Challenges of Online Dating among the Youths in the Contemporary World:

Experiences of Undergraduates

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Abstract

Online dating has gained prominence among students seeking life partners, with dynamics and challenges varying across cultural contexts. This study investigates the challenges of online dating among contemporary youth, specifically focusing on undergraduate experiences. Employing a descriptive survey design, the study surveyed 210 undergraduates from the University of Ilorin, utilizing a researcher-designed questionnaire named "Challenges of Online Dating Questionnaire (CODQ)." The instrument demonstrated validity and reliability (coefficient of 0.70). Data analysis involved frequency count, mean, rank order analysis, t-test, and ANOVA at a 0.05 significance level. Results identified electronic abuse, disappointment after in-person meetings, and disrespect for partner opinions as primary challenges. Hypotheses testing revealed no significant gender, age, or religious differences, except for educational levels. The findings underscore the importance of understanding and addressing online dating challenges in educational settings, where diverse experiences converge. Recommendations include counselor-led awareness programs to help undergraduates navigate challenges, particularly electronic abuse and mistreatment issues.

Keywords: Dating, Online, Challenges, Undergraduates, University

INTRODUCTION

Online dating has seen a surge in popularity, providing a convenient platform for individuals to connect with potential romantic partners. While this virtual medium offers benefits like expanding the dating pool and overcoming geographical barriers, it also introduces challenges and concerns impacting user experiences, especially among young adults. Recognizing these issues is vital for developing effective strategies to promote safe and satisfying online dating experiences. The use of online dating platforms has gained significant traction among young adults globally, including undergraduates. According to Smith and Anderson (2016), about 27% of Americans aged 18 to 24 have utilized online dating services. A similar trend is observed in Nigeria, where widespread internet access has led to the adoption of online dating platforms by young individuals (Ojo & Olatokun, 2019).

While online dating platforms are designed to facilitate communication and connection, a critical concern expressed by youths is the potential impact on face-to-face social interaction. Studies, such as Valkenburg and Peter's (2007), have addressed this issue, revealing that excessive online communication may reduce face-to-face social skills among adolescents. This concern is relevant to Nigerian undergraduates, who, at a stage crucial for personal development, rely on social skills and interpersonal relationships.

The internet is reshaping the way new generations approach dating, permeating all segments of internet users. It has become a prominent communication tool, particularly among students. Academic institutions increasingly use social networking sites like Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and others to connect with students for information dissemination (Paul, Baker & Cochran, 2012). Online dating, in particular, has fundamentally altered the traditional process of finding romance, allowing users to connect across vast geographic regions through various computer-mediated communications (CMCs) such as photos, texts, or video. With the advent

of internet-accessible smartphones, online daters can now use various mobile applications to meet their individual romantic needs (Wortham, 2013).

Online dating distinguishes itself from traditional offline dating primarily through the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC), allowing users to interact with potential partners through the dating site or service before meeting face-to-face. Dating websites primarily focus on providing users with opportunities to form new romantic relationships (Finkel & Hanson, 2012). A key differentiation of online dating is the vast pool of potential partners it offers. Finkel and Hanson (2012) argued that online platforms break down geographical barriers, enabling individuals to connect with a broader and more diverse range of people than would be possible through traditional means. This expanded reach has the potential to increase the likelihood of finding compatible matches. The mode of communication in online dating differs from the conventional one; rather than relying solely on face-to-face interactions, individuals engage in text-based discussions (Gibbs & Martin, 2018).

Numerous studies indicate that online dating is becoming increasingly prevalent among university students. A study by Smith and Duggan (2013) reported that 22% of young adults aged 18-24 in the United States used online dating platforms, and this trend is likely mirrored among university students. The easy access to dating apps and websites through smartphones and other devices has made online dating a convenient and appealing option for the younger generation (Vanden Abeele et al., 2014). The rise of online dating has also led to changes in dating behavior and attitudes among university students. A study by Gibbs et al. (2010) found that online dating expanded students' dating horizons by connecting them with individuals they might not have met otherwise. This widening of the dating pool may influence students' preferences and expectations in potential partners.

