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# The Enduring Effect of Internet Dating: Meeting Online and the Road to Marriage

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## Abstract

This study takes a relational stage approach to understanding the role of online dating in the progression of relationships toward marriage. Fifty interviews were conducted with individuals from across the United States (ages 21–62;  $M_{\text{age}} = 33.42$ ) who were married or engaged to someone they met via online dating. The results present a comprehensive view of online dating through 4 stages and 13 subcategories of relationship development. Participants described meeting through a process of technology-enabled relationship initiation. Once the relationship escalated offline, they entered a period of multimodal development that demonstrated the enduring influence technology continued to have after meeting in person. Throughout this process, participants stressed the role of online dating platforms in breaking down barriers and reinforcing divisions. Three outcomes for marriage were also uncovered. Findings from this study suggest that online dating is changing more than where couples meet and have theoretical and practical implications.

## Keywords

courtship, marriage, online dating, relationship development, stage theories

In the past few decades, the landscape of marriage in the United States has been transformed by a number of historical events and social and political changes (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010). Chief among these has been the birth and widespread adoption of the Internet, and with it the growth of a multi-billion dollar online dating industry

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(Finkel et al., 2012). Online dating has rapidly expanded to become the most common way to meet a romantic partner, displacing conventional relationship intermediaries such as friends and family in what has been described as “a process of technology-driven disintermediation” (Rosenfeld et al., 2019, p. 17756). The Pew Research Center reports that the number of people who are meeting and marrying from online dating is increasing and estimates that just over half (52%) of American adults who have never before been married have sought assistance from an online dating service in their search for companionship (Anderson et al., 2020). The Internet is also responsible for roughly one in three marriages (Cacioppo et al., 2013), leading to questions about how online dating sites and apps may affect the successfulness of relationships now and into the future.

The possibility that online dating may play a role in shaping marital dynamics first began to attract attention in the early 2000s with eHarmony’s efforts to develop a scientific matching system (Carter & Buckwalter, 2009). As Finkel et al. (2012) noted, if online dating indeed has the potential to be more effective than traditional pathways to marriage, then it may serve “to boost happiness and to reduce the great suffering and costs associated with relationship distress and dissolution” (p. 5). In one of the few studies to systematically examine this possibility, Cacioppo et al. (2013) found that individuals who were initially introduced to their spouse online were slightly more satisfied and slightly less likely to separate or divorce than those who met through typical offline channels. However, little research has been conducted since in an effort to explain these effects on marital quality and stability. Although the literature on online dating is flourishing (for a review, see Finkel et al., 2012), there is a notable lack of knowledge about the trajectories and long-term outcomes of the relationships that are emerging from these platforms.

The present study uses Knapp’s (1978) relational stage model to inductively explore the relationship development process in online dating through in-depth interviews with individuals who met their fiancé or spouse online. There are two primary goals for this research: The first is to chart the trajectories of online dating relationships by working from the ground up to model the stages in their development toward marriage; the second is to examine the implications of this process for long-term relationships. Many people use online dating because they hope that it will eventually lead to a meaningful relationship (Sprecher, 2009). Thus, to fully understand the work of these platforms, it is necessary to provide a detailed look at the experiences of those who have succeeded in using them to find a partner. This study reflects back on this process as a way forward to understanding the impact of online dating on the relationships it helps to conceive.

## **A Stage Model Approach to Online Dating**

The literature on interpersonal communication has historically conceptualized relationship development as a linear series of stages that couples experience throughout the lifecycle of a relationship. One of the most well-known and widely used stage theories of relationship development is Knapp’s (1978) relational stage model.

Drawing inspiration from earlier stage theories (e.g., social penetration theory; Altman & Taylor, 1973), Knapp proposed a dual staircase model to explain how offline relationships have traditionally developed and deteriorated as couples move toward or away from greater intimacy. The stages in Knapp's model are assumed to occur through a sequential process as couples move to escalate or dissolve their relationships. Each stage is characterized by the face-to-face (FtF) communication patterns that couples emphasize at different points in the developmental trajectory (Knapp et al., 2020).

Knapp et al. (2020) described relationship development as occurring through five discrete stages of interaction. First, in *initiating*, potential partners determine whether they are attracted to each other and strike up a conversation. Second, there is *experimenting*, where they begin to get to know each other. This includes seeking information to reduce uncertainty and engaging in small talk to uncover similarities (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Third, during *intensifying*, partners grow exceedingly intimate. During this stage, there is an increase in the breadth and depth of disclosure as partners come to know each other on a deeper level (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Fourth, *integrating* involves greater interdependence in all aspects of the couple's life as they begin to establish a shared identity (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Finally, the *bonding* stage is marked by public displays of commitment to the relationship such as engagement or marriage.

Although online dating relationships may develop similarly to offline relationships (e.g., by emphasizing disclosure and interdependence in later stages), they are unlikely to follow precisely the same progression. In online dating, there may be a pre-interaction stage prior to initiating where people seek information about potential partners through profiles before deciding whether to initiate or reciprocate contact (LeFebvre, 2018). At least early on, the stages involved in meeting and getting to know someone in online dating are also likely to be different as a result of being entirely mediated by technology. Thus, there is a need to revisit traditional assumptions about how relationships evolve toward greater intimacy in order to account for the ways that online dating may reflect and change the stages in Knapp's (1978) model. Further, a common critique of stage theories like Knapp's is that they focus exclusively on internal dynamics within the couple, making it important for contemporary theorizing to also attend to features of the external environment when tracing the progression of relationships from courtship to marriage (Huston, 2000; Niehuis et al., 2006). For instance, there are social and physical forces that may influence couples' trajectories, such as network support (Sprecher, 2009) or the social stigma of dating online (Wildermuth, 2004). The following sections further explore relationship development in online dating and potential long-term outcomes in marriage.

### *Relationship Development in Online Dating*

The rise of online dating sites followed recently by an influx of mobile dating apps has produced a number of fundamental changes to the ways relationships are formed (Finkel et al., 2012). For many people, partner selection is guided by algorithms

(Sharabi, 2021; Tong et al., 2016), self-presentation is accomplished through profiles (Ellison et al., 2006), and interest is expressed by way of swiping (LeFebvre, 2018). Communicating with potential partners is also different in online dating, where asynchronous text-based messaging and the absence of nonverbal and contextual cues can contribute to heightened attraction relative to what would be expected FtF (Antheunis et al., 2020). These changes demonstrate the considerable influence online dating platforms can have on relationships and how they differ from conventional dating.

