

The (Un)Enjoyable User Experience of Online Dating Systems

Doug Zytko
New Jersey Institute of Technology, Newark, New Jersey, United States, daz2@njit.edu

Sukeshini Grandhi
Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, Connecticut, United States, grandhis@easternct.edu

Quentin Jones
New Jersey Institute of Technology, Newark, New Jersey, United States, qgjones@acm.org

1. INTRODUCTION

Online dating systems are used by millions of people around the world to pursue love, sex, friendship, and other goals. Several product features of online dating systems contribute to a seemingly enjoyable and rewarding user experience. For example, the “swiping” mechanism commonly found in many of today’s mobile dating apps has been likened to a game (Purvis, 2017). Users swipe right to “like” profiles that they find attractive, and swipe left to reject the others. Receiving a match in these apps (i.e. discovering that an attractive user reciprocated a “like”) can be an exciting and addictive experience, not unlike winning a trivial amount of cash on a casino’s slot machine. Let’s pull the lever just one more time, let’s view just one more profile.

Despite a barrage of reward mechanisms and gamified features, research into online dating system-use suggests that user experiences with these systems are sometimes anything but enjoyable. Frost and colleagues found that users more often than not “preferred to stay home and watch a movie” than engage in online dating system-use (Frost, Chance, Norton, & Ariely, 2008, p. 54). Several other studies have deepened our knowledge of aspects of online dating system-use that users may find difficult, confusing, anxiety-laden, and stressful (e.g. Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Masden & Edwards, 2015; Zytko, Grandhi, & Jones, 2014a), which can contribute to an unenjoyable online dating user experience.

This chapter frames enjoyment of online dating user experiences through user motivations for online dating system-use. Such motivations commonly revolve around achieving social relationship goals (e.g. committed romantic relationships, casual sex, platonic friendship) (Gatter, Hodkinson, & Kolle, 2016; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017). An advantage that online dating systems provide to users pursuing these goals is an expanded pool of potential partners for one’s desired social relationships. We argue in this chapter that user experiences with online dating systems become unenjoyable due to perceived failures and inability to reap the benefits of this digitally expanded pool of potential relationship partners. These can include experiences that represent lost or ruined opportunities to attract desirable partners, experiences that instigate doubt regarding one’s general appeal to the pool of potential relationship partners, and so on.

The chapter begins by defining and describing prototypical online dating system design, and reviewing motivations for online dating system-use. This understanding of system design and user motivations is then leveraged to dissect dimensions of the online dating user experience that are commonly unenjoyable. The chapter concludes by reflecting on why users may continue their use of online dating systems despite some of their user experiences being unenjoyable.

2. ONLINE DATING SYSTEM DESIGN

Online dating systems are a type of social matching system, or system designed to recommend people to people for various reasons (Terveen & McDonald, 2005). While many online dating systems have the stated aim of recommending users to each other for long-term romantic relationships like marriage (e.g. *eHarmony.com*), systems are increasingly becoming more inclusive of a range of relationship goals—such as short-term dating, casual sex, and platonic friendship—providing system designs that allow users to specify one or more relationship goal to other users.

Online dating systems are accessible as websites and also mobile apps that allow for accurate location aware features (such as “you crossed paths with”). From a system design point of view, today’s online dating systems comprise three typical user interface elements regardless of the platform they are accessed on: 1) user discovery interfaces, 2) user profile pages, and 3) private messaging interfaces. *User discovery* is often supported by proprietary algorithms that display system-recommended users on a “matches” page (e.g. *eharmony*), or a “swiping” interface that lets users indicate initial (un)attraction to potential partners recommended with non-proprietary criteria like GPS-based proximity (e.g. *Tinder*). User discovery is also sometimes facilitated with a search function that lets users proactively find others that satisfy objective trait requirements such as for height and age (e.g. *OkCupid*). Users are represented to one another in online dating systems as *profile pages*, which are comprised typically of self-provided information in the forms of profile pictures, dedicated trait fields (e.g. age, height), and open-ended “about me” text fields. *Private messaging interfaces* allow users to engage in dyadic communication through the exchange of asynchronous text-based messages.