Online dating sites serve as a platform for users to seek new friendships, alleviate boredom, and find romantic partners. Couch, Liamputtong, and Pitts (2012) discovered that meeting a potential online partner in real life does not guarantee a successful relationship or love. Couples who initially meet online often struggle to maintain their relationships (Wortham, 2013). While online daters may develop a high level of intimacy through virtual relationships, they often lack the significant feelings experienced when meeting in the real world.

Despite the growing popularity of online dating platforms among youth, concerns have been raised about potential problems associated with this form of dating. Couch et al. (2012) reported that 66% of internet communities view online dating as a dangerous activity. Social networking sites, which have evolved into phenomena with billions of users, have raised concerns among researchers linking unsettled homes to online dating (Akinwale, 2010). The assumption that individuals who meet online and get married find it challenging to establish settled homes has been discussed by Christina (2015). Communication and socio-psychological experts have emphasized the potential risks facing youth engaged in online social networking and dating. The hook-up phenomenon has become more prominent in the digital dating landscape, influencing students' perceptions and experiences.

Furthermore, online romance scams have been prevalent for a considerable number of years, involving criminals who pretend to initiate relationships through online dating sites and defraud victims of a substantial amount of money. Whitty and Buchanan (2016) estimated that 230,000 citizens in Britain have fallen victim to online dating scams, with the UK National Fraud Authority reporting fraud costs exceeding £38 billion in the United Kingdom.

Various studies have highlighted the risks associated with online dating, such as misrepresentation, identity theft, and the potential for encountering malicious individuals (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). The lack of physical presence

and immediate feedback in online interactions can make it challenging to accurately assess the intentions and credibility of potential partners. The emotional impact of online dating is an area of interest, as users may experience a range of emotions, from excitement and hope to disappointment and frustration. Research by Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino (2006) suggests that online daters might be more vulnerable to experiencing rejection and disappointment due to the mediated nature of interactions.

The major theory for this study is based on the Uses and Gratification Theory, propounded by Katz and Blumler in 1974. The Uses and Gratification Theory explains why people use certain social websites, what needs push them to use the media, and what gratification they derive from such sites. Media plays a major role in societal transformation, emphasizing social communication and how social media has changed the way people interact. This explains why people gravitate towards particular social networking sites, and most students use social media to suit their purposes. A good understanding of this theory shows that people will continue to relate to social media sites from which they derive gratification. The theory is relevant to this study because it provides reasons why people are responsible for the contents they generate and consume. Equally, people use technology that can help them achieve a purpose. As such, students deliberately visit online dating sites to satisfy their needs of choosing a partner.

Research has explained the relationship between demographic variables and online dating challenges. According to Hitsch, Hortacsu & Ariely (2010) and Ellison, Heino & Gibbs (2011), online dating challenges experienced by men differ from those of women. For example, men often experience a lot of rejection online more often, while women experience challenges such as navigating unsolicited messages and managing expectations around response time. Research by Smith and Duggan (2013) stated that young adults view online dating as a tool for meeting potential romantic partners, but they encounter challenges such as managing multiple online

profiles, dealing with peer pressure, and navigating the blurred lines between online and offline interactions. Andersen and Chen (2017) found that individuals of middle-aged adults (26-45) often experience heightened expectations, as they may be seeking more serious and long-term commitments. Balancing career and family commitments while trying to establish meaningful connections online can lead to stress and time management challenges.

Religious individuals were found to use online dating less, mainly due to negative perceptions about such acts. Christian and Muslim students often struggle to verify an individual's religious identity and if it aligns with their own beliefs (Almog, 2019). Roscoe and Cavanaugh (2016) reported that individuals of different religious affiliations often face similar stressors, such as balancing religious values with the expectations of modern dating practices. Education-wise, Brown's (2020) findings revealed no significant difference in the challenges experienced by first-year and returning students engaging in online dating. Both groups reported similar issues, such as managing self-presentation when meeting their partner for the first time, concerns about honesty and authenticity, and the potential impact of online interactions on offline relationships. Jones and Brown (2020) found that college students across class levels exhibited similar concerns related to self-presentation, fear of rejection, and the pressure to conform to societal expectations.

