by getting to know about one’s life, family, and interests.” According to participant H, by engaging in online dating, he got to see the physical beauty of the woman he loves even when she has just woken up. He said, “I get to see her in her ‘I woke up like this look’ and she is still lovely.”

But for participant C, when engaging in online dating, one does not get to know the other person well. He said, “Online dating is OK but somehow you are also aware that the relationship will not last since you barely got to know the other person.” Participant D acknowledged that there are a lot of things she still needed to know about her significant other: “We are close, but there are still a lot of things I need to know about him. It seems crazy because you barely know him and he courted you via text messages and you believed him then realization comes in, that he is not the one you figured him to be.”

Participants E and F became a couple through online dating although they have not personally met each other; participant F alleged, “To be honest, we have known each other about just 50%, although we talk over the phone, it is really different when you personally see each other and talk.”

When asked how they get to know the other person, participant E’s reply was, “x x x it’s either I directly ask her questions or whenever I see her posts or stories, I ask her details about her posts.” F answered, “It is important that you have something to argue about so you can see how he is irritated or up to how he will react when you argue.”

Communicate

For the participants, effective communication is the key to coping with challenges in online dating. This entails constant communication with the other person to establish trust in a relationship. According to participant E, “Communication is important. Whatever problems you encounter, you should communicate this to the other person. Me, before I talk to him, I do self-meditation, just to calm myself because if I readily talk to him while I am angry then we will not be able to understand each other.” Participant B said, “We stay in touch all the time. We work to communicate our issues well, try to settle these face-to-face or at the very least through calls.”

For participant D, communication in online dating makes one fall for the other person easily: “It is easy to fall in love when the other person always sends you text messages, even if just to ask how you are doing.”

For participant E, communication relieves stress: “If I have the time and I need someone to talk to because I am stressed or depressed, I talk to him, and he makes himself always available to listen to me.”

For participant F, as far as communication is concerned, engaging in traditional dating and in online dating does not have much difference: “There is not much difference. Even in traditional dating, you also talk via phones. The only difference is that you do not really get to see the other person.” But he stressed that miscommunication results in conflict; he explained, “The problem in the communication is sometimes you do not get to deliver what you mean to say in a nice way, or you just want to be playful and loving and yet the other person does not see it that way, so the result is that you argue, you fight. once you forget the term of endearment in a message you sent, the other person will feel something is wrong and react differently.”

Participants C and D see miscommunication as a problem, however. For participant C, he finds some discourses irritating; he said, “We always say sweet nothings but eventually we fight because of miscommunication. I used to tease her before so that she would fall in love with me but now it has become problematic. On the other hand, participant D said, “It’s tiring if you are already living together, it becomes annoying.”

For participant E, if the chat message creates a different interpretation from what she really intended to convey, “I immediately send a voice message.”

Cons of online dating

The participants identified the probable reasons online dating relationships will fail-- the challenges online daters face, poor relationship quality, and lack of trust. They shared what they discovered and experienced while engaging in online dating.

Challenges

Participants are one in saying that the biggest challenges to online dating are internet connectivity and time. As participant A puts it, “I always experience trouble with the internet connectivity which results in having late replies so sometimes we have miscommunication or poor communication.” Participant F said, “One of the challenges is time. She is busy and I am also busy. Our schedules do not meet. This was confirmed by participant E, “For us, it is the lack of time for us to call or text each other because when my classes end, he is already about to go to sleep because he needs to wake up early for his work.”

Another challenge to online dating is the limited social interaction imposed by the relationship. Participant C said that the restrictions in his current relationship caused him to be socially restricted as well; he narrated, “I might lose the chance to know other people because of her jealousy. She always tells me to unfriend all the girls on my Facebook friends list.” For participant D, the restriction limited her social network: “I wanted to talk to others, but I am restricted. I wanted to do TikTok, but I was not allowed. I detest that because I am

still young and am supposed to have a lot of male FB friends.” On the other hand, participant H said that he voluntarily limited his interaction with others because the other person is enough for him: he explained, “I used WhatsApp exclusively with her, I limited my interaction with other women, I got to court my dream woman and that for me is enough.”

The restrictions brought about by the pandemic was one of the challenges to online dating, yet it was also the reason traditional daters resort to online dating. As participant D mentioned, “We were not allowed to go out. We only see each other when my employer sends me to do errands.” Participant F, said, “I’m wishing to be with her, but the restrictions of the pandemic won't allow us.” For participant H, however, the pandemic restrictions do not affect him as the quality time he enjoys with his significant other using social media is enough, “It will suffice for now, I would not dare risk our health just to be together.”

