Grading The Online Dating Industry

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New Scientific Report Finds Some Positives, Many Areas for Improvement

The report card is in, and the online dating industry won't be putting this one on the fridge. A new scientific report concludes that although online dating offers users some very real benefits, it falls far short of its potential.

Unheard of just twenty years ago, online dating is now a billion dollar industry and one of the most common ways for singles to meet potential partners. Many websites claim that they can help you find your "soulmate." But do these online dating services live up to all the hype?

Not exactly, according to an article to be published in a forthcoming issue of Psychological Science in the Public Interest, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

In the article, a team of psychological scientists aims to get at the truth behind online dating, identifying the ways in which online dating may benefit or undermine singles' romantic outcomes.

Lead author Eli Finkel, Associate Professor of Social Psychology at Northwestern University, recognizes that "online dating is a marvelous addition to the ways in which singles can meet potential romantic partners," but he warns that "users need to be aware of its many pitfalls."

Many online dating sites claim that they possess an exclusive formula, a so-called "matching algorithm," that can match singles with partners who are especially compatible with them. But, after systematically reviewing the evidence, the authors conclude that such claims are unsubstantiated and likely false.

"To date, there is no compelling evidence that any online dating matching algorithm actually works," Finkel observes. "If dating sites want to claim that their matching algorithm is scientifically valid, they need to adhere to the standards of science, which is something they have uniformly failed to do. In fact, our report concludes that it is unlikely that their algorithms can work, even in principle, given the limitations of the sorts of matching procedures that these sites use."

The authors suggest that the existing matching algorithms neglect the most important insights from the flourishing discipline of relationship science. The algorithms seek to predict long-term romantic compatibility from characteristics of the two partners before they meet. Yet the strongest predictors of relationship well-being, such as a couple's interaction style and ability to navigate stressful circumstances, cannot be assessed with such data.

According to Finkel, "developers of matching algorithms have tended to focus on the information that is easy for them to assess, like similarity in personality and attitudes, rather than the information that relationship science has found to be crucial for predicting long-term relationship well-being. As a result, these algorithms are unlikely to be effective."

Many online dating sites market their ability to offer online daters access to a huge number of potential partners. However, online profiles are a feeble substitute for face-to-face contact when it comes to the crucial task of assessing romantic chemistry. Furthermore, browsing through all those online profiles may overwhelm people or encourage them to treat their search more like shopping than mate-finding, which can lead singles to pass over potential partners who are actually well-suited to them.

Finkel and his co-authors conclude that online dating is successful insofar as it rapidly helps singles meet potential partners in person, so that they can discover whether a romantic spark is there. The chats and messages people send through online dating sites may even help them to convey a positive initial impression, as long as people meet face-to-face relatively quickly.

Given the potentially serious consequences of intervening in people's romantic lives, the authors hope that this report will push proprietors to build a more rigorous scientific foundation for online dating services. In a preface to the report, psychological scientist Arthur Aron at the State University of New York at Stony Brook recommends the creation of a panel that would grade the scientific credibility of each online dating site.

"Thus far, the industry certainly does not get an A for effort," noted Finkel. "For years, the online dating industry has ignored actual relationship science in favor of unsubstantiated claims and buzzwords, like 'matching algorithms,' that merely sound scientific."

He added, "In the comments section of the report card, I would write: 'apply yourself!'"

Finkel co-authored this report with Paul Eastwick, assistant professor of psychology at Texas A&M University; Benjamin Karney, professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles; Harry Reis, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester; and Susan Sprecher, professor of sociology and psychology at Illinois State University.