



Dating Safety and Victimization in Traditional and Online Relationships

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The technological landscape of society is changing at an extremely rapid pace (Sautter et al., 2010), with an estimated 80% of Americans having access to the internet either at home or at work in October 2010 (Strickling & Gomez, 2011). The availability and use of online dating websites has also grown exponentially during that period of time (Finkel et al., 2012), and societal perceptions of online dating have changed dramatically. During the 1990s, online dating was seen as an extremely deceptive and ineffective enterprise (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Since then, however, online dating has become much more mainstream.

While online dating has become relatively common, a large portion of Americans do not believe that the practice itself is safe (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Using an online dating site, like any other form of social networking, requires users to put personal information about themselves on the internet. Beyond traditional concerns regarding the protection of internet users' personal information, the safety of dating websites is additionally in question due to the relative ease with which users are able to deceive potential partners (Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Toma et al., 2008). The pervasiveness of deception in online dating has become somewhat of a cultural phenomenon, spawning both movies and an entire television series ("Catfish" on MTV) dedicated to deciphering whether online partners are representing themselves accurately.

There is currently an emerging body of empirical literature regarding online dating; however most of this research overlooks differences in victimization evident between this type of social interaction and its traditional counterpart (Jerin & Dolinsky, 2001). This report presents results of a study designed to investi-

gate questions of safety and victimization experiences related to online dating versus more traditional forms of dating.

Sample

Data were gathered from a total of 811 college students. The age of respondents ranged from 19 to 59, with nearly two-thirds being under the age of 23. Most respondents (72.3%) were female. Nearly two-thirds of respondents identified themselves as White, about 19% identified as Hispanic, 13% as African-American, 2% as Asian, and less than 1% as Native American.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents

Age	22.94 (19 - 59)
Gender	
Female	72.3%
Male	27.7%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	63.7%
Hispanic	18.6%
African-American	13.0%
Asian	1.9%
Native American	0.5%
Other/Multi-Racial	2.3%
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	91.3%
Homosexual	3.6%
Bisexual/Unsure	5.2%
Current Relationship Status	
Not in a Relationship	42.1%
Long-Term, Monogamous	25.2%
Engaged/Married	11.4%
Casual/Serious Dating	17.7%
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	2.2%
Other	1.5%
Previous Sexual Partners	3.77 (0 - 10)

More than 90% of respondents were heterosexual. While 42% were not currently dating anyone, 25% of respondents reported being in a long-term, monogamous relationship, and 11.4% were engaged or married. The self-reported number of previous sexual partners ranged from 0 to 10. About half of the respondents reported fewer than 3 sexual partners, and the average was 3.77.

Methods of Meeting People

Nearly 40% of respondents reported that they have used the internet to meet people for the purpose of developing some sort of relationship, including a friendship, casual or serious dating relationship, or a sexual relationship. Nearly three-quarters of respondents have used traditional methods (e.g., going to bars/clubs or social functions) to meet new people for the purpose of developing a relationship. When broken down by gender, males are more likely than females to report having used the internet to find a relationship (44.9% of males and 37.0% of females). On the other hand, male and female respondents were equally likely to report using traditional methods of meeting people (over 73% of men, and over 72% of women).

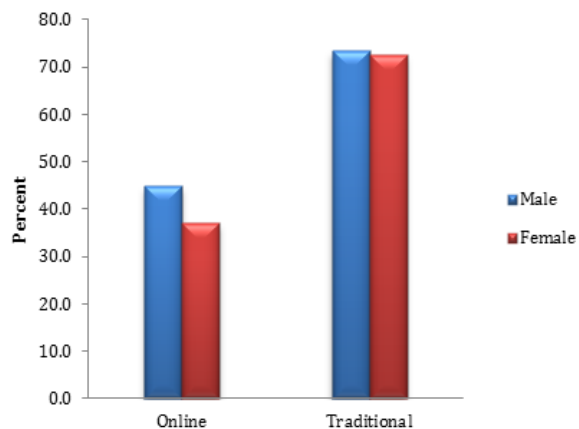


Figure 1: Methods of Meeting People by Gender

Of those who had met people over the internet, Facebook was overwhelmingly the number one Social Networking Site (SNS) people used, with nearly 70% of respondents who reported meeting someone online using Facebook. Figure 2 shows other popular SNS, which include eHarmony (used by 22 people), Match.com (used by 21 people), and Plenty of Fish (used by 21 people).