Poor relationship quality

For most of the participants, online dating does not give people a chance to get to know the other person well, hence the quality of the relationship suffers.

For participant B, online dating is easy, but it lacks relationship quality because one does not get to know the other person well enough; she said, “It’s easier to fall in love if there is constant communication, when the person consistently checks on you, but it’s not enough because you don’t really know the person. You do not know if he is telling the truth.”

Participant C said that as a traditional dater, doing online dating in the new normal setting affected his perspective in his relationship with the woman he is currently dating as he thinks that their relationship is not serious and entertain doubts on her; he relayed, “It’s not like I’m taking it too seriously because I have doubts. She was the one who made the first move through social media. It is like I have not put so much effort courting her.” For him, online dating experience produces shallow emotional attachment, and is not for long term relationships: he said, “Seems like the relationship would not be deep enough and lasting, the quality of our love or relationship might be lacking, it’s rather shallow because I didn’t really get the chance to know her that much.”

Lack of trust

For the participants, trust is important for the online relationship to survive. Participant G was able to cope with the transition from traditional to online dating because of the mutual trust she and the other person shared; she advised, “You just need to trust the other person.”

Participant D said that when there is jealousy, there is not enough trust and this poses a challenge in her relationship with her partner; she said, “He is always jealous. He wants me to reply immediately because if not, he accuses me of flirting with somebody else. He is the one flirting because thinkers are doers.” Participant D admits, however, that she also has her bouts

of jealousy, “It’s easy to fall in love but I always overthink and have doubts if he is really serious because how do I know that he is not fooling around with another woman if I am not around?”

For participant H, enjoying mutual trust addresses the other person’s immaturity and jealousy. He said, “She is quite immature and the jealous type, but it is ok, trust is the key, I trust her so much that she trusts me too.”

For participant F, one builds trust eventually when he or she is with the right person; he said, “Building trust is a little risky because of the situation but if you are with the right person, it comes naturally.” But he added that with the many apprehensions one has, there will be no trust; he said, “Sometimes when you have apprehensions, you start doubting and lose trust in the other person.”

Participant E said, "Prior to pandemic, I was not comfortable being courted because of some trust issues which worsened a bit with the pandemic because I don't get to see the other person, unlike before, so I continue to have doubts as I am not aware of what he really feels about me." Yet she claimed that her relationship with her significant other has strengthened when they try to work on their challenges; she said, “I think our relationship has become stronger, trust is gradually built up every day, the jealousy brought about by lack of trust has slowly lessened.”

What online dating brings

Online dating brings happiness, forges connections, and leads to commitment to the people engaging in it. It inspires them to be a better version of themselves.

Becoming a better person

For the participants, online dating provides users great delight, excitement, and tranquility, making them feel significant, confident, and pleased. It also boosts self-esteem and pushes individuals to prioritize their physical health, resulting in a better person. As participant A puts it, “I experience joy and peace of mind every time we chat. She is always there to remind me about my physical health. I am happy to be cared for, I became more health conscious.”

By engaging in online dating, participants learned to control their emotions, do self-meditation, and deal with difficult emotions. Participant G said, “I can get hold of my emotions” while participant A said, “I can now control some of my emotions.”

Engaging in online dating resulted in decreased insecurities for the participants because they became more confident. Participant A said, “I am now more confident to share my thoughts and ideas to someone,” while participant G averred, “I am able to express myself now, I know that I am special even if we do not see each other.”

Commitment

Most participants are ready to elevate their relationship status to a lifetime commitment because of the belief that the other person is the right partner for marriage. They have included them in their future and plan to marry them. According to participant B, “I believe I am already ready to level up our relationship with him” while participant F said, “I am ready even if we have not met in person.”

It is because of the online dating experience that most of the participants became more motivated and committed to the other person. They have learned to bear with the challenges as they want the relationship to work. Participant G said, “He is the one I dream to marry from among those people courting me.” Participant H said that he and his loved one knew each other well and decided to bring the status of their relationship to the next level; he said: “I definitely plan to propose marriage as soon as the pandemic is over.”