3. USER MOTIVATIONS FOR USING ONLINE DATING SYSTEMS

Usage of online dating systems has continually grown through the years, with more than 38% of single Americans having used online dating systems as of 2015 (Smith & Anderson, 2015). Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) has been applied to study the varying motivations for using online dating systems (Clemens, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2015; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Under U&G, the user plays an active role in choosing and using media—sometimes at the expense of other, competing media choices—to satisfy a particular need (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973). In the context of this paper, we leverage U&G to posit that users actively decide to use an online dating system over other media choices (including other online dating systems) to satisfy particular needs or goals.

While individual motivations or goals for using online dating systems can be numerous (e.g. “to get over an ex” or “to live out a sexual fantasy”) (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017), common motivations and anecdotes of online dating system-use revolve around achieving social relationship goals that require in-person meetings (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; N. B. Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012; Zytka et al., 2014a). Long-term romantic relationships may be the most publicized of these goals. Of couples that married between 2005-2012, more than one third had discovered each other online (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, & Vanderweele, 2013), and online dating systems were the most common way that those online couples met. The literature has indicated that use of online dating systems is also motivated by other social relationship goals like finding short-term dating partners, casual sex partners, platonic friendships, travel partners, and local residents who can give advice to travelers (Gatter et al., 2016; Hsiao & Dillahunt, 2017; Sumter et al., 2017). In line with the U&G perspective, prior research has indicated that the choice of which particular online dating systems to use (as there

are many to choose from) is informed by one's particular relationship goals, such as casual sex (Zytka, Grandhi, & Jones, 2015).

If motivations for using online dating systems commonly revolve around social relationship goal achievement, then there must be an element of online dating systems that leads users to believe that they can achieve their social relationship goals through online dating system-use. While the designs of online dating systems may vary (e.g. some have proprietary matching algorithms while some do not), the most commonly used online dating systems offer the universal advantage of partner choice and access. Specifically, online dating systems provide users with access to hundreds to thousands of users in their geographic area, and millions of users around the world, whom they can assume are available as potential partners for their social relationship desires. This pool of potential partners, and the air of partner availability implied by their presence in an online dating system, almost certainly trumps the relationship partner pools that users have access to through their social circles, their school or job, and even bars and clubs due to social, geographical, and temporal constraints.

4. WHAT MAKES ONLINE DATING USER EXPERIENCES (UN)ENJOYABLE?

Now that we understand social relationship goal achievement as being a common motivator for online dating system-use, and expanded access to and choice of potential relationship partners as a likely reason users think that online dating system-use can or should result in relationship goal achievement, we can use this understanding to explain what makes for an (un)enjoyable online dating system user experience.

What do we mean by an unenjoyable or enjoyable user experience? Blythe and Hassenzahl differentiate two distinct forms of enjoyable experiences based on "fun" and "pleasure" [x]. Under this distinction, fun is characteristic of distraction, repetition, and triviality. Pleasure is derived from, among other things, *progression* towards a goal and *anticipation* ("fantasies about activities or objects that are about to happen") (Blythe & Hassenzahl, 2005, p. 97). We refer to Blythe and Hassenzahl's conceptualization of pleasure when discussing (un)enjoyable online dating user experiences because common motivations for online dating system-use revolve around social relationship goal achievement and the anticipation or expectation that use of online dating systems can satisfy these goals.

