

Examining the Success of Technology Impacted Relationships

Albert Xu

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

## Introduction

It's no secret that technology is growing at an accelerated rate. Humans everywhere around the world operate radically differently from even 10 or 20 years ago. In every aspect of our lives, technology has forced us to adjust the way we act and think. It's rare to find anything untouched by technology: agriculture, finance, entertainment, and travel are all fields that are integral to human life, and are massively influenced by technological advances.

However, early adoption of new technologies may be a double-edged sword. Without understanding the risks or side effects associated with the emerging technologies comes with critical costs to both societies and individuals — sometimes costs that can be avoided or bypassed with safeguards in place.

In the recent decade, smartphones and other internet use have massively impacted society, perhaps even in ways we don't yet understand. With social media and modern networking, we're forced to rethink how we approach our relationships with family, friends, coworkers, and even love.

Suddenly, keeping in touch is much more feasible for cross-state, or even cross-country relationships. The option to reach out to someone, or even *anyone*, becomes much more realistic. Constant, immediate feedback is readily available for anyone, from anyone. In particular, I believe the option for long distance relationships has become much more viable in the past 10 years.

This article will focus on examining how effective romantic relationships are different with the introduction of modern technology. Are long distance relationships less effective than normal relationships? Are couples more likely to *grow apart* in long distance relationships? Is

online dating only for “weird people”? In this essay, I aim to explore the effectiveness of relationships that are impacted by technology. I believe that relationships can be enhanced, and even made possible by digital communications and technology. I will approach this by examining long distance relationships, and aspects of online dating.

### **Examining Quality of Long Distance Relationships**

To understand how people communicate over long distances in the modern world, I propose that we first understand if empathy, or how people understand each other, is diminished significantly over long distances, if at all.

#### **Sherry Turkle: *Reclaiming Conversation***

Sherry Turkle, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, is the champion of urging individuals to be cautious of changes in technology, particularly when it transforms the way we interact with each other. In her book, *Reclaiming Conversation*, Turkle pulls from a wide range of studies and anecdotal evidence, making a strong case that smartphones and social media otherwise have a large, potentially negative influence on human interaction. Turkle makes a strong case that teenagers, or even adults, are unable to separate themselves from their phones, creating an over reliance on technology. This over reliance extends into our personal lives, creating gaps in our skills or aptitude for conversing with our peers.

I am not denying that our ability to interact with other individuals in real life could be hindered by the advent of technology; Turkle makes many compelling arguments that the technology we have available today is inhibiting some of our existing methods of bonding and

communicating with others. However, I believe that long distance relationships operate with different expectations.

So called “real-life” relationships operate face to face, in person. Long distance relationships, whether it be completely online or a conversion (in person relationship converted to a long distance relationship), rely on a different set of skills and empathetic responses. While empathy and social interaction in a traditional sense may have seen an overall decline in the past two decades as a result of emerging technologies and methods of instant communication, long distance relationships could potentially even benefit from modern interfaces. I argue that empathy over long distances is greatly improved with modern communication devices.

### **Online Takeover**

A study from 2006 suggests that individuals are losing their closer relationships in exchange for weaker ones. “... computer technology may foster a wider, less-localized array of weak ties, rather than the strong, tightly interconnected confidant ties” (McPherson, Lynn, & Brashers, 2006, pp. 373). In fact, the younger generation, particularly Generation Z, could be becoming more reliant on their online status than ever before. A study by Wikia examined users of ages between 13 to 18. The study revealed that all 100% of users are connected for more than 1 hour a day, but 46% of users are connected more than 10 hours per day (Wikia, 2018). It seems that the current trend is that individuals, particularly young teens and adults, are favoring wider, online based relationships, rather than close knit, geographically based relationships. In addition, it seems that individuals can suffer from self esteem issues, rooted in their use of social media (Pea, 2012). Looking outwards to our peers becomes frighteningly easy when social media puts an idealized version of ourselves on full display.

However, trading in person presence for online presence may be counterintuitively healthy for romantic relationships. In fact, over-idealization through interacting with others online may actually benefit long distance relationships. “One would think that individuals in long-distance relationships would be less satisfied — if not with their relationship in general, then at least with their communication. Yet the individuals in this study report being more satisfied with their relationships than were geographically close individuals” (Stafford & Reske, 1990, pp. 277). Individuals in long distance relationships seem to appreciate their significant others more, resulting in a better satisfaction rating. While “individuals in long-distance relationships reported less interaction overall” (Stafford & Reske, 1990, pp. 277), it appears that that the lack of frequent, in person communication can serve to improve the quality of the relationship. Stafford and Reske (1990) suggest that the restriction of communication can develop positive relational images, providing a basis for premarital relationship longevity.