For the participants, commitment not only means closeness and bondedness but also connectedness. The participants said that they are close, connected and have bonded well with the person they are interested in. But for participants C and D, while they have decided to live together without the benefit of marriage, they have not attained the commitment stage. For participant D, she knew she was ready to bring the status of her relationship to the next level when she gave up her work and her single life just to be with the other person, but she has second thoughts about marriage. She said, “I left my ward and my employment because of him, I lived with him without the benefit of marriage. We were both happy then, but we encountered financial hardships. Now, I am beginning to regret my hasty decision. I do not even know if I would like to stay in this relationship.” Participant C, on the other hand, said, “We are already living in, why do we need to get married? Sometime, but not now. We have just been together for a year, and we still do not know each other very well to decide if we really are meant for each other.” Participant D commented, “We are not looking at it, I will let fate decide. I am already showing him my true colors, my true character, and I think so is he. If he can bear it, then fine, if not, then we separate.” She added that if the relationship does not work it is best to give up and leave, “It’s okay, we can overcome the challenges, but if it doesn’t work anymore, sorry but we need to break up, time to move out of the relationship.”

Implications on couples therapy

The study examined traditional daters' experiences with online dating, aiming to inform couples therapy applications for online dating relationships. Couples therapy is a psychotherapy that helps couples improve their relationship quality and address issues like trust, disconnection, affairs, sex, and external stressors. The study identified issues such as lack of trust and poor relationship quality, highlighting the need for couples therapy to address these issues.

The Attachment Theory of adult romantic relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1993) stresses the proneness of humans to form and maintain deep affectional ties with significant

others (Bowlby, 1988). These ties significantly impact every aspect of the human experience. A secure attachment link between partners is based on psychological and physiological interdependence; rather than reciprocal altruism (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999) such that the aim is to achieve a Secure-Secure attachment, so the couple is more open to being influenced, less self-centered, and has a higher capacity for empathy as both are secured, emotionally regulated, and mutually respected. In situations of urgent need, one partner's response negatively impacts the quality of an attachment relationship, due to their reliance on each other. Couples therapy can help understand this theory and its application in adult romantic relationships (Simpson & Rholes, 1994). Many couples seek counseling to address the issues they face in their relationship and reestablish connection and trust (Johnson et al., 2001).

Couples seeking to save their relationship from online dating challenges should consider couples therapy, which utilizes techniques such as narrative, cognitive-behavioral, solution-focused, brief, and reality therapy as workable solutions to address presenting problems. These therapies are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3.
Matrix of the Identified Issues and the Proposed Therapy

Identified Issue No.1: Lack of Trust		
<p><i>Trust as a Cornerstone-</i> Trust emerges as a fundamental element for a successful transition from traditional to online dating. According to Participant G, the foundation of mutual trust with her partner facilitated the adjustment to online dynamics. Her advice, "You just need to trust the other person," emphasizes the significance of trust in navigating the shift.</p> <p><i>Jealousy as a Symptom of Trust Issues-</i> Participant D's dilemma sheds light on the detrimental effects of jealousy on trust. She describes her partner's jealousy as a manifestation of a lack of trust. Her own struggles with bouts of jealousy underscore the reciprocal nature of trust in a relationship. The accusation of flirting and the challenge posed reveal the fragility of trust in the face of suspicion.</p> <p><i>Trust Mitigates Immaturity and Jealousy-</i> Participant H recognizes trust as a powerful tool to address immaturity and jealousy in a partner. Despite acknowledging certain negative traits, he believes that mutual trust acts as a stabilizing force in the relationship, creating a sense of security.</p> <p><i>Building Trust and Managing Apprehensions-</i> Participant F introduces the idea that building trust is not without risks, particularly in the context of uncertainties. He suggests that being with the right person facilitates a natural development of trust. However, he also acknowledges the role of personal apprehensions, which, if not managed, can erode trust over time.</p> <p><i>Trust Amidst Pandemic Restrictions-</i> Participant E's struggle brings the element of the pandemic into the discussion, highlighting the impact on trust. The lack of physical proximity intensifies her pre-existing trust issues. However, she sees an opportunity for trust to strengthen through concerted efforts and communication, reflecting a nuanced understanding of trust as a dynamic process.</p> <p>The narratives collectively emphasize that trust is not a static element; it evolves, faces challenges, and requires conscious effort. The contrast between Participant G's success in trusting her partner and Participant D's struggles with jealousy paints a diverse picture. Trust is portrayed as a fragile entity susceptible to external factors like the pandemic and internal challenges such as personal doubts and apprehensions. The narratives also suggest that trust is reciprocal, requiring both partners to contribute to its cultivation. Overall, trust emerges as a dynamic force that, when nurtured, contributes significantly to the resilience and growth of online relationships.</p>		
Therapy/ Theory Description	Objective	Proposed Activity
<p>Narrative Therapy by Michael White and David Epston <u>Goal:</u> To transform the effects of a problem to make space between the persons and their issue so that it is possible to see how a certain concern is serving, rather than harming them and relying on their own skills to minimize problems.</p>	<p>The gradual building of trust between the couple</p>	<p><u>What is your story?</u> Engaging in storytelling; sharing stories to connect over shared experiences, say when they feel wronged, and sort out thoughts and feelings.</p>
<p>Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy by Dr. Aaron Beck <u>Goal:</u> To assist the individual in implementing new thought and behavior patterns, not through altering</p>		<p><u>Open yourself to me.</u> Letting the partner have access to the other's private self. <u>Game of honesty.</u></p>