We argue that pleasure derived from online dating system-use stems from the perceived progression towards one's social relationship goals (anticipation of a goal that appears closer to being actualized). Pleasurable user experiences with online dating systems are contingent on the user's perception that the resources they devote to online dating system-use (e.g. time, money, emotional energy) are bringing them closer to achieving their social relationship goals. Conversely, unpleasurable user experiences are ones in which users believe that the resources devoted to online dating system-use are not bringing them closer to achieving their anticipated social relationships. By extension, if an expanded pool of potential relationship partners is what facilitates the initial anticipation of relationship goal achievement through online dating system-use, then unpleasurable user experiences with online dating systems are reflective of perceived failures or the fear of failure to progress towards one's relationship goals in spite of the expanded pool of potential relationship partners.

5. DISSECTING UNENJOYABLE ONLINE DATING USER EXPERIENCES

In the previous section we argued that unenjoyable online dating user experiences stem from perceived and expected failures to progress towards one's relationship goals in spite of the expanded pool of potential relationship partners facilitated by online dating systems. What particular scenarios of online dating system-use may trigger these perceived failures and thus unenjoyable user experiences? In this section we identify and discuss four such scenarios: conveying one's relationship goals to other users, evaluating user profile pages, crafting one's own profile page, and crafting message content.

5.1 *What If the Next One is Better?: Shopping for Profile Pages*

Several scenarios of online dating system-use involve user evaluation: forming impressions of other users as potential relationship partners to determine who is worthy of an in-person meeting. The process of evaluating a given user often begins with the discovery of that user's profile page and the decision to express initial interest in them (e.g. by sending a message or "liking" their profile page).

A user can easily spend hours sifting through an almost-endless sea of profile pages before ever going on an in-person date (Frost et al., 2008). This may appear an advantage to users looking for romance—the ability to search through and select profile pages that appear "just right" can negate awkward blind dates, costly trips to bars and clubs, and the pressure to settle for someone "good enough." However, there is evidence that excessive choice of profile pages can be detrimental to users' romantic relationship goals.

Confronting people with many choices of profile pages can induce choice overload (Iyengar, 2010), which may spur them to reject all available choices, or to evaluate choices based on traits that are easiest or fastest to evaluate (González-Vallejo & Moran, 2001). Research has demonstrated that as the choice of online dating profiles increases (from 4 to as many as 64), users increasingly adopt a faster evaluation strategy that leverages the traits easiest to evaluate on the profile page like age and height (Lenton & Stewart, 2008). They also deviate from their ideal romantic partner preferences (Chiou & Yang, 2010; Wu & Chiou, 2009; Yang & Chiou, 2010), they misremember which traits were listed in particular profile pages (Lenton, Fasolo, & Todd, 2009), and they are less satisfied with profile pages that they express interest in (D'Angelo & Toma, 2016).

System design may encourage a hasty and dissatisfying profile page evaluation process. Some online dating systems facilitate profile page discovery with a "browse and search" page, which provides users with search parameters to curate their list of recommended potential partners based on trait fields in profile pages (e.g. "a man over 6'0", between 25 and 32 years old, who does not smoke"). Decisions of which potential partners to select for further evaluation on "browse and search" pages are largely predicated on ideal partner preferences; a phenomenon Heino and colleagues call "relationshopping" (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010). As they describe (p. 437):

"[...] the ability to filter through thousands of profiles [...] encouraged a shopping mentality, in which participants searched for the perfect match based on discrete characteristics and reduced potential partners to the sum of their parts. Decision making based on these qualities was quite different from offline dating situations in which individuals often get a more holistic impression of the individual, usually taking into account unquantifiable aspects of personality (such as energy level) and interaction (such as chemistry)."

"Relationshopping" is detrimental to users' romantic relationship goals for two reasons. One, there is evidence that ideal romantic partner preferences do not predict romantic attraction in-person (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). Two, potential romantic partners that may otherwise be evaluated favorably in later stages of

evaluation (e.g. messaging, in-person dates) may go undiscovered or may be prematurely disqualified if their “discrete characteristics” do not resonate with the evaluating user’s conscious preferences.