### **Measuring Quality of Long Distance Relationships.**

Indeed, it seems at least romantic long distance relationships do not require frequent in person contact. In fact, long distance relationships seem to perform just as well, if not better, than in person relationships. According to Guldner and Swensen (1995), “individuals in LDRs report levels of relationship satisfaction, intimacy, trust and commitment that are identical to those reported by individuals in PRs, despite seeing one another on average only once every 23 days” (pp. 318). While couples that spend a lot of time together may develop a better relationship, the amount of time spent together is not the sole factor that determines the quality of the relationship (Guldner & Swensen, 1995). I do not mean to imply that long distance relationships are a viable

avenue for everyone. However, it seems to be that long distance relationships do not always suffer from stereotypical problems, like lack of intimacy or communication.

### **Reliance on Online Communications.**

According to Hampton, Rawlings, Tregar, and Sprecher, “In LDRs, it is possible that forms of communication such as text messaging, and especially video communication, can serve as viable social snacks and facilitate closeness and satisfaction between the two members of a romantic couple... A person may feel socially full after either a text message or a video conversation” (2018, pp. 182-183). Long distance relationships exist because we have methods of communicating. And, with new developments in communication technologies in the recent several decades, communicating with our significant others is easier than ever. It’s undeniable that long distance relationships are becoming more and more viable, even to individuals who may be traditionally opposed to long distance relationships. Synchronous communication, like video calling and phone calls, allows for bonding that is comparable to in person interactions, and can foster a feeling of shared space (Janning, Gao, & Snyder, 2018).

### **Quality of Online Relationships: the Verdict**

I propose that online relationships can, in fact, be as rewarding as in person relationships. As society adapts to technology and modern methods of communications, we could be seeing a loss of empathy in individuals.<sup>1</sup> However, long distance relationships both seemingly benefit from the lack of communication by idealizing partners, and benefit from more means of communication by feeding into intimate social needs. It seems that long distance and separation can serve to improve a relationship, and online activity can further bring partners closer together.

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<sup>1</sup> This may not even be true: empathy in society may not even be declining as a result of technology (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Nevertheless, long distance relationships don’t seem to be significantly impacted by this supposed trend.

### **Online Dating**

Online dating is something that is relatively new, with the first sites like Kiss.com or Match.com becoming available in 1994 and 1995, respectively. Since then, online dating use has skyrocketed. In a survey from 2017, Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen found that about 39% of heterosexual couples reported meeting their partner online, from 22% in 2009 (2019). “People trust the new dating technology more and more, and the stigma of meeting online seems to have worn off” (Stanford University, 2019). While the number 1 way for individuals to meet new partners is still through friends and existing connections, online dating has risen to become the number 2 way for couples to meet (Pov, 2013). Online dating has become the primary way to displace traditional modes of meeting (Rosenfeld et al., 2019).

Online dating is clearly popular, and is trending upward. But let’s examine the bottom line: is online dating successful?

### **Online Misrepresentation**

One of the problems associated with online dating is the difficulty of discerning what is true and false. Like mentioned before, idealizing our partners could be beneficial to long distance relationships. However, honest representations of the self online may have a detrimental effect (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino 2006). People that are less honest online may have more to gain, because they reveal less about their unfavorable selves. In other words, they are probably not revealing as many flaws or negative characteristics about themselves, which would make them appear more desirable (Gibbs, et al., 2006).

In fact, some individuals “may be outright lying about characteristics such as age, weight and physical appearance, or income” (Gibbs et al., 2006, pp. 169). While 94% of individuals

deny that they intentionally misrepresented themselves, many believed that other online users were untruthful about their appearance, relationship goals, age, income, and marital status (Gibbs et al., 2006). “Online daters often regret it when they do tell the truth, feeling that too much honesty, especially about negative attributes, creates a bad impression” (Epstein, 2007, pp. 31). Practically, men will lie about income, and women will lie about age, simply for the chance to gain more following, or raise the chances of potential partners responding.

Then again, it may be that the online dating landscape still needs to develop and mature. Gibbs (2006) concludes that “more positive and intentional self-presentation in online dating leads to greater perceptions of self-presentation success” (pp. 171). Honest individuals are rewarded for being... well, honest. They form better, potentially more permanent bonds with their partners. I want to highlight Amy Webb, a user who “hacked” online dating by using statistical analysis and trial-and-error to produce fantastic online dating results that she was very satisfied with, without misrepresenting herself at all. Webb showed that it was possible to put your best foot forward on an online dating profile, and still receive a viable amount of attention. Ultimately, it’s up to society to decide how much it values honesty in the online dating environment.

### **Matching and Suggestion Algorithms**

One of the crucial factors and main appeals of online dating is its proactive matching algorithms. While most all applications like Tinder and Bumble give users the freedom and decision to match with other users, the applications have inherent matching algorithms to determine which users to show in the first place.