Yet despite all that is known about online dating, much of the work in this area has been primarily focused on communication in the early stages of relationships with a particular emphasis on self-presentation and impression formation (e.g., Ellison et al., 2006). By comparison, there is far less research attending to what happens after people have succeeded in identifying a partner and how their relationships continue to progress after moving offline and in later stages of development. There is evidence to suggest, however, that the way partners get to know each other online could play a critical role in shaping their offline trajectories. Sharabi and Caughlin (2017) found that the dynamics of people's online relationships predicted how successful they were on a first date, while Sharabi and Dykstra-DeVette (2019) showed that the likelihood of a second date depended on the relationship initiation strategies that were used to get the first one. Ramirez et al. (2015) examined how the amount of time that online daters spent communicating through the platform affected their perceptions of a partner after meeting FtF for the first time. They discovered that people benefited from online dating when they progressed quickly offline; however, those who spent an extended amount of time interacting online had poorer outcomes when they finally decided to meet FtF. What remains unclear is what happens after this initial FtF encounter following online dating for those people who continue to progress in their relationships. Theorizing about multimodality would suggest that communication changes as relationships develop beyond the Internet and as people integrate their mediated and FtF communication (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013; Haythornthwaite, 2005). In order to fully understand the development process in online dating and the stages involved in the progression of participants' relationships toward marriage, a first research question is posed:

RQ1: What stages characterize the development of online dating relationships to marriage?

### *Online Dating and Long-Term Outcomes*

The process of initiating and developing a relationship in online dating may also have lasting implications for relationships. In fact, some online dating platforms even claim to match for the potential for long-term relationship success. For instance, when discussing the proprietary matching system at eHarmony, Carter and Buckwalter (2009) wrote, "The theoretical perspective underlying the online matchmaking paradigm is that who you are and who you choose to be with will have an enormous impact on the quality of your marriage" (p. 106). Many academics, however, are skeptical that any site's matching process can predict long-term compatibility based on individual

factors alone and without knowledge of how two people will interact or the external circumstances that will come to affect their relationships over time (Finkel et al., 2012).

To examine potential consequences of meeting online for long-term relationships, Cacioppo et al. (2013) surveyed a nationally representative sample of 19,131 adults to determine if the location where couples met (online vs. offline) had any bearing on the quality and stability of their marriages. They found that meeting online was associated with a slightly higher level of satisfaction among couples and a slightly lower likelihood of separation and divorce than meeting FtF. In another study, Rosenfield (2017) observed that couples who met online were not more satisfied or less likely to terminate their relationships, but they did move more quickly to marriage. These results raise the intriguing possibility that the experience of meeting and communicating with a future spouse in online dating may have lasting effects on relationships.

Yet there is still the question of *why* and *how* online dating would affect long-term outcomes. Cacioppo et al. (2013) speculated that perhaps the people who meet a spouse online possess different qualities that make them more successful in relationships over the long run, such as a stronger motivation to marry. It could also be something about the platforms where they meet, which may utilize algorithms or encourage greater selectivity and disclosure. Further, Rosenfield (2017) reasoned that the nature of the information that is available when making decisions about potential partners may lead to better choices in a mate. There may also be other yet uncovered explanations, such as the filtering that people are able to do in order to find a partner that fits their criteria for an ideal mate or the feeling that someone better might be just around the corner. In one experiment, having access to a larger quantity of potential partners in online dating left people feeling less satisfied with their decisions, potentially undermining long-term commitment (D'Angelo & Toma, 2017). To begin to explore the downstream effects of the online dating process on relationships in participants' own words, a second research asks:

RQ2: What are the long-term outcomes of the stages of development in online dating for relationships?

## Method

### *Participants*

Fifty individuals were recruited for participation in this study from locations across the United States.<sup>1,2</sup> The eligibility criteria specified that participants must be (a) at least 18 and (b) married or engaged to someone they met on an online dating site or mobile dating app (e.g., Tinder, OkCupid, eHarmony). Both married and engaged participants were recruited to ensure that recent experiences with newer online dating platforms were represented in the sample.

Participants were women ( $n=36$ ; 72%) and men ( $n=14$ ; 28%) between the ages of 21 and 62 ( $M=33.42$ ,  $SD=8.44$ ). They self-identified as heterosexual ( $n=47$ ; 94%),

bisexual ( $n=2$ ; 4.0%), and lesbian ( $n=1$ ; 2.0%) and were White ( $n=38$ ; 76%), Black or African American ( $n=5$ ; 10.0%), Asian ( $n=4$ ; 8.0%), Hispanic/Latinx ( $n=2$ ; 4.0%), and other (e.g., Caribbean;  $n=1$ ; 2.0%). Approximately half of the sample reported having household incomes below ( $n=27$ ; 54.0%) and above ( $n=21$ ; 42.0%) \$100,000 per year, with two participants (4.0%) preferring not to say. Compared to U.S. Census Bureau (2021) data, the sample was largely representative of national demographics but contained a greater share of women and high-income households.

Most participants were married ( $n=33$ ; 66.0%) and the rest were engaged ( $n=17$ ; 34.0%), with their relationships ranging from 3.71 months to 10.21 years in length ( $M=4.18$ ;  $SD=2.46$ ). They met their spouse or fiancée on Tinder ( $n=18$ ; 36.0%), OkCupid ( $n=9$ ; 18.0%), eHarmony ( $n=7$ ; 14.0%), Plenty Of Fish ( $n=6$ ; 12.0%), Match ( $n=5$ ; 10.0%), Bumble ( $n=2$ ; 4.0%), Coffee Meets Bagel ( $n=1$ ; 2.0%), Jdate ( $n=1$ ; 2.0%), and Shaadi ( $n=1$ ; 2.0%). To obtain a sense of the quality of their relationships, participants completed Hendrick's (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale, a subset of Rusbult et al.'s (1998) Investment Model Scale, and Aron et al.'s (1992) Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale. Participants reported high relationship quality, with average scores of 4.74 ( $SD=0.33$ ) on a 5-point scale for satisfaction, 5.84 ( $SD=0.23$ ) on a 6-point scale for commitment, and 5.04 ( $SD=1.29$ ) on a 7-point scale for closeness.

### Data Collection

Data were collected using in-depth interviewing in order to achieve a rich description of the developmental process in online dating and its long-term effects on relationships. Interviews were conducted remotely over the phone and ranged from 25 minutes to 1 hour and 44 minutes in length ( $M=52.24$  minutes,  $SD=13.33$  minutes). Afterward, participants completed an online survey where they provided background and demographic information and digital artifacts of their relationships (e.g., emails, profiles). All participants were compensated for their time.