Worse, this “relationshopping” spree of profile page evaluation can become a circular process of dissatisfaction. Finkel et al. (2012) suggest that discovery of multiple potential romantic partners at a time induces an assessment mindset (Kruglanski et al., 2000) in which choices are evaluated against each other (e.g. “is this potential partner more or less attractive than ones that I also just discovered?”) rather than solely in regards to one’s goal (a locomotive mindset). Finkel and colleagues consider this mindset detrimental to evaluation of potential romantic partners in online dating systems, drawing on romantic compatibility research which demonstrated that romantic relationship partners with assessment mindsets are more critical of their partners and more pessimistic about their relationships (Gagne & Lydon, 2001; Kumashiro, Rusbult, Finkenauer, & Stocker, 2007). Under this line of thinking, an abundance of discovered potential partners may increase online dating system users’ tendencies to disqualify a potential partner even if their profile page is considered attractive because another, potentially more attractive user “is a mere mouse-click away” (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012, p. 29).

Ultimately, sifting through a sea of profile pages is poised to be an unenjoyable user experience despite the apparent advantages of partner choice. This is because users’ perceived progress towards their relationship goals can be stifled by endless thoughts of “what if?” regarding the next discoverable profile page and tendencies to evaluate profile pages using criteria that poorly predicts later attraction.

5.2 *Pick Me, Pick Me: Temptations of Deception in Profile Pages*

“People have an ongoing interest in how others perceive and evaluate them” (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 34).

The previous section highlighted user evaluation as a fundamental theme of online dating system-use. Yet evaluating a user favorably as a potential relationship partner does little to progress one towards their relationship goal if the respective user does not reciprocate interest. As such, users have a vested interest in presenting information about themselves to influence potential partners’ attraction to them. This is called self-presentation: the act of managing impressions that other people form about us (Goffman, 1978).

The profile page is often the first source of information used for evaluation or impression formation in online dating systems. This means that profile page creation stands to be one of the most vital aspects of online dating system-use for self-presentation. Users experience tension between desires to maximize attractiveness and accurately portray oneself when crafting their profile pages (N. B. Ellison et al., 2012; Hancock, Toma, & Ellison, 2007). Desires to maximize attractiveness can give way to deception—deliberately lying about aspects of one’s profile page to attract potential partners. Prior work has shown that users do exaggerate particular traits in their profile pages, like height, age, and income in text fields dedicated to those traits, and physical appearance through profile pictures (Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Hancock & Toma, 2009). Deception may be the result of users thinking there is no better strategy to attract potential partners. For example, the lower an online dater’s physical attractiveness, the more likely they are to deceptively present information about their physical appearance (Toma & Hancock, 2010).

What kind of user experience culminates from decisions to deceptively present in profile pages? After all, deception and lying are generally understood to be morally wrong, and online daters do not want to be deceived by their potential partners (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Prior work has revealed ways that users rationalize their deceptive self-presentations in profile pages. Profile pages may be conceptualized as “promises” that self-presented traits in profile pages will not differ

too drastically from in-person impressions (Ellison et al., 2012). Other work has called this strategic self-presentation—mildly exaggerating traits to the extent that deception will not be obvious come an in-person date [(Hancock et al., 2007)]. Users have also justified deceptive self-presentations of malleable traits such as body type and career through the concept of an “ideal self” (Ellison et al., 2006). This entails self-presenting traits in the form that a user expects them to be in the future. For example, a user may exaggerate their job title because they expect to get a promotion or are training for their desired job. Another example from prior work (Ellison et al., 2006, p. 426): “The only thing I kind of feel bad about is that the picture I have of myself is a very good picture from maybe five years ago. I’ve gained a little bit of weight and I feel kind of bad about that. I’m going to, you know, lose it again.”