Despite the growing popularity of online dating problems among youths, there is a notable gap in the existing literature regarding the nuanced experiences of undergraduates associated with online dating. While some studies (Ojo & Olatokun, 2019; Gibbs et al., 2018; Whitty & Buchanan, 2016) have explored general aspects of online dating among the general populace of different countries, there is a need for research that specifically focuses on the challenges faced by undergraduates, considering their developmental stage, academic commitments, and social dynamics. This study addresses this gap by examining the challenges of online dating

among youths in the contemporary world, specifically the experiences of undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Research Question

1. What are the online dating challenges experienced by undergraduates of the University of Ilorin?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are generated for this study:

Ho$_1$: There is no significant difference in the online dating challenges experienced by undergraduates of the University of Ilorin based on gender.

Ho$_2$: No significant difference exists in the online dating challenges experienced by undergraduates of the University of Ilorin based on age.

Ho$_3$: There is no significant difference in the online dating challenges experienced by undergraduates of the University of Ilorin based on religion.

Ho$_4$: Educational level does not create any significant difference in the online dating challenges experienced by undergraduates of the University of Ilorin.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a descriptive survey research design with the objective of collecting information from undergraduates at the University of Ilorin regarding the challenges of online dating. The research population comprised all undergraduates at the University of Ilorin, and the target population consisted of selected undergraduates who self-reported their engagement in online dating. Utilizing a simple random sampling technique, 210 respondents were chosen, representing various faculties across the University of Ilorin in Ilorin, Nigeria.

The research instrument used for data collection was the "Challenges of Online Dating Questionnaire (CODQ)." The questionnaire comprised three sections: Section A covered

demographic data, including gender, age, religion, and educational level. Section B involved a self-report online dating motivation scale with items such as "online dating is an effective way for me to find a long-term relationship" and "I engage in online dating out of curiosity about different people and relationships." Respondents who agreed to at least two of these items proceeded to Section C, which focused on the challenges of online dating. The items in Section C were scored on a Four-Point Likert-type scale: Very True of Me (VTM), True of Me (TM), Not True of Me (NTM), and Not Very True of Me (NVTM). The instrument demonstrated content validity, and its reliability coefficient was 0.70.

Demographic data were analyzed using percentages, and research questions were addressed through mean and ranking order analysis. Hypotheses were tested using t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) at a significance level of 0.05.

Results

The demographic data of the respondents revealed that 99 (47.1%) were males, while 111 (52.9%) were females, indicating a higher participation of female undergraduate students in the study. Additionally, 77 (36.7%) of the undergraduates were below the age of 20 years, while 133 (63.6%) were 20 years and above, suggesting that respondents aged 20 and above participated more in the study. Regarding religious affiliation, 6 (2.90%) students adhered to African Traditional Religion, 134 (68.8%) identified as Christians, and 70 (33.3%) were of the Islamic faith, indicating a higher participation of Christians in the study.

Research Question 1: *What are the online dating challenges experienced by undergraduates of the University of Ilorin?*

Table 1: Mean and Rank Order showing Online Dating Challenges Experienced by Undergraduates of the University of Ilorin

S/No.	due to my engagement in online dating, I experienced the following challenges:	Mean	Rank
1	exposure to electronic abuse (posting embarrassing comments on dating sites)	3.83	1st
2	disappointment after meeting a partner in person	3.78	2nd
3	disrespect for partner's opinion	3.77	3rd
4	Insecurity	3.74	4th
8	loss of privacy due to hacking issues	3.72	5th
6	unhealthy sexual behaviour	3.69	6th
9	living in fantasy and unreal life	3.68	7th
7	exposure to higher risk of scam and fraud	3.67	8th
5	lack of intimacy and actual interaction	3.65	9th
17	financial stress	3.60	10th
14	emotional distress	3.60	10th
11	infidelity among couples	3.59	12th
13	multiple relationship	3.57	13th
12	increased divorce rates	3.51	14th
20	Deception	3.48	15th
10	loss of self-confidence about long lasting relationship	3.46	16th
18	sedentary life style	3.45	17th
15	social withdrawal	3.43	18th
16	low openness to conventional dating experience	3.39	19th
19	poor academic performance	3.07	20th