The interviews were semi-structured and modeled after Buehlman et al.'s (1992) Oral History Interview by inviting participants to reflect on their relationship from the first time they met their partner to their decision to marry.<sup>3</sup> Most major online dating platforms (e.g., Plenty Of Fish, OkCupid, Bumble) solicit user "success stories," and these questions were also reviewed for inclusion in the interview protocol. The protocol contained questions about participants' past online dating experiences and the history of their relationship, which were used to answer RQ1, as well as questions about their current relationship dynamics, which were used to answer RQ2. Participants were free to skip questions or discontinue at any time, and all consented to have their interviews recorded. The recordings were professionally transcribed and generated 901 pages of data for analysis ( $M=18.02$  pages,  $SD=4.14$  pages, range = 11–30 pages).

### Data Analysis and Verification

A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to code the interview data using NVivo 12 software. Data analysis was accomplished through a process of

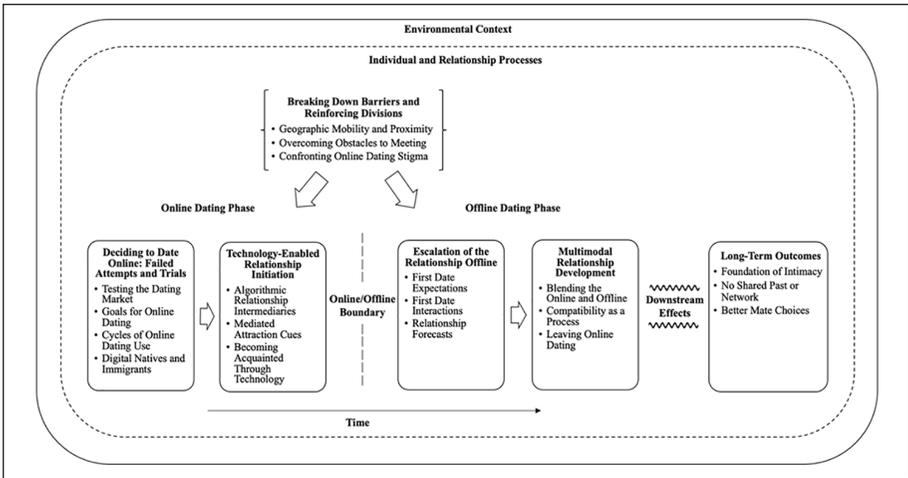
abduction that “constantly moves back and forth between data and pre-existing as well as developing knowledge or theories, and makes comparisons and interpretations in the search for patterns” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014, p. 162). First, *open coding*, guided by the research questions posed, was used to attach labels to the data and involved line by line reading and coding of the transcripts using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). As an example, codes such as “constant realization,” “not a light-switch moment,” and “accumulation of events” were used to describe the ways that participants talked about compatibility. During this phase of the analysis, a codebook was developed to organize the codes into clearly defined categories. Second, *axial coding* was used to explain the data by collapsing, expanding, and merging categories (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For instance, the previous codes were combined to explain “compatibility as a process.” Frequent and forceful responses were chosen as exemplars in this phase of analysis to illustrate each category. The data were also reviewed for inconsistencies with the emergent categorization system, and adjustments were made as needed to better reflect the complexity of the responses.

As a final step, *selective coding* (i.e., the process of integrating and refining theory) was used to relate the coding categories to each other by grouping them into higher-order categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I drew from Knapp’s (1978) model in this phase to explain how the categories fit together into several broad stages of relationship development. For example, categories that involved incorporating other channels into the relationship beyond the online dating platform (i.e., blending the online and offline, compatibility as a process, and leaving online dating) were subsumed under the umbrella of “multimodal relationship development.” The stages were organized chronologically into a theoretical framework for understanding the development of online dating relationships over time.

## Findings

The analysis was used to construct a stage model of relationship development in online dating and associated outcomes for marriage. The model (see Figure 1) conceptualizes online dating as a dynamic communication process shaped by individual experiences and interpersonal behaviors and nested within the broader environmental context surrounding the relationship. This is illustrated in RQ1 with four stages of relationship development characterized by 13 subcategories. The stages are organized along a trajectory beginning with the decision to use online dating and followed by a process of technology-enabled relationship initiation before eventually crossing the online/offline threshold and continuing down a path of multimodal relationship development. The online dating platforms also have a role to play in breaking down barriers and reinforcing divisions throughout the relationship development process. The effects of this progression are further captured in RQ2 with three categories representing the long-term outcomes of online dating for relationships.

All potentially identifiable information has been changed to protect participant privacy. Quotations have been lightly edited for spelling and grammar, and ellipses in



**Figure 1.** Stage model of relationship development in online dating.

*Note.* This figure illustrates the developmental course of online dating relationships from meeting online through engagement or marriage, beginning with participants' decision to date online and giving way to a process of technology-enabled relationship initiation, escalation of the relationship offline, and multimodal relationship development, while recognizing the role of these platforms in breaking down barriers and reinforcing divisions. Downstream of this process are long-term relationship outcomes.

brackets are used where content was shortened for length. Additional exemplars are in the Online Appendix.

### *Stages of Relationship Development (RQ1)*

*Deciding to date online: Failed attempts and trials.* The first stage of online dating centered around participants' decisions to date online and their failed attempts and trials with different platforms prior to meeting their partner. This stage was accomplished through four subcategories: (a) testing the dating market, (b) goals for online dating, (c) cycles of online dating use, and (d) digital natives and immigrants.

*Testing the dating market.* Participants used online dating to improve interpersonal skills by taking advantage of opportunities for *testing the dating market*. The large field of eligibles allowed participants to accumulate a wealth of dating experience in a short amount of time, with two participants estimating they had corresponded with as many as 100 people before choosing a partner. Participants also identified ways the guided communication systems (e.g., eHarmony) and match questions (e.g., OkCupid) these platforms provided served as "training wheels" for learning to date online. Vishal said that without the Internet: "I wouldn't have been able to guide myself into the situation that I'm in today." However, a few said that they relied too heavily on online dating and became dependent on these platforms. Kaitlin noted:

I didn't take opportunities that were in front of me because I was relying on the app [ . . . ] There were people that I was like, "Oh, I should ask her on a date," and then I'd be like, "No, no. I'm just going to swipe through and see if she's on Tinder. I'm too shy."