<p>the individual's circumstances, but by assisting him or her in taking charge of how these circumstances are perceived.</p>		<p>Enhancing trust and understanding real relationship situations to reveal desires without fear of judgment, fostering genuine connection and understanding.</p>
<p>Solution- Focused Brief Therapy by Steve de Shazer <u>Goal:</u> To focus on solutions to problems or issues and discover the resources and strengths a person has.</p>		<p><u>Me first, you are next.</u> Allowing each other to take turns in deciding couple matters.</p>
<p>Reality Therapy by William Glasser <u>Goal:</u> To accept responsibility for behaviors and choose more desirable actions to connect with others.</p>		<p><u>Setting bucket lists.</u> Setting goals they want to achieve together.</p>

Identified Issue No. 2: Poor Quality of Relationship

Lack of Depth in Online Relationships- The overarching consensus among participants is that online dating poses challenges in truly getting to know a person. The lack of face-to-face interaction and the reliance on digital communication are perceived as hindrances to developing a profound understanding of the other person.

Quality vs. Quantity of Communication- Participant B emphasizes the importance of constant communication for falling in love. However, she points out a crucial limitation—frequent communication alone does not guarantee a genuine understanding. The absence of certainty about the truthfulness of the partner's statements underscores the potential drawbacks of online communication.

Doubts and Shallow Emotional Attachment- Both Participant C and Participant D provide insight into the impact of transitioning from traditional to online dating, expressing doubts about the seriousness of the relationship initiated through social media. Participants C and D's respective perspective echoes concerns about the lack of effort in courtship, leading to a perceived shallowness in emotional attachment. The apprehension about the depth and lasting quality of the relationship adds another layer to the challenges faced in the online dating landscape.

The narratives highlight a common thread of skepticism regarding the depth and longevity of relationships formed through online platforms. The digital nature of interactions is seen as a barrier to authentic connection. Participant B's emphasis on the need for more than just communication aligns with Participant C's doubts about the efficacy of online courtship. The notion that online relationships might lack the depth necessary for lasting connections is a recurring theme. This collective perspective invites contemplation on the dynamics of online relationships. The analysis suggests that while online dating offers convenience, it may struggle to provide the richness and depth associated with traditional, face-to-face interactions. The narratives underscore the importance of meaningful engagement beyond mere communication in fostering genuine connections. Overall, these insights contribute to a nuanced understanding of the challenges inherent in maintaining high-quality relationships within the realm of online dating.

Therapy/ Theory Description	Objective	Proposed Activity
Narrative Therapy	Establishing and maintaining a quality relationship	<u>Appreciation List.</u> Appreciating each other from the heart.
Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy	Improving empathy	<u>Digital Fasting Exercise.</u> Spending time alone with one another, avoiding digital distractions, and engaging in activities they find interesting, such as planning, sharing, talking, or cuddling, to avoid distractions and engage in meaningful activities.
Solution- Focused Brief Therapy		<u>The Relationship Journal.</u> Tracking personal thoughts, feelings, actions, experiences, mistakes, successes, and wishes, as well as partner and relationship status, daily or weekly, depending on availability. <u>Let us practice active listening.</u> Allowing one's partner to speak his or her mind freely that does not involve yelling, using emails and texts, and speaking while he or she is speaking.