The process of profile page creation can be an unenjoyable user experience because of fears of failure to procure initial attraction in potential partners and then subsequent rationalization of deceptive self-presentation to avoid this failure. Given that profile page creation is a requisite step of signing up for an online dating system, this means initial experiences with online dating system-use are likely to be unenjoyable. This unenjoyment can mount if users do not receive as much attention from potential partners as they were expecting, which some users interpret as a sign that they are universally unattractive to the system’s user base (Zytko et al., 2014a).

5.3 Private Messaging: What Do I Say, and When Do I Say It?

Self-presentation does not end with the profile page. Conversation through an online dating system’s messaging interface is an integral step towards a face-to-face meeting with another user. Messaging interfaces are used not simply to organize in-person meetings, but to evaluate users beyond their profile page to determine their suitability for an in-person meeting (Zytko, et. al. 2015). As such, messaging is a stage for further, tailored self-presentation to potential relationship partners.

Messaging interfaces are typically unprompted with no instructions, meaning users can discuss whatever they would like. What should one say in their messages to a user of interest? There is evidence that male users, in particular, experience anxiety over how to craft their messages due to fear of a lack of response and thus failure to attract desirable relationship partners (Zytko et al., 2014a). This may be because male users typically initiate messaging conversations more than women and receive less messages in general than women (Fiore et. al. 2010).

Anxiety over what to say in messages can lead to erratic, potentially offensive messaging behavior. Prior work has discussed male users randomly changing their messaging strategies in search of ways to procure the most responses (Zytko et al., 2014b). Such strategies ranged from writing poems to discussing politics to making fun of women’s appearance. As one male user reported (Zytko et al., 2014b, p. 6):

“I used to send long paragraphs, but now I send short messages where I try to make fun of the girls. Honestly, I have no idea what’s working, I just don’t want them to think I’m insecure.”

Once male users do procure a response from a female user of interest, the question of when to escalate communication off of the online dating system to the phone or an in-person meeting becomes a new source of anxiety. Female users in a prior study called this a “moment of truth” (Zytko et al., 2014a). They reported discontinuing contact if male users attempted to move communication off of the online dating system too early (thus making them uncomfortable) or too late (thus making them annoyed that the man was not taking a leading role).

In summary, user experiences with deliberating message content can be quite unenjoyable for male users because of potentially ruined/missed opportunities to attract potential partners—the possibility that a user did not respond because of one’s choice of message content, and the possibility that they may responded if one chose different message content.

Conversely, receiving message content can be an unenjoyable experience for female users who receive offensive messages that cause them to doubt their value to the potential partner pool or the general quality of male potential partners available to them. As one female user described (Zytko et al., 2014b, p. 2):

“This one guy called me fat and messaged me with a diet plan. I guess he thought it was funny? It made me feel horrible about myself. I didn’t log in [to the online dating system] for a couple weeks because of that.”

Furthermore, some female users intentionally avoid responding to men to overtly reject them because of prior experiences in which rejected men repeatedly messaged them demanding a second chance or insisting that the female user formed the wrong impression of them (Zytko et al., 2014a). This means unenjoyable user experiences with receiving messages can be quite frequent because male users have little opportunity to learn why their messages do not yield responses and thus how to correct potentially off-putting behavior.

Some users, however, do seek advice from others about how to craft their message content, such as by soliciting free advice from public online communities (Masden & Edwards, 2015) or paid advice from online dating coaches (Zytko et al., 2016). These coaches commonly sell advice for crafting messages in the form of prewritten message content that clients can simply copy and paste into their own messages. Online dating coaches do not claim particularly high response rates for their prewritten message content; one coach claimed a response rate of 7-20% (Zytko et al., 2016). While response rates to prewritten message content may seem low, the copy-and-paste strategy enables users to contact hundreds of users very quickly, meaning they can procure at least a few responses with relatively little effort. Of course, the majority of users who do not respond to such copy-and-pasted messages stand to have unenjoyable user experiences due to time wasted reading these messages and doubts over the kind of users they are attracting.