The experience of answering questions, filling in profiles, and engaging with others online also made participants more cognizant of what they were looking for in a potential partner and more intentional about the people they chose to date. For example, Isha commented: "I've learned a lot of things about myself. And, people that I want to be with. A lot, being online." Tanesha added:

It really helped me hone in on [ . . . ] Really figuring out what I wanted out of relationships, because I would have to think about that. Like, hmm, do I care about this or that? So, I'm actually putting thoughts to what I want out of a partner, and then basically saying, "Okay, I'm not even going to bother with somebody who doesn't meet these criteria."

These comments illustrate that while online dating gave people the experience to recognize what they wanted in a relationship, it also sometimes closed them off to other ways of meeting people.

*Goals for online dating.* These comments suggested that participants' decisions to date online involved considering their *goals for online dating*, which often changed over time. One reason that online dating may lead to successful relationships is that the individuals who use these platforms are highly motivated to marry, yet most participants said marriage was not their goal when they signed up. Mariam stressed: "I wasn't one of those kids who daydreamed about my wedding day, you know? That wasn't my goal." By the time they met their partner, more participants were open to a serious relationship, either because their motivations changed or because they met someone who made them consider marriage for the first time. Franklin said:

When I started online dating, I was not even really thinking of marriage. I just wanted to meet people and get to be able to have conversations again. I was lucky enough to meet Jennifer, who made me start thinking about marriage.

Some platforms prompt people to articulate their goals for online dating, yet these responses show how objectives are sometimes fluid and can evolve over time and with continued use.

*Cycles of online dating use.* In recounting their history with online dating, participants described taking part in *cycles of online dating use* that extended across time and platforms. This was evident in statements portraying online dating as a "download-and-delete" cycle composed of multiple episodes of use. For example, Kaitlin remarked that she would periodically suspend her account: "I would download the app and then delete it for a little while. Then I'd download it again and then I'd delete it for a little while." When prompted to explain her reasons for cycling on and off the

platform, she credited her frustration with online dating: “I would get really discouraged by how it was going and I would just be like, ‘You know what? I’m done with this. This is making me feel bad.’” Shreeya offered an alternative explanation for her intermittent use of online dating: “I would buy subscriptions that were three months or so [. . .] Once it ended, if I hadn’t really talked to anybody or anything I would just kind of be like, ‘Eh whatever. I’ll give it a break.’” Many participants also used multiple platforms simultaneously or sequentially. Fatema recalled: “I used Plenty of Fish, I used Match.com, I used Christian Mingle, and I used Black People Meet. Is that all of them? Yeah, those are all the ones I tried.” Ely described each platform like a virtual singles bar with its own crowd and culture: “You realize one has better matches [. . .] You change around what seems to be working.” These participants were not users of any one service; rather, they experimented based on their needs and goals for dating online.

*Digital natives and immigrants.* The experience of using online dating varied depending on participants’ statuses as *digital natives and immigrants*. Some members of the millennial and Z generations remembered growing up with social technologies and being accustomed to conducting their relationships online, which made it easy to segue to online dating when they were older. Poppi revealed: “It never scared me, since I was always talking to people in chat rooms when I was in high school [. . .] So when I wanted to look for someone to date, then that was just an option.” Others had used online dating since they were teenagers and insisted they rarely, if ever, met people offline. For these participants, online dating was their primary source of dating experience—online dating *was* dating in their minds. Franklin said: “Since my last relationship, which was in high school, Jennifer’s the only other person I’ve ever been with, and I met her online. So I really don’t have much experience of meeting people outside of Tinder.” When asked if he would be comfortable approaching someone for a date in person, he confessed: “I really don’t know, because I haven’t talked to anybody in person.”

In contrast were participants who had adopted online dating later in life and who had something to which to compare the experience. For example, Alicia explained that there was a learning curve to online dating: “I was also married eight years prior to all this, so it was all just a whole new game for me, this technology, and dating online.” Others said it was the experience of using other technologies that eventually led them to online dating, as noted by Tanesha:

I wasn’t really that comfortable with the idea of online dating at first. And so, I started at Craigslist because I was already on there doing other things [. . .] It just allowed me to ease into the idea of something like that, which was something that was really foreign.

These statements provide evidence of a cohort effect in online dating and show that even though these platforms are as old as the Internet, for many the process of meeting online is still new.

*Technology-enabled relationship initiation.* The second stage of online dating captured participants' processes of initiating a relationship with their current partner. This stage was fulfilled through three subcategories: (a) algorithmic relationship intermediaries, (b) mediated attraction cues, and (c) becoming acquainted through technology.

*Algorithmic relationship intermediaries.* During relationship initiation, online dating platforms served as *algorithmic relationship intermediaries*. These comments centered on the role of algorithms in shaping interpersonal dynamics and reducing cognitive load. Not all participants were aware of having been introduced by an algorithm, but on platforms that emphasized compatibility matching, algorithms served as important decision-making heuristics. Ely explained: "If you put two people together that were very similar in how attractive they were, I'd click on the one with the higher [match] percentage." Participants had a great deal of confidence in these algorithms, but this was not a blind trust. Joseph said: "If they'd only answered like four questions and we got 100% [compatibility], then I really didn't put much stock into it. Now, I remember she answered like 50 questions, and so I knew there was a lot of compatibility." As he noted, it was not about surrendering judgment to the platform entirely, but interpreting algorithmic feedback alongside his own evaluations of partners. Scarlet described basing some judgments on algorithms but determining her own threshold for compatibility:

I found that while I was initially really excited to meet up with guys who are like 90% or 92%, those were some of the worst dates I went on [. . .] Like 70% to 80% was really the sweet spot in terms of the people who I met who I liked, who liked me back.

Participants also suggested that providing feedback to the recommendation system (e.g., by answering questions) gave them a greater sense—or illusion—of control over the matching process. For instance, participants mentioned ways they were able to contribute to the algorithm, as Joel shared: "I feel like as I gave it more data, it was able to give me better individuals. But at the beginning, it might've just thrown everyone and the kitchen sink up." Others like Vishal gave explicit credit to the platform for recommending the partner they would eventually marry: "They did better than I did. I mean, they picked her. I didn't really find her. They found her." The choice of a long-term mate is arguably one of the most significant decisions most people will make, and these comments illustrate the power of algorithms to affect relationship trajectories.