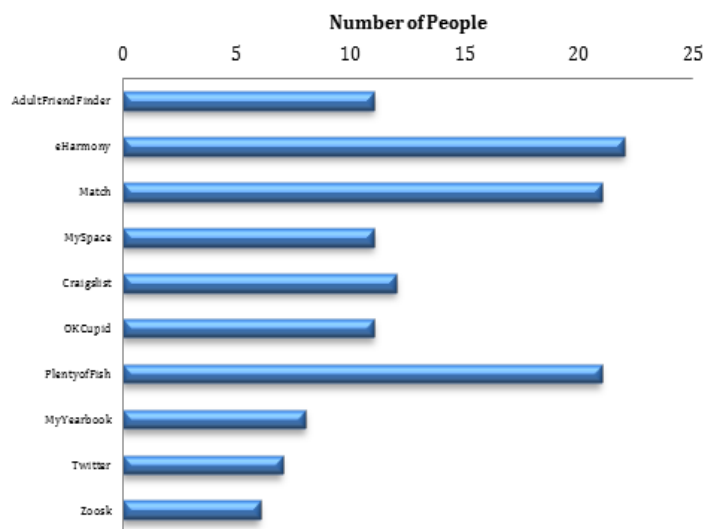


Figure 2: Popular Social Networking Sites Used to Meet People

Figure 3 shows the most common places for students to meet new people using traditional methods for relationships. Unsurprisingly for this population of college students, school was the most popular place to meet new people, as almost 60% of respondents met potential relationship partners there. Other common places included meeting people through friends, at parties, at work, and at bars/clubs.

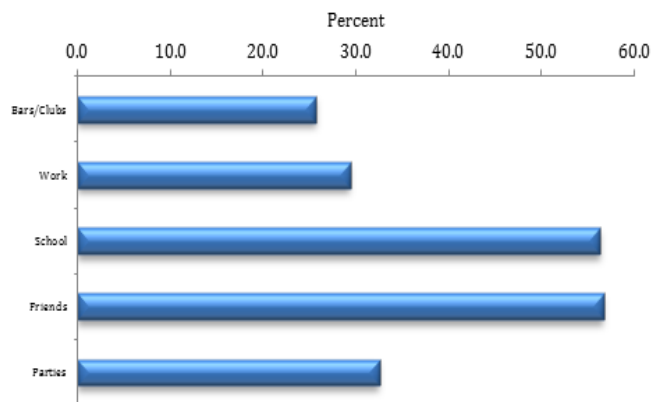


Figure 3: Popular Places to Meet People in Traditional Dating

Very few differences emerged between those who use traditional dating methods and those who use online methods of meeting people. Figure 4 shows that similar percentages of each group were female, White, and heterosexual. Additionally, a similar proportion of each group reported being either married/engaged or in a long-term, monogamous relationship.

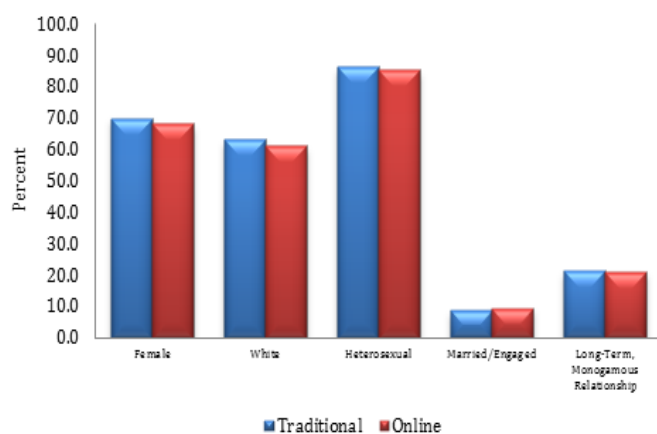


Figure 4: Timing Before Meeting Someone in Person

Dating and Online Safety

Meeting Someone New in Person – Timing and Location

Relationships that begin online might eventually involve face-to-face meetings. When asked about meeting someone in person, most of those who had used the internet in this way reported wanting to wait at least two weeks (31.3%) or at least one month (35.6%) before meeting in person. Less than 5 percent wanted to meet in person immediately. Interestingly, over 25% of those who use the internet to develop relationships indicated that they never wanted to meet someone in person.

