With the emergence and rise of online dating sites and dating apps, there has been an exponential growth in romantic relationships initiated and/or maintained online. In fact, in the recent years, following increasing usage of social networks, the most common way to meet a future spouse is online, and the popularity of this method is expected to increase even more. A recent estimate says that there are more than 320 million active users of dating apps worldwide.\(^1\) In addition to an interest in casual sex, many initiate and maintain romantic relationships, first through dating apps and then through other online media. While we used to assume that dating apps were predominantly a tool for arranging a physical meeting with another person, the Covid-19 pandemic proved us wrong because while it lasted the use of the app increased (instead of the expected decrease).\(^2\)

Although there has been an academic interest in researching online relationships, studies that specifically explore online romantic relationships are less common.\(^3\) Their results depict the various different views on the nature of these relationships so some researchers describe them as very impersonal and shallow due to the limited nature of the media.\(^4\) Also, there is a common view that they are interpersonal, but more restrictive than face-to-face relationships, so they take more time to form and develop,\(^4\) while others see them as accelerated and so intense that individuals rapidly self-discover and form deeply intimate bonds within a short time frame.\(^4\)

Many therapists claim that online romantic relationships do not have the potential to become mature and that the virtual space is a place for creating high hopes that are often not fulfilled and thus cause deep disappointments. When comparing online romances to real-life relationships, there is an inherent tendency to focus exclusively on its negative aspects, while ignoring the potential opportunities that the online medium can offer to those in online relationships. Of the most prominent of the potentially negative aspects of online relationships are the dangers associated with various forms of online fraud as well as the dangers associated with unrealistic self-presentation as well as the potential to create idealized perceptions of others.\(^5\) However, some of those views on potentially negative aspects have not found empirical support. Studies show that the overall quality of relationships started online is about the same, and sometimes even higher, than of those started in other ways.\(^6\)
They also show that people are aware of the importance of caution when entering online relationships. Many users take advantage of the textual nature of the online medium to check the consistency of messages from their online partners by reviewing previous conversations. It turns out that people look for significant consistency among partner messages so that they can feel confident in their assessment of their partner.⁷

Furthermore, online relationships cannot be reduced solely to role-playing because these are real people developing real romantic relationships with real feelings. The presence of the screen and the freedom of socializing, made possible through various public and private communication channels, make it possible to nurture relationships in a specific way that has its advantages. It is easily overlooked that an online relationship is a way to cope with the lack of time we all face as part of the modern capitalist system and with a limited pool of available others which often boils down to co-workers.⁸ Also, a certain degree of anonymity that comes with an online context can facilitate and further encourage the disclosure of personal information, thoughts and feelings, and may actually accelerate the formation of intimacy compared to offline contexts.⁵

However, online relationships reach a big hurdle when it comes to the environment that is often skeptical of online relationships and that often plays a strong role in the success and quality of romantic relationships.⁹ As people often rely on information from those close to them whose opinion they value, their disapproval may play a significant role in how online participants evaluate the viability of their relationship.⁹ This is further emphasized in the therapeutic relationship that can have an even stronger influence on the perceived viability.

In conclusion, it is evident that there still exists an important gap in research related to the positive aspects of online dating. What the situation in Croatia so vividly showed is that, especially during periods of great social isolation (like both the earthquake as well as the pandemic), online dating played the role of the guardian of mental health in the period of physical and mental isolation. Yet there is plenty of research regarding negative aspects (despite some even showing an absence of those negative aspects) while the research into positive aspects of online dating is still lacking and the attention of the scientific community should be directed there.

Submitted: October 30, 2022 GMT, Accepted: November 06, 2022 GMT
REFERENCES