*Mediated attraction cues.* *Mediated attraction cues* involved participants' descriptions of the elements of their partner's online self-presentation that they attended to when initiating the relationship. Participants noted a number of cues that drew them to their partner online, with most revolving around one central profile element: pictures. Participants prioritized their partner's profile pictures when gauging attraction, likely due in part to design features of the platform where they met. Many mobile dating apps emphasize pictures by limiting the amount people can write about themselves in their bios. Of course, that does not mean that participants disregarded their partner's self-

description entirely. Poppi attended to pictures alongside other cues, noting: “He was definitely cute. I mean, I am definitely attracted right off the bat to the way someone looks [ . . . ] If they had a profile that looked interesting, I would go for it.” The visual information in pictures also provided insight into experiential attributes that allowed participants to imagine what their partner would be like in person. For example, Shelly reflected on the intangible qualities she was able to gather from her partner’s pictures: “He just looked like he was nice and had fun.” Jadyn said her partner’s pictures: “Were not self-involved. It was not like, ‘Here’s me in a cutoff t-shirt and all my muscles showing.’ It was just like, ‘Here’s me with my dog’ and ‘Here’s me fishing.’ From the beginning, he seemed very genuine.” In this way, pictures were often influential in participants’ decisions to initiate a relationship.

*Becoming acquainted through technology.* These statements centered around participants’ accounts of how initiating a relationship in online dating meant *becoming acquainted through technology*. To open the lines of communication, some participants relied on platform-based features such as winks and likes that allowed them to signal interest and assess whether a conversational bid would be well-received. Most participants took advantage of the opportunity to get to know their partner by waiting an average of 28 days before meeting FtF. Some became acquainted entirely through online dating, often for safety reasons. Adriana said: “The first time I met him in person was the first time we’d even spoken. We had not even had a phone call.” Others described switching channels or seeking information on social media to confirm their partner’s identity. Elysha said: “I made him go on Facebook and download an entire album of pictures for me to look at. I was like, ‘I need to see 20 pictures of you,’ so I could feel like he was a real person.” Through technology, participants felt comfortable being open and vulnerable, as Mariam explained: “People can lie on social media or on dating platforms and whatnot, but I think they also are very authentic, maybe more open and authentic than they would be in person.” Participants also noted how online, they could solicit more intimate disclosures. Harper observed: “It was a little easier to ask questions about him, because in person sometimes it’s a little nerve wracking. You don’t want to ask; you don’t want to overstep.” The result was a level of intimacy that formed the foundation for further communication.

*Escalation of the relationship offline.* The third stage in online dating was marked by participants’ transitions of the relationship from online dating to meeting in person. This stage included three subcategories: (a) first date expectations, (b) first date interactions, and (c) relationship forecasts.

*First date expectations.* Many participants described how their *first date expectations* were met or exceeded after meeting their partner FtF. When it came time to meet in person, participants noted a high amount of anticipation surrounding the first date and whether their partner would be what they imagined when interacting online. Colette explained: “You can have a picture in your mind of what this person’s like, and you can kind of have an idea, but you don’t know if you’re just dreaming of that or if it’s fact.” Nearly all participants reported that their partner either met or surpassed

what they envisioned, like Shreeya who said: “He was even more good looking than I had imagined. He was as genuine as his messages were.” Although negative expectancy violations were not the norm, participants were tolerant of minor inconsistencies if they were already invested in the relationship, as Alicia admitted: “He was a little bigger than I thought he was, like so his pictures he posted were pre-gaining weight. But because I was so infatuated with what we’d already had, it wasn’t an issue.” Overall, most participants held reasonable expectations for the first date, which helped buffer them from disappointment.

*First date interactions.* *First date interactions* captured an important milestone in participants’ relationships as told through their stories of meeting their partner FtF for the first time. Some first dates were quick meet-and-greets to gauge chemistry, whereas others lasted hours or even days, especially when distance was involved. Some participants found that getting to know their partner online deepened their connection so that the first date felt less like an introduction and more like a continuation of the online relationship. This led to first dates that were sometimes exceedingly intimate, as explained by Jocelyn: “It was really weird. It was really strange. I remember we saw each other and then it was like, he kissed me before he even said anything.” Participants also described how the first date made the relationship feel more “real” and “tangible” and how they became more comfortable after confirming their partner was who they claimed to be online. For instance, Sierra said: “I think it just became real. Like I said, we had talked practically every minute for those 10 days. By the time I met him I already felt like I knew him. He felt the same way.” This points to the first date as a significant turning point in relationships and an experience shaped by the period of online dating that preceded it.

*Relationship forecasts.* Statements containing *relationship forecasts* were used to uncover participants’ predictions regarding the future of the relationship following the first date. During the interview, participants were asked to reflect back on the first date and to estimate the likelihood that they would eventually marry their partner. Although some participants knew right away the relationship was headed for marriage, over half of the sample was ambivalent about the future. Often this was due to circumstantial reasons that had little to do with their feelings for their partner. For instance, Katharine, who considered marriage improbable (2% chance), did not have marriage in mind: “I was still healing from a bad break up, I guess. And I just wasn’t totally ready to be in a serious relationship.” Colette, whose confidence in marriage was moderate (60%–75% chance), shared that much still remained unknown on the first date: “He met all my, ‘must have these things,’ but I wasn’t positive. Just kind of see what’s there. I knew those things could grow.” Thus, rather than using online dating to find a partner they were certain about from the beginning, participants were oriented to developing the relationship to marriage over time.

*Multimodal relationship development.* The final stage in online dating pertained to participants’ development of the relationship beyond the platform and movement toward

marriage. This stage included three subcategories: (a) blending the online and offline, (b) compatibility as a process, and (c) leaving online dating.

*Blending the online and offline.* The process of developing an online dating relationship toward marriage involved *blending the online and offline*. Once participants moved offline, the communication in their relationships became more interdependent, including their technology use. This meant that many of the norms for technology use that they established early in the relationship became a model for how they interacted with their partner moving forward. For example, Scarlet noted: “Our communication continues to be primarily electronic. We’ve set a precedent for that in our early dating.” As participants spent more time with their partner FtF, they indicated that their reliance on technology sometimes decreased but always continued. Evan recalled: “We would Snapchat a lot, like send pictures and stuff, and something we still do every day is we FaceTime [. . .] And we still send Snapchats every once in a while. We text a lot, too.” In sum, participants grew their relationships beyond online dating by integrating their mediated and FtF communication and incorporating additional channels into the relational repertoire.