5.4 What Brings You Here?: Expressing and Identifying Relationship Goals for System-Use

The relationship goal perhaps most synonymous with online dating systems is long-term romance (e.g. marriage), but users have adopted online dating systems to pursue a variety of alternative relationship goals (Hsiao & Dillahun, 2017). Prior research has revealed user struggles with conveying and identifying such alternative goals, which can instigate unenjoyable user experiences.

Casual sex is a type of relationship goal that online daters commonly pursue or are open to experiencing (Blackwell et al., 2014; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Hardy & Lindtner, 2017; Zytko et al., 2015). Recent work has indicated that heterosexual men and women sometimes disguise this relationship goal because of the belief that its disclosure may negatively impact their achievement of this goal (Zytko et al., 2015). Work in the psychology domain regarding social stigma around promiscuity supports this user concern (Crawford & Popp, 2003). If users are unwilling to elucidate their interest in casual sex, they stand to have difficulty probing for casual sex interest in others. Collectively, this increases the chances of relationship goal misinterpretation, which can culminate in unenjoyable user experiences because of resources (e.g. time, emotional investment) committed to users that are discovered to be incompatible in later online or in-person discourse. A study of online dating coaches revealed that they commonly coach their clients to expect first dates to go poorly in order to avoid the emotional let down of misinterpreted relationship goals and other traits (Zytko et al., 2016). This can be interpreted as a way to temper the anticipated benefits of online dating system-use and thus unenjoyable user experiences when those benefits go unrealized.

Some users have adopted specific strategies for identifying others who are open to casual sex. For example, a subset of male online daters are called “pickup

artists” (Zytko et al., 2015). They formulate and sell strategies for how to seduce women for casual sex in online dating and physical world environments. Prior work has indicated that “pickup artists” engage in exhaustive “field research” to develop profile and message content that attracts women open to casual sex (Zytko et al., 2015). This includes a method akin to cold-calling—sending copy-and-pasted message content that implies casual sex interest to hundreds of female users in geographically distant areas to gauge which messages yield the highest response rates. This method enables users to test various system-use strategies without ruining their chances with female users who they are feasibly able to meet. Such a method can trigger unenjoyable user experiences for both message senders and receivers. For one, the repetition of sending mass quantities of messages and recording response rates is likely not an enjoyable user experience for the sender. Indeed, the “pickup artists” who employ the strategy have outsourced the messaging process to avoid a user experience altogether (e.g. developing message automation software and paying others to send messages on their behalf) (Zytko et al., 2015). On the flip side, receiving, reading, and potentially responding to a copy-and-pasted test message costs time that can never culminate into relationship goal achievement.

Aside from romance and sex, users also pursue platonic relationships through online dating system-use (e.g. friendship, travel partners) (Hsiao & Dillahunt, 2017). Both same- and opposite-sex users are potential partners for these goals, which effectively doubles the pool of potential partners. However, prior work has indicated that potential platonic partners of the same and opposite sex tend to assume romantic/sexual intent when they are contacted. There is documentation of users with platonic interests having unsuccessful in-person meetings with opposite-sex partners because of assumed romantic intent (“*I think she thought it was a date, but I wasn’t attracted to her like that. We never messaged each other again after that*”) (Zytko et al., 2014, p. 60). Other work reported that users stopped contacting same-sex potential partners for platonic connections because of assumptions of homosexual intent by the users they contact (Hsiao & Dillahunt, 2017). Ultimately, pursuit of platonic relationship goals can lead to unenjoyable user experiences because of perceived and expected failure to clarify one’s relationship goal to the pool of potential partners.