Standard reference Mean Score = 2.50

Table 1 displays the mean scores and rankings of items related to the challenges of online dating experienced by undergraduates at the University of Ilorin. Notably, Items 1 (electronic abuse), 2 (disappointment after meeting a partner in person), and 3 (disrespect for partner's opinion) secured the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd positions, respectively, with the mean scores of 3.83, 3.78, and 3.77. As all the mean scores surpass the standard reference mean score of 2.50, it can be inferred that a majority of students engaged in online dating encounter these challenges.

Hypotheses Testing

Concerning the variations in online dating challenges experienced by undergraduates at the University of Ilorin across gender, age, religion, and educational level, Table 2 provides a comprehensive summary analysis of these differences.

Table 2: Summary of the Differences in the Online Dating Challenges of the Respondents across Gender, Age, Religion and Educational Level

Hypothesis	Variables	Cal. t-value	Cal. F-ratio	p-value	Decision
1	Gender	.092		0.93	Accepted
2	Age	1.22		0.23	Accepted
3	Religion		0.63	.52	Accepted
4	Educational Level		3.92*	.004	Rejected

* Significance, p<0.05

Table 2 indicates that the p-values for gender, age, and religion are greater than the 0.05 level of significance, but less than 0.05 in the case of the respondents' educational level. This implies that there were no significant differences in the online dating challenges experienced by undergraduates at the University of Ilorin across gender ($F(1, 208) = 0.092$, $p > 0.05$), age ($F(1, 208) = 1.22$, $p > 0.05$), and religion ($F(1, 208) = 0.63$, $p > 0.05$). However, a significant difference was found based on educational level ($F(1, 208) = 3.92$, $p < 0.05$).

However, the Duncan Multiple Range Test (DMRT) was conducted as a post hoc test in the table to determine the magnitude of differences noted in Hypothesis 4:

Table 3: DMRT on Online Dating Challenges Based on Educational Level

Duncan Groupings	N	Means	Group	Level
A	10	68.30	1	100 level
B	42	70.64	2	200 level
C	54	71.37	3	300 level
D	83	73.71*	4	400 level

E	21	67.90	5	500 level

The results revealed that the groups differed in their expression of online dating challenges based on educational level. However, it can be inferred that respondents who were in the 400 level, with the higher mean score of 73.71, contributed the most to the differences noted in the table.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that challenges associated with online dating experienced by undergraduates include electronic abuse (repeated calls or texting, posting embarrassing comments on dating sites), disappointment after meeting a partner in person, and disrespect for a partner's opinion, among others. These findings align with Rentman (2012), who discovered that those who date online are prone to a higher risk of scams and hacking due to the accessibility of their information, such as identity, photos, and other personal details, through the internet. Henry and Barraket (2008) emphasized that, in many cases, online daters do not feel the same connection when meeting face to face. Also, Lo, Haich, and Chiu (2013) stated that online users tend to be deceptive in their photographs and self-presentation to create a more favorable impression in an online dating environment. The reasons for these findings may be attributed to the societal norms in Nigeria, where face-to-face communication holds high value. Many undergraduates might lack the necessary communication skills and online etiquette to express themselves effectively online, exposing them to various challenges.

The results also indicated no significant difference in the challenges of online dating experienced by undergraduates of the University of Ilorin based on gender. This implies that male and female undergraduates of the University of Ilorin both face problems in online dating. This finding contradicts the results of Abramova, Bailman, Krasnova, and Buxmann (2016), who found that online users tend to follow natural stereotyped ways in choosing an online mate.