*Compatibility as a process.* These responses described *compatibility as a process* occurring throughout relationship development and as participants came to know their partner better. Online dating often centers around facilitating introductions between people who the platform deems to be compatible. However, participants said that compatibility took time to judge, as Mariyah explained: “I needed to see his interaction with me, and how he treated other people, and just have consistent experiences with him over time.” Although there were some sudden epiphanies that their partner was “the one,” most framed compatibility as an emergent quality of their interactions and an accumulation of events. In describing what made them compatible with their partner, participants referenced qualities that included persistence, kindness, loyalty, and supportiveness, all of which would be difficult to discern prior to meeting. For example, Rico confided: “There were times where she could just tolerate when I’m struggling because I’m autistic and she helps me during my times of need.” In short, participants did not base their judgments of compatibility on superficial characteristics. Rather, they relied on qualities of the relationship that manifested over time and across repeated interactions.

*Leaving online dating.* At some point in relationship development, all participants had to make decisions about *leaving online dating* and terminating their accounts. These statements exposed a clear divide between participants who struggled with knowing when to quit and those who had no difficulty leaving for a relationship. Some participants referred to online dating as “addictive” and described receiving a “dopamine rush” from swiping. Lakeisha noted the indecision of not knowing if someone better was a swipe away: “I wanted to keep my options open to see. . . This guy that I met online seems like a great fit, but there was always this idea, ‘Could I find

somebody better? Will I find somebody better?” Yet most participants claimed that when it came to the partner they married, they were not tempted by their alternatives. For example, Bethany observed that when she found her future spouse, it was easy to narrow in: “Once I started talking to him, the other people just kind of faded into the background.” Naomi said her partner became a point of comparison: “I definitely kept looking, but the only difference was, this time I had a baseline to compare the new guy to, right? So, instead of, ‘Do I like you?’ it was, ‘Is he better than Jeff?’” It is, however, important to remember that these relationships led to marriage. Quitting may be more challenging for those who never reach this milestone.

*Breaking down barriers and reinforcing divisions.* Across the four stages, online dating enabled and at times constrained the relationship between participants and their partner. Participants described three ways these platforms broke down barriers to relationship development and reinforced divisions: (a) geographic mobility and proximity, (b) overcoming obstacles to meeting, and (c) confronting online dating stigma.

*Geographic mobility and proximity.* Statements referencing *geographic mobility and proximity* pointed to the diminished importance of proximity in online dating. This was apparent in how participants searched for a partner, often by setting their radii wide. Camilla said: “I did it out up to three hours away. I was okay with it being long distance because I was in a point in my life where I was okay with relocating if I needed to.” Some participants used distance as a strategy for increasing access to potential partners by expanding their search parameters and using location-based apps while traveling, which allowed them to carry conversations back home. Isha remarked: “In today’s day and age, I feel like it’s futile to just look for people around you. At least for me, it was kind of impossible to find what I was looking for around me.” As a result, distance was a part of the relationship for over half of the sample, who either started long distance or experienced extended periods of distance over the course of their development (e.g., due to school, career, or family obligations). This led some participants to relocate, like Elysha:

We were dating long distance for four or five months. Then he asked me to move in, and I was very skeptical to move in with him, especially because it was moving two hours away. I didn’t necessarily have a job, so I was putting all my eggs in one basket.

These comments illustrate how online dating removes barriers related to distance, making it possible to form relationships in the absence of proximity and across geographic boundaries.

*Overcoming obstacles to meeting.* *Overcoming obstacles to meeting* involved participants’ descriptions of the opportunities online dating presented for relationship development that were not available FtF. For many participants, the Internet was just another (potentially better) way to date and meet new people. However, those who did have difficulty meeting people offline said that online dating helped them overcome

perceived obstacles to approaching people. This was exemplified by Joleen, who disclosed: “It was easier for me because I’m a shy person and I really don’t know what to say to somebody if I don’t know them. It’s hard to talk to somebody you don’t know.” Because of the confidence participants gained online, some felt online dating provided options they did not have FtF. As Nate explained:

My mom, being a mom, always says, “Oh, you always have so much to offer someone.” But in reality, people always just. . . I’ve never been someone that girls just rush to. So I’m always just like, “Well, if someone likes me, I guess they like me, and I guess I’ll just have to settle.” But this time, I didn’t have to settle.

Comments such as these suggest that individuals who face barriers in traditional dating markets may particularly benefit from the use of online dating services.

*Confronting online dating stigma.* Statements emphasizing the need for *confronting online dating stigma* showed the challenges many participants encountered when deciding whether to share how they met with others. Although participants stressed that some of the stigma associated with online dating has faded, they were adamant it still existed. For instance, they described experiencing judgment and disapproval, as well as feeling their relationship was inferior. Safah revealed: “It still doesn’t get the same respect or oohs and awws as people who will be like, ‘I met my husband when I was in college, and we’ve been together ever since.’ It just seems like a lesser relationship.” Participants also indicated that the stigma attached to online dating has evolved to be platform-specific, with people making assumptions about their relationship based on the reputation of the platform where they met. For instance, Tinder is used for more than casual sex, yet “Tinder stigma” was widespread. Katharine commented:

I started Tinder and then my kids were making fun of me. They said, “Oh mom, that’s a hookup site. That’s not a dating site” [. . .] So, because they were laughing at me, then I found another site. But I actually met my husband from Tinder, believe it or not.

In response to this stigma, nearly a fifth of the sample confessed to misrepresenting how they met to their networks. For instance, Jocelyn devised a cover story to share with family:

I did not tell my parents that that’s how we met [. . .] I feel like there’s such a stigma around it, that hookup culture and, “Oh why were you on there? Were you just trying to hook up with guys?” That’s not what I was doing, but I didn’t want to have to defend it.

These societal beliefs about online dating contributed to artificial divisions between online and offline relationships. One way to help normalize these relationships is to avoid perpetuating stigmas by making assumptions about people’s motivations, particularly on mobile dating apps.

## Long-Term Outcomes (RQ2)

The downstream effects of online dating on participants' relationships yielded three outcomes: (a) foundation of intimacy, (b) no shared past or network, and (c) better mate choices.

*Foundation of intimacy.* These responses showed how online dating can have lasting effects on marriage by facilitating self-disclosure and encouraging participants to build their relationships from a *foundation of intimacy*. Holly shared how online dating prompted her to seek information: "We probably asked a few questions that we generally don't ask until 6 months in. If you're smart, you ask them long before you ever get married." Given that their relationships began entirely online, participants also observed that there were fewer physical distractions, which meant communication was all they had to rely on. Joseph said: "Nowadays I think people meet. They have sex and then they learn about each other, where we kind of had the opposite. We got to talk and have that month of just getting to know each other." This had noticeable effects as the relationship progressed, as Lakeisha recognized: "We have pretty good communication, but I think that was the tone we set from the jump. We spent a lot of time talking so we still spend a lot of time talking, even when it's uncomfortable." These comments show how online dating enabled participants to disclose intimately, which may have lasting implications in marriage.