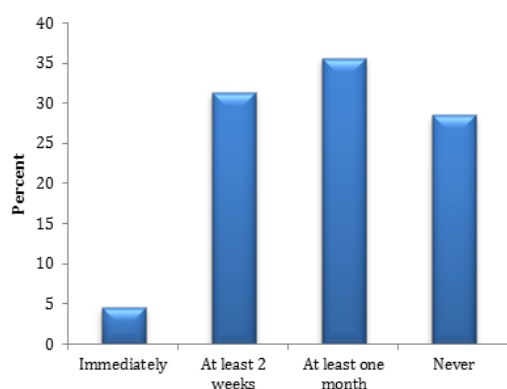


Figure 5: Timing Before Meeting Someone in Person

First dates in new relationships can take place in many locations. As demonstrated in Figure 6, those who initiated relationships over the internet prefer to meet someone in person for the first time in a public location, such as a restaurant (33.2%) or coffee

shop (42.5%). Nearly 10 percent would meet someone in a bar or club, but very few would agree to a first meeting in a private location. Slightly more than 11% of respondents indicated “other” locations, which included general statements that they would only meet in very public places or with friends or other people around. Among those who have met people through traditional methods, a greater percentage report restaurants as a preferred location for a first date or meeting as compared to those who meet online. Fewer report having their first date at coffee shops or bars/clubs.

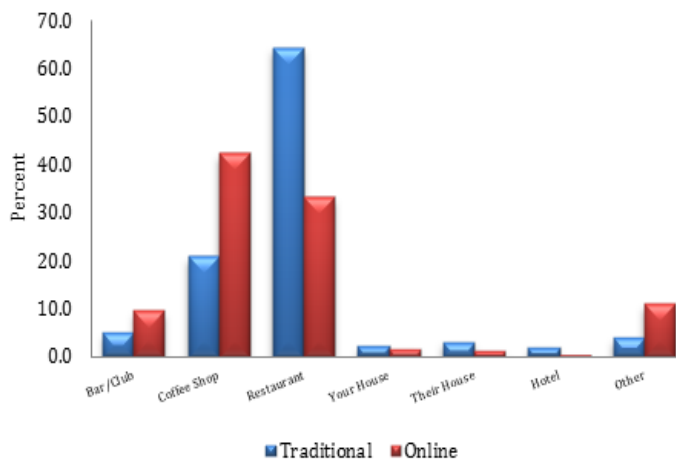


Figure 6: Location of First Date/Meeting

Sharing Personal Information

When asked how long students prefer to know someone before feeling comfortable enough to give out personal information, such as a telephone number, the responses varied depending on how the relationship had begun (see Figure 7). Among those who had met in traditional ways, over fourteen percent of students gave out their personal information immediately. Twenty-seven percent knew the person less than a week, while a majority waited between one to two weeks (31.5%). In contrast, individuals who met potential partners online preferred to wait longer. Just over eight percent of students who met someone on the internet gave out their personal information immediately, while a majority of the students (23.2%) gave out their information after communicating with the individual for three to four weeks, and almost seventeen percent waited more than a month. Over twenty-two percent of those who had met someone online never gave out their personal information.