However, dating applications can be deceptive and ingenuous. For example, Tinder suggests matches with other users based on an elo score by ranking each person's desirability. "Every time you swipe right on one person and left on another, you're fundamentally saying, 'This person is more desirable than this other person'" (Carr, 2017). Tinder isn't alone in terms of ranking users: other platforms like Airbnb, Lyft, or Uber also ranks users, then decides how to treat them. And, the ranking may not be immediately intuitive, if at all. Sometimes, algorithms are built for user engagement, rather than user satisfaction.

Unsurprisingly, I was unable to find good research on how exactly each dating application's dating algorithm worked — after all, these algorithms are closely guarded industry secrets. But the sheer amount of choice for different dating applications provides users the flexibility of choice. Whether it be from Tinder and Grindr, OkCupid and eHarmony, or Hinge and Coffee Meets Bagel, the options suggest that there's something out there for everyone. In the end, with so many competing applications, it's up to the user to put in the effort.

### **The Success of Online Dating**

I want to preface this section by stating that "success" in a relationship comes in many forms, which makes it hard to objectively measure. However, we can still perform analysis on statistics of how online dating users *perceive* the success of their relationship. According to Toma (2015), couples that met online were less likely to end in divorce over a 7 year period. In fact, "online couples reported greater marital satisfaction" (Toma, 2015, pp. 3). Impressively, this holds true even when accounting for age, length of relationship, ethnicity, education, and income, suggesting that online dating could have wide benefits for users of all backgrounds.

“One possibility... is that the increased availability of potential partners enables individuals to make better choices for romantic partners, eventually leading to more successful unions” (Toma, 2015, pp. 4). Toma suggests that the abundance of choice in the online dating world allows users to extend their reach, making it easier to hunt for the pearl in the ocean.

While there still exists many problems within online dating, users that find partners seem to think that online dating is a positive experience. In fact, users “tend to thank the technology that mediated the introduction to their partner” (Mascaro, Magee, & Goggins, 2012, pp.7). Even despite stigma<sup>2</sup>, users seem to pursue online dating as a new avenue for meeting potential partners, because technology makes it readily available and easy to access. “The importance of a romantic partner leads people to start to use a technology, which indicates that people will work with a new technology when motivated” (Mascaro et al, 2012, pp. 7). Online dating continues to enjoy widespread success from multiple angles, like finding satisfying matches, keeping partners together, and creating new opportunities for single users.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Let me preface the conclusion by saying that in no way is this research complete or conclusive. There remains to be more research and studies to really examine the success of how technology impacts relationships. This paper only tackles the surface of two aspects of how technology can impact relationships: long distance relationships and online dating.

While some individuals may prefer frequent intimate, in person contact with their significant others, other individuals may find better success in long distance relationships, due to idealizations of their partner or other reasons. As technology develops, we increase our modes of

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<sup>2</sup> One user was reluctant to start online dating because there was a stigma associated with it: “At the time I started online I was really skeptical about the result I was going to get. I actually didn't like telling people that I was dating online because I thought only weird people met online” (Mascaro et al., 2012, pp.7).

communication, making more long distance relationships possible than ever. Online dating has also seen a rise in popularity, and does not seem to have any additional drawbacks on top of traditional dating. In fact, online couples can feel happier and more satisfied with their partners. Online dating also opens up the opportunity for individuals to network beyond their original capacity, enabling them to find additional new partners, which would otherwise not be possible.

Overall, technology seems to have a positive impact on the scene of dating and relationships. Given my research into studies ranging from 1990 to 2018, it seems that technology assisted dating is increasing. And that's a good thing.

### **Further Considerations**

There were some aspects of technology based dating that I was unable to research due to my time constraints.

#### **Catfishing.**

Catfishing, believed to be coined by the documentary *Catfish*, is a term used to describe the act of creating a fake identity and luring someone into a relationship online. Catfishing is taking the aforementioned online dating misrepresentation to the extreme, often for scamming purposes. Notable films that involve catfishing in the main plotline include the 2010 documentary *Catfish* and 2018 thriller film *Searching*. Catfishing can serve to deter potential users from online dating, or even frustrate existing users from returning to their online dating service.

**Hookup Culture.**

Hookup culture, propagated by apps like Tinder, are commonplace. I did not look into whether hookup culture serves to decrease or increase the satisfaction users obtain from online dating.

**Preference and Bias.**

I went over this briefly in the section on **Online Misrepresentation**, but this topic is wider and more prevalent than I do it justice. Men and women have many different preferences, and could result in some unhealthy selection. For example, “women have a stronger preference than men for income over physical attributes” (Hitsch, Hortacsu, & Ariely, 2007, pp. 393). Such preferences can be toxic, and can be perceived as shallow or inorganic.

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