*No shared past or network.* References to *no shared past or network* indicated that one outcome of online dating was meeting a stranger with whom participants lacked any history or social connections. In online dating, algorithms have replaced friends and family as relationship intermediaries, which means these platforms often introduce people to strangers who their networks may neither know nor approve of. The absence of a shared network initially gave participants the opportunity to form their own judgments, as Holly noted: "You're not meeting someone from a friend who already has preconceived notions. You're not getting someone else's opinion. You're forming your own opinion." However, the lack of connections posed problems if participants' networks were reluctant to accept their partner. Safah described these challenges in her own relationship:

If I had married somebody from my church, there would have been family connections. People would have known who he was [ . . . ] My family did not take to accepting him and probably doesn't really accept him still to this day. I just don't know if maybe I hadn't gone the online dating route, if it would have been easier.

As this participant noted, the fact that partners started out as strangers also meant that they had no common experiences to draw from – each person was a clean slate, so to speak. Sunny discussed the influence this had on development: "We had no mutual friends, no immediate mutual interests, and he was from a completely different state [ . . . ] We had to connect in other ways, like I said, value wise and personality wise

instead of experience wise.” Statements like these highlight that participants’ relationships began in isolation, which meant there was a continuous process of adapting to and learning about each other’s networks and histories.

**Better mate choices.** Statements involving *better mate choices* revealed the ways that online dating provided participants with more control when selecting a partner and entering into a relationship. Because online dating offers access to a larger pool of potential partners, people do not have to date out of circumstance, nor do they have to compromise their standards for a mate. This made participants more confident in their choice of a partner, as Naomi said: “I think it has made me more sure of our relationship, because I was able to directly compare him to other people and because I chose him instead of people who would have been easier to be with.” Participants also indicated that online dating pushed them to be more thoughtful and deliberate about their relationship. Adriana noted: “It forced me to slow down, to think more about it, to learn more about the person and all that before I became involved.” Thus, when contemplating a future spouse, online dating helped participants develop a relationship based on choice rather than chance circumstances.

## Discussion

Online dating has revolutionized relationships and upended centuries of tradition to become the primary way to meet a romantic partner in the United States (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Grounded in a relational stage approach (Knapp, 1978), this study proposed a stage model of relationship development in online dating using inductively-derived data from people who succeeded in identifying a spouse. The findings uncovered 4 stages and 13 subcategories characterizing the developmental trajectories of online dating relationships toward marriage, along with several specific ways platforms facilitate and impede development. Also apparent were three long-term effects of online dating on relationships. The results fill an important gap in what is known about the relationships to emerge from Internet dating and offer possible explanations for the role of online dating in shaping marital success (Cacioppo et al., 2013).

### *Implications for Theory and Research*

Findings from this study show that online dating relationships pass through four primary stages of development on the road to marriage. In the first stage, participants described *testing the dating market* and considering their *goals for online dating*, which revealed a wide range of motivations that did not necessarily involve commitment (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). Based on these results, a selection effect (see Cacioppo et al., 2013; Rosenfeld, 2017) may not be the most likely explanation for why online dating relationships are successful since not everyone was seeking marriage when they began using these platforms. Participants also experienced triumphs and frustrations that led to *cycles of online dating use*. Research has documented the negative effects of choice in online dating (D’Angelo & Toma, 2017; Pronk & Denissen, 2020), yet these findings point to situations where people may benefit from the

opportunity to get to know a variety of different partners across multiple platforms. Participants' approaches to online dating were shaped by whether they were *digital natives and immigrants* who adopted these platforms at an early age or who came to them later in life (Prensky, 2001). This highlights how dating and courtship have changed over time, with some members of younger generations indicating that most, if not all, of their significant relationships in adulthood started online.

The second stage of online dating required that participants use technology to initiate a relationship. Many participants recognized that online dating platforms served as *algorithmic relationship intermediaries* in introducing them to their partner. The trust participants placed in these algorithms may have also been a factor in their success given that online daters experience better outcomes when they are confident in the compatibility matching process (Sharabi, 2021). Yet despite accepting algorithmic input, participants still expressed a desire for control over their decisions (Tong et al., 2016). Consistent with a social shaping perspective (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999), they turned to algorithms for guidance but attached their own meaning to the feedback they received. Regardless of how participants were matched, profile pictures were by far the most common *mediated attraction cues* in online dating. Pictures were useful for judging physical appearances, but they also provided context for understanding who a person was offline. Participants further described how *becoming acquainted through technology* encouraged more uninhibited disclosure, which provided a foundation for success in the relationship (Suler, 2004).

After becoming acquainted with their partner, participants entered the third stage of online dating, where they began to transition offline. According to expectancy violations theory, positive outcomes may ensue when the reality of a partner's behavior exceeds expectations (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). In this study, participants' *first date expectations* indicated that the first date was successful when their partner met or surpassed their expectations, perhaps because they were less susceptible to the disappointment that often follows FtF meetings (Ramirez et al., 2015; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017). Considering that almost a quarter of the people who use online dating have never met anyone in person (Anderson et al., 2020), by the time participants decided to transition offline, their relationships had already progressed farther than many. When discussing their *first date interactions*, participants felt that the information they received from online dating benefited them by strengthening their connection to their partner (Rosenfield, 2017). Participants' *relationship forecasts*, however, suggested that they could not have foreseen that the relationship would lead to marriage. This supports Finkel et al.'s (2012) claim that it would be difficult for an online dating platform to predict long-term success without knowledge of the types of relational and environmental factors that will come into play after meeting.

The final stage in online dating entailed that participants develop their relationships beyond the platform, yet technology never ceased to be a part of their communication. Along with switching channels (Ramirez et al., 2015; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017), participants were also *blending the online and offline* (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013; Haythornthwaite, 2005). As their relationships grew, participants described *compatibility as a process* involving more than just superficial characteristics (e.g., physical attractiveness, socioeconomic status; Burgess & Wallin, 1953), which provides further

evidence of the challenge in predicting which two people will experience long-term success before they have had the opportunity to interact (Finkel et al., 2012). Decisions about *leaving online dating* and committing to just one person were also important in this final stage (see Sharabi & Timmermans, 2021). However, rather than being tempted by their options, many participants devalued or became inattentive to their alternatives as their relationship with their current partner progressed (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989).