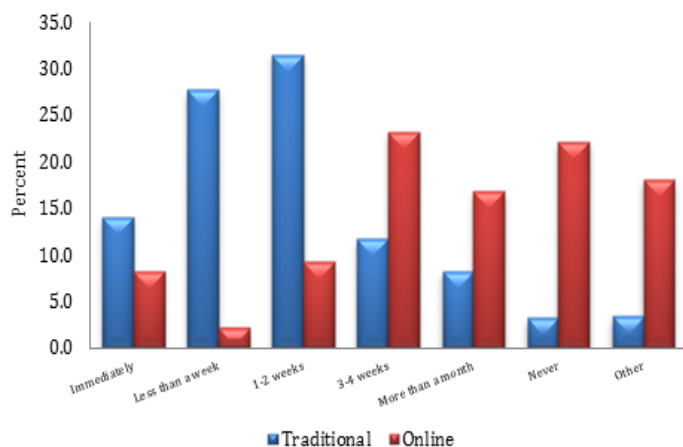


Figure 7: Sharing Personal Information

Perceptions of Truthfulness

Unlike the internet, which allows users a fair amount of anonymity, truthful encounters through traditional means may be more common. Respondents were questioned about how confident they were that the people they were meeting were being truthful. Figure 8 shows that respondents were more confident in the truthfulness of the other person when meeting people through traditional methods as opposed to online communication. While only 8.2 percent of those in the traditional dating group were always confident about their partner being truthful, the large majority (78.5%) believed their partner was being truthful most of the time. Less than fifteen percent of those respondents believed the other person was “not usually” or “never” being truthful. In contrast, students who had met potential dating partners online were less likely to feel that the other person was being truthful “always” (2.5%) or “most of the time” (47.8%). A much larger percent reported that the other person was “not usually” or “never” being truthful.



Figure 8: Confidence in Truthful Communication

Safety Precautions for Communication

What may be most important when using social networking sites for developing relationships are the safety precautions individuals take to protect themselves. Figure 9 shows some of the most common online dating safety precautions for online communication. The most popular safety precaution is to be aware of red flags (reported by 27.9%). Other common precautions include never discussing financial information (reported by 23.9%), never revealing personal information on a profile (21.4%), and never discussing specific locations (19.2%). Eleven people (1.3%) admitted to never using any safety precautions.

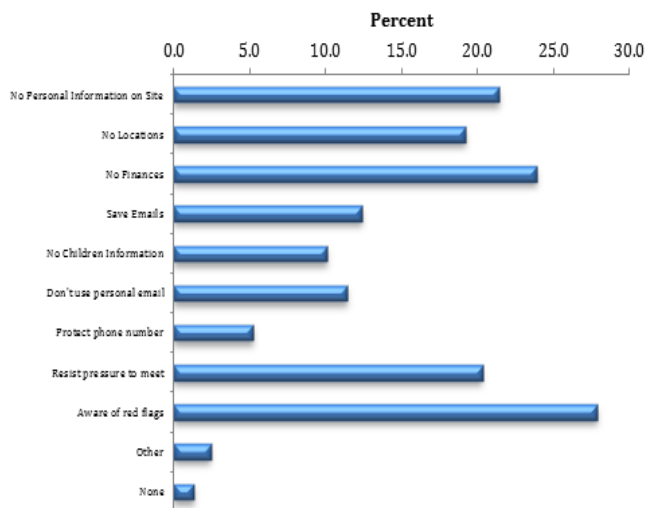


Figure 9: Safety Precautions for Communication

Although it receives less attention, it is important that individuals in more traditional relationships consider safety issues as well. Figure 10 shows some of the most common dating safety precautions for traditional methods. Similar to those who met online, the most popular safety precaution is to be aware of red flags (reported by 49.7%). Other common precautions include never discussing financial information (44.3%), never revealing personal information (32.7%), and looking for discrepancies in information (32.6%). Twelve people (2.2%) admitted to never using any safety precautions.