Reality Therapy		<p><u>Tell me, share it.</u> Let their partners know how they are feeling and what they want and need.</p> <p><u>Discussing each other's goals.</u> Communicating the dreams, goals, and needs to one's partner and setting goals together.</p> <p><u>Pursuing a hobby together.</u> Either trying to do the hobby of one another or choosing to explore and do new hobbies together.</p>
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Discussion

The study delves into the contrasting experiences of traditional and online dating, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditional daters reflect on their pre-pandemic experiences as enjoyable yet challenging, emphasizing the effort and intimacy involved in courting. Face-to-face interactions and quality time spent together are cherished, creating a more profound connection. However, participants express regret in traditional dating due to issues like infidelity, personal growth, and the impact of pandemic restrictions, with emotional pain from betrayal playing a significant role.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted significant challenges in romantic relationships, leading to an increased reliance on online dating. Online dating is portrayed as a form of courting through the internet, facilitated by social media apps. While some find it practical to express feelings, concerns about the sincerity of online interactions echo the findings of Lykens et al. (2019) and Anderson et al. (2020), highlighting the potential for deception in online dating. Online dating is lauded for its flexibility and practicality, offering a less formal and uncomfortable approach compared to traditional dating. Despite its advantages, some view it as a risky endeavor, akin to a battle or gamble, as it introduces the possibility of hurting or losing another person. This aligns with the observations of Cambay et al. (2017) that not all relationships formed in the virtual environment endure for a lifetime.

Traditional daters turned to online dating during the pandemic for reasons including safety concerns, feelings of love, fear of competition, and boredom. This shift to online platforms like Facebook, Messenger, Viber, Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp aligns with the findings of Goldstein and Flicker (2020) on Canadian teen girls relying on social media for communication and dating during the pandemic. Additionally, the influence of others' experiences encourages young Filipino adults to engage in online dating.

The study contributes new insights into the experiences of traditional daters embracing online dating during the pandemic, reinforcing consistent findings with other research. As relationships evolve amid challenges, this research provides a nuanced perspective on the motivations and outcomes associated with traditional and online dating experiences, offering valuable contributions to understanding modern dating dynamics.

Conclusion

Humans are socially intimate, and despite global pandemic restrictions and isolation, people continue to connect through various means. Traditional daters express their interest in a person through various methods, albeit online, such as making friends, sending caring messages and gifts, and spending quality time. They make themselves attractive to be noticed, provide advice, and comfort, and make the other person feel special. They call each other to laugh and listen to each other's stories and jokes. They also check in with each other occasionally through phone and text. Traditional daters strive to make the other person feel special and comfortable in their relationship.

Participants turned to online dating during the pandemic using various social media platforms. While some found the transition comparably like traditional dating, however, challenges exist in online dating relationships, such as poor internet connectivity, work-related commitments, miscommunication, and a lack of trust which leads to jealousy and insecurities. Despite challenges, participants found happiness, excitement, and connection in online dating.

The advantages of online dating include the positive experiences linked to increased confidence, self-esteem, and a commitment to self-improvement. Many participants expressed readiness for a lifetime commitment, including marriage, in their online relationships. The positive impact of online dating on motivation and commitment to building a future together was evident. On the other hand, the disadvantages of online dating include internet connectivity issues, time constraints, and limited social interactions which have become sources of miscommunication and at times, lack of trust. Trust emerged as a crucial element in successful online relationships as participants highlighted the importance of mutual trust and acknowledged that a lack of trust could lead to jealousy and insecurities. Also, the relative ease of courting also leads to a poor quality of relationships.

Trust is crucial for a relationship to thrive, and building it involves effective communication, quality time together, and making the other person feel special. It leads to intimacy, passion, and commitment. The challenges faced in establishing and maintaining online relationships may be averted by spending more quality time, ensuring honest communication, and enabling the participants to express their feelings sincerely, fostering a sense of assurance, care, and love, and getting to know each other better. These acts will deepen the relationship between them amidst the challenges and uncertainties, establish a connection between them, raise each other's self-worth, and commit to each other.

Couples facing significant stress relating to trust issues or are experiencing poor quality relationships, and not knowing how to move forward or whether they want to move forward, are advised to undergo couples therapy which provides an opportunity for healthy couples to improve their relationships, develop new skills, and foster a more fruitful partnership.

Recommendations

Researchers and practitioners can benefit from comprehending the complex nature of online dating for traditional daters who may have turned to it for relationships with desired individuals. Since the research study only focuses on the online dating experiences of the traditional who are currently dating the time the interview was conducted, it is highly recommended to look at the dating and relationship outcomes after the pandemic. It is also recommended that further studies be conducted to a larger sample size, or to conduct a similar study on traditional daters from the LGBTQIA+ and those in relationships with foreigners.

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