Online dating platforms also had a role to play in supporting participants' relationships and challenging their development across stages. Nearly a century ago, marriages commonly occurred between people who lived in the same neighborhood (Bossard, 1932). Participants' references to *geographic mobility and proximity* demonstrate how the Internet has broken down barriers related to geographic distance so that propinquity is no longer central to relationship initiation (Baker, 2002). Online dating was also valuable for *overcoming obstacles to meeting* offline (e.g., shyness; McKenna et al., 2002). At the same time, these platforms reinforced divisions as evidenced by participants' reports of *confronting online dating stigma* and feeling that their relationships were inferior compared to others. Rather than fading over time, the stigma surrounding online dating has evolved to be platform specific, with some participants experiencing judgment for using so-called hookup apps to meet a partner (Wildermuth, 2004). Participants were often reluctant to disclose their use of these apps to family, but less guarded with friends. There can still be skepticism toward online dating, particularly among older generations who may have less experience with these platforms or who lack positive models of what successful Internet relationships look like (Bandura, 1977).

The downstream effects of this relationship development process could be seen in the ways that online dating positioned participants for long-term advantages as well as obstacles. Some participants described clearly benefiting from the strong *foundation of intimacy* that online dating provided, which often remained with the couple throughout the course of their relationship (Baker, 2002). Because online dating affords access to a larger pool of potential partners (Finkel et al., 2012), participants could be more selective and did not have to compromise on a mate as demonstrated by *better mate choices*. However, others alluded to the challenges these platforms presented, such as *no shared past or network* and the absence of a well-integrated social network (Sprecher, 2009). Most platforms are designed to introduce people to strangers, which is significant considering the critical role of network support to relationships (Felmlee, 2001). Future research on the outcomes of online dating would do well to consider the magnitude of these effects relative to other influential factors in a couple's history. Also worth considering are the broader societal changes that have created an environment where online dating can flourish and which may play a role in many of these outcomes (Coontz, 2005).

This study makes theoretical contributions to the literature on stage theories of relationship development by reexamining Knapp's (1978) model in light of the fact that most relationships today begin via Internet dating (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). This research also responds to calls to examine the development of relationships that begin online (Baker, 2002) by being among the first to illuminate the entirety of the online dating process from courtship to marriage. The results reflect some parts of Knapp's

model but also show how technology is changing the ways relationships progress. The *initiating* and *experimenting* stages of development now occur entirely online, with online dating replacing FtF contact as the primary means of relationship initiation. The communication constituting these stages is also different and begins prior to any direction interaction, with people assessing attraction using profiles and relying on the judgment of algorithms to make decisions about partners (LeFebvre, 2018). The *intensifying*, *integrating*, and *bonding* stages of Knapp's model unfold more similarly in online dating, yet people must also contend with channel switching and blending as their relationships grow closer and more interdependent. Knapp's model is also limited to explaining internal communication dynamics, whereas the results of this study demonstrate how external factors (e.g., network support and geographic distance) are also implicated in the development of online dating relationships.

### *Practical Implications for Online Dating*

There are also practical implications of these findings for online dating users and platforms. Divorce rates have been declining since the 1980s, yet some scholars still estimate that as many as 40% to 50% of marriages fail (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010). Online dating is linked to more stable and satisfying marriages (Cacioppo et al., 2013), but until now the process through which this happens had not been fully explored. Knowing the path that successful online dating relationships follow toward marriage may benefit users by offering a roadmap to help guide them into a long-term relationship. For example, the first two stages of the model proposed in this study suggest that people should be prepared for how long it can take to find a long-term partner using online dating, while the last two stages indicate that they should not expect to know if someone is "the one" immediately after meeting FtF. Designers and others in the industry may want to use these results to better support the long-term development of relationships both on and offline. Additionally, the views of compatibility that participants expressed in this study may have value for improving how online dating platforms approach the matching process.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

As with any study, there were limitations. Because participants were asked to recall the history of their relationship, there is the possibility of retrospective bias that would need to be addressed with longitudinal research. It is also important to recognize that this study shed light on the success stories and instances where online dating worked well. Although much can be learned from these successes, research should also look carefully at the experiences of people whose relationships failed and who never left online dating or gave up without meeting anyone. Additionally, online dating has expanded considerably in recent years (Rosenfeld et al., 2019), meaning many participants were newly married or still engaged. Given evidence that satisfaction begins to decline for some couples after marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 2020), the recency of these relationships should be taken into account when drawing conclusions about

online dating's long-term effects. Finally, despite recruiting widely, the sample lacked racial diversity and was largely heterosexual. Race can affect online dating in many ways, from which platforms people use to their experiences confronting harassment and discrimination. Scholars should also take care to ensure that LGBTQ+ populations are included in online dating research, especially since they are among the most common users of such platforms (Anderson et al., 2020).

The results of this study point to several directions for future research. First, the proposed model could be used to compare online dating relationships that are successful to those that are not to determine when and how their trajectories begin to diverge. Second, the long-term outcomes of online dating presented here may account for differences in marital success between couples who meet on and offline. For instance, the foundation of intimacy created by online dating may explain why couples who meet online report more satisfaction and stability in their marriages relative to offline couples (Cacioppo et al., 2013). Finally, researchers could use the stages and subcategories in this model to design a quantitative relationship stage measure for online dating similar to Welch and Rubin's (2002) Relationship Stage Index. Such a measure would be valuable for quickly assessing where a couple is in the developmental trajectory independent of intimacy, which can sometimes be exaggerated online (Antheunis et al., 2020).

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the trajectories of online dating relationships and couples' movement toward marriage. The results demonstrate the enduring effect of online dating by giving voice to the successes. In Damon's words: "I never had the opportunity to express what online dating did for me [ . . . ] I do this when I buy things from Amazon, I leave a review, but for online dating I never did a review." As online dating continues to displace traditional ways of meeting, more work will be needed to understand its implications for offline relationships.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. Participants were referred to the study by social media posts and sharing ( $n=19$ ; 38.0%), electronic campus announcements ( $n=17$ ; 34.0%), friends and family members ( $n=12$ ; 24.0%), and flyers displayed in targeted locations (e.g., restaurants, wedding venues, dress and tuxedo shops) throughout the community ( $n=2$ ; 4.0%).
2. All data collection procedures received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.
3. All interview materials are available on the Open Science Framework.

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