6. WHY DO USERS ENDURE UNENJOYABLE EXPERIENCES?

The previous section discussed various scenarios of online dating system-use that can culminate in unenjoyable user experiences, or experiences that spur users to believe that the resources devoted to online dating system-use are not bringing them closer to achieving their anticipated social relationships. This begs the question: why do users not simply discontinue online dating system-use if they perceive a lack of progress towards their relationship goals? There certainly are users who discontinue online dating system-use, either temporarily (Zytko et al., 2014b) or permanently. But users may continue online dating system-use despite frequent unenjoyable user experiences because they are unsure as to why they are not achieving their relationship goals. Could they be using the online dating system “wrong”?

Recall that users solicit advice from others (Masden & Edwards, 2015; Zytko et al., 2016) about how to use online dating systems, which suggests that some find themselves at least partially responsible for their lack of relationship goal achievement through online dating system-use. Online dating systems are not like bars, clubs, and other physical-world social settings for relationship partner recruitment where one can observe how others act and how successful others are at soliciting potential relationship partners. Ignorance over other users’ behavior and experiences in online dating systems can lead some to assume that unenjoyable user experiences with online dating systems are largely their fault and can be rectified by altering one’s system-use strategies. This assumption may be bolstered by system

design elements that can make it seem like relationship goal success should be inevitable or just around the corner (e.g. matching algorithms that emphasize supposed romantic compatibility with several other users).

We can leverage Uses & Gratifications Theory (U&G) to pose an alternative explanation for why users continue online dating system-use despite unenjoyable user experiences. U&G was referenced earlier in this chapter to frame unenjoyable user experiences with online dating systems as those that represent failures to progress towards the expected gratifications (i.e. relationship goal achievement) that motivated online dating system-use. Katz and colleagues describe a recursive cycle between gratifications sought and obtained through media-use: needs or desires that are gratified through media-use in turn construct new desires, creating a cycle of sought and obtained gratifications (Katz et al., 1973).

In terms of online dating systems, unenjoyable user experiences may be offset by a recursive cycle of sought and obtained “mini-gratifications” that can re-instill a perception of progress towards one’s relationship goals or a general sense of desirability by the system’s user base. Several of these small gratifications are emphasized through system design, such as notifications that a user “liked” one’s profile page or that multiple users viewed one’s profile page, bright icons that highlight a number of unread messages in one’s inbox, alerts by the system’s matching algorithm of romantic compatibility with newly signed-up users, and so on (see Figure 1).

If enjoyable user experiences are characteristic of anticipation and progression towards one’s relationship goals, online dating system-use can be viewed as a cycle of enjoyable and unenjoyable user experiences that sustain system-use in ways reminiscent of the “carrot and the stick” idiom. Unenjoyable user experiences weaken perceptions of progress towards one’s relationship goals, but frequent small gratifications help users endure these experiences and renew anticipation for the “carrot” of relationship goal achievement.



Figure 1. Small gratifications from online dating system-use such as “liking” a user’s profile page in the mobile dating app Tinder and receiving a match can reinstate anticipation of relationship goal achievement and sustain system-use despite other unenjoyable user experiences

7. CONCLUSION

Several aspects of online dating system design seem primed to facilitate an enjoyable and rewarding user experience. Notifications of user interest like “9 unread messages!” or “20 people viewed your profile!” are commonplace, as are myriad other reward mechanisms. However, research suggests that unenjoyable user experiences with online dating systems can be quite frequent.

In this chapter we framed unenjoyable online dating system experiences through users’ relationship goals that commonly motivate system-use. We argued

that the large pools of potential relationship partners on offer in online dating systems lead users to believe that relationship goal achievement is possible or probable through online dating system-use, and that unenjoyable user experiences are indicative of perceived or expected failures to exploit this digitally expanded choice of potential partners. Various scenarios of online dating system-use that can culminate in unenjoyable user experiences were reviewed, such as crafting one's profile page and message content to attract potential partners, and detecting alternative relationship goals in other users such as casual sex.

We concluded the chapter by suggesting that users sustain their system-use despite unenjoyable user experiences because of frequent, small gratifications or rewards of system-use that reinvigorate anticipation of relationship goal achievement.

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