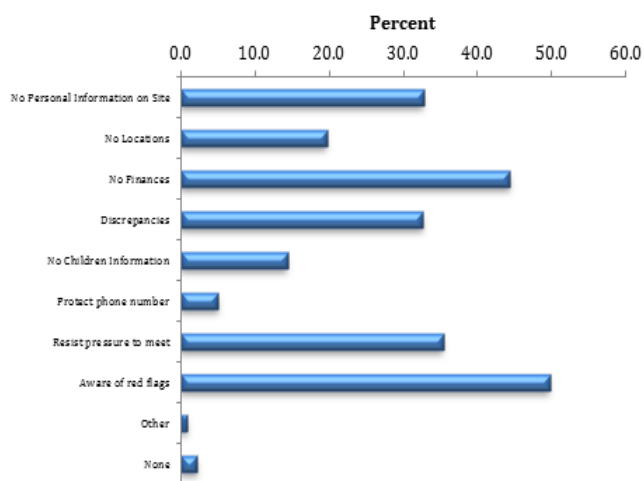


Figure 10: Safety Precautions for Communication

Safety Precautions for Meeting

Figure 11 shows various safety precautions taken by individuals when meeting someone in person or on a date for the first time. For those meeting people through traditional methods, the most common safety precaution for first meetings/dates was having a fully charged cell phone (reported by 47.9%). Other commonly reported precautions included sharing plans with a friend (45.8%), providing their own transportation (45.1%), and meeting in a public place (43.1%). Similarly, for those who had met someone online, the most common safety precautions taken for meeting in person were meeting in a public place (reported by 25.3%), having a fully charged cell phone (reported by 23.7%), providing their own transportation to the meeting place (23.4%), and sharing their plans with friends (21.0%). While the types of precautions are similar, those who meet online appear less likely to use those precautions overall.

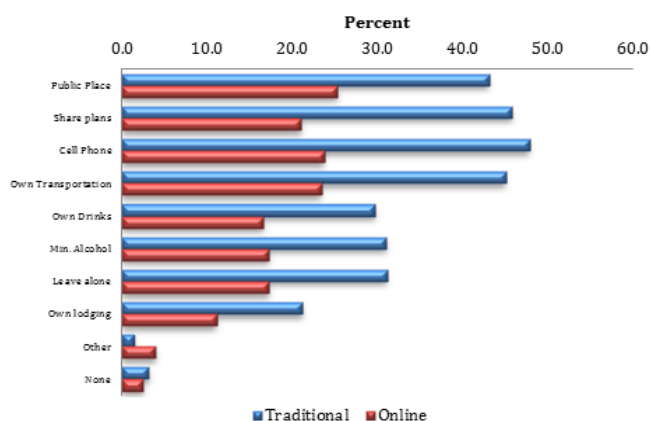


Figure 11: Safety Precautions for Meeting in Person

Information about Safety Precautions

Figure 12 shows various ways that individuals may have learned of dating safety. Among those who use traditional methods, information about safety was most likely to come from family (37.5%), friends (32.8%), or observing others (31.7%). About 10 percent reported that they had never learned about dating safety. In contrast, while the sources for learning about online dating safety are similar, fewer individuals report each of the sources. Among those who meet people using online methods, about 15 percent reported learning about safety from observing others. Similar proportions of respondents reported learning about safety from family, friends, or dating literature. Almost 10 percent reported having learned about dating safety from information on the social networking site itself. Similar to those who use traditional dating methods, about 8 percent of those who use online methods reported that they had never learned about online dating safety.

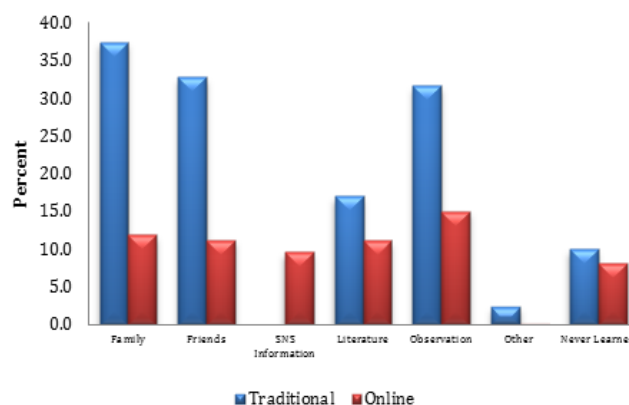


Figure 12: Learned About Dating Safety

Victimization Experiences in Dating Relationships

Victimization as a result of intimate or dating relationships is always a concern. Figure 13 shows a number of forms of victimization experienced by those respondents who were in relationships developed from traditional and online methods. A majority of those who had relationships through traditional dating methods (244 students) never experienced any form of victimization. Nearly 11 percent of these respondents received unsolicited obscene emails, messages or calls, behaviors that might be characterized as stalking. Almost 15 percent were victims of harassment, and about 15 percent reported being hurt emotionally or psychologically. Almost 9 percent

were verbally assaulted, almost 8 percent reported being sexually assaulted, and about 4 percent reported being physically assaulted.