They further asserted that male online users are attracted by the physical appearance of potential mates, while female daters base their choices on male breadwinning abilities and socio-economic characteristics (income, occupation, and education) over physical attractiveness. Although men disclose more readily, women lead in creativity and the variety of information provided, with males focusing on status-related information such as income, occupation, phone numbers, photos, and car, while females provide information on kids, desired age of a partner, photos, interests, home, and sex. The reason for this difference could be that both male and female undergraduates at the University of Ilorin may come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, influencing the challenges they face in online dating. Common financial constraints, academic pressures, and family expectations could overshadow gender-specific challenges.

There was no significant difference in the challenges of online dating experienced by the undergraduates of the University of Ilorin based on age. This implies that undergraduates across age ranges faced similar challenges. This finding is not in line with Smith and Duggan (2013), who stated that younger college students encounter challenges such as managing multiple online profiles, dealing with peer pressure, and navigating the blurred lines between online and offline interactions when compared to older youths. The reason for this discrepancy could be that undergraduates at a university often share similar socialization experiences, irrespective of their age, and are likely to have comparable exposure to social media and online platforms, leading to similar challenges in the realm of online dating.

There was no significant difference in the problems of online dating as expressed by undergraduates of the University of Ilorin based on religion. This implies that religion plays no part in the problems of online dating. This finding is in line with the study of Roscoe and Cavanaugh (2016), which reported that individuals of different religious affiliations faced

similar stressors, such as balancing religious values with the expectations of modern dating practices. This could be because students from different religious backgrounds may interact closely with each other, leading to increased understanding, tolerance, and shared experiences. This social integration could dilute the influence of religious differences when it comes to facing challenges in online dating.

There was a significant difference in the problems of online dating as expressed by undergraduates of the University of Ilorin based on educational level. This implies that respondents with various educational levels expressed different problems in online dating. The Duncan Multiple Range Test revealed that respondents who were in 400 level contributed more to the significant difference. This finding is not in line with the study of Jones and Brown (2020), who found that college students across class levels exhibited similar concerns related to self-presentation, fear of rejection, and the pressure to conform to societal expectations. The reason for this difference could be that undergraduates who were in 400 level (final year) might shift their attention from online dating and focus more on academic success.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the study revealed that challenges faced by undergraduates in the context of online dating at the University of Ilorin encompassed issues such as electronic abuse, including repeated calls and texting, as well as the posting of embarrassing comments on dating sites. Disappointment after meeting a partner in person and a lack of respect for the opinions of partners were also identified as prevalent challenges. Notably, the research found no statistically significant differences in the experienced challenges across gender, age, and religious affiliations among the surveyed undergraduates. However, a significant disparity emerged based on educational levels, indicating that the nature of challenges in online dating varies depending on the academic year of the students. These findings contribute valuable

insights into the nuanced landscape of online dating challenges within the university setting and emphasize the importance of considering educational levels in understanding and addressing these issues.

Counselling Implications

The findings of this study and its discussion have shed more light on the problems associated with online dating. This study revealed that online daters are vulnerable to electronic abuse, disappointment after meeting a partner in person, and disrespect for a partner's opinion. Electronic abuse in the form of picture hacking, incessant phone calls, and messages, etc., is inevitable. Also, like other online users, online daters divulge a wealth of personal information and other social media avenues, which may, in turn, be used against them. Most of the information and pictures shared online are not real; hence, the dater may be disappointed upon meeting the online mate in person. Online counsellors may use this invaluable information to establish rapport with online users, especially online daters. The social networking system is built on the model of sharing personal information to build friendship by employing therapeutic means, similar to what counsellors use to promote openness. Counsellors should, therefore, be familiar with various social media applications to be able to employ them as a means of reaching out to a number of online clients.

Counselling services rendered online should be both preventive and curative when necessary. Online daters, according to the findings, are often disappointed after meeting a partner in person, and there is a possibility of disregarding the partner's point of view. Guidance and counselling should be acquainted with social networking