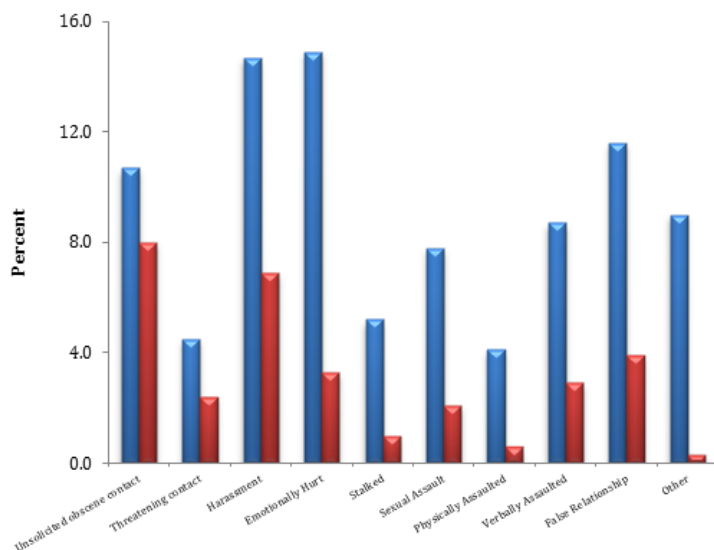


Figure 13: Victimization Experiences

Victimization experiences may also occur in relationships originating from meeting someone online. A majority of those who had met someone online (153 students) never experienced any form of victimization as a result of this type of relationship. About 8 percent of these respondents received unsolicited obscene emails, messages or calls. Nearly 7 percent were victims of harassment, while more than 3 percent were hurt emotionally or psychologically. Almost 3 percent of respondents reported being verbally assaulted, about 2 percent sexually assaulted, and 0.6 percent physically assaulted.

Conclusions

While the number of individuals involved in online social networking and dating has increased dramatically, little is known about how individuals may approach these types of relationships differently than those developed through more traditional means. This report provides initial results from a study of traditional and online dating strategies, safety precautions, and victimization experiences among a sample of college students. To some extent, these results suggest that approaches to online dating appear to differ from strategies and safety precautions used in traditional forms of dating.

Many types of victimization appear to be less common among those who met potential partners online. However, it is important to recognize that, while most of those who develop relationships through more traditional means communicate and socialize with potential partners in person, those who develop relationships online may never meet these potential partners face-to-face. Thus, it is difficult to make direct comparisons in terms of victimization experiences.

Overall, the advent and widespread use of the internet has severely altered the landscape and dynamics of dating in the United States. The ability to use the internet to search for partners affords individuals not only the unique opportunity to look outside of their immediate vicinity and peer group, but the unprecedented ability to deceive potential partners. This, along with increasingly permissive attitudes and practices regarding sexual behavior, may be more likely to produce negative outcomes in dating relationships. Although society has become increasingly accepting of online dating, the use of these services is still perceived as risky and dangerous (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Such concerns, however, may be misplaced. Toma et al. (2008) argue that most deception that occurs online is so minor that it would be unnoticeable in the context of a conventional dating scenario. In addition, most online websites provide their users with extensive information regarding how they can increase their own personal safety, as well as avenues through which they can report potentially dangerous users. Nevertheless, the results presented here point to the need for additional research into the use of safety precautions and how those precautions may prevent victimization for both online and traditional dating relationships.

References

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Resources on Internet and Dating Safety:

**February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month.
One in three young people experience abuse in their relationships.
Visit <http://www.teenDVmonth.org> for more information!**

Dating Safety: <http://www.datesafeproject.org/>

<http://www.stayteen.org/dating-abuse?gclid=CLW255nPn6oCFQllgwodUQzt6A> –dating abuse in teen relationships

<http://www.onlinedatingsafetytips.com/>

General Internet Safety Information

Family resource for online safety: <http://www.fosi.org/>

National Crime Prevention Council: <http://www.ncpc.org/topics/internet-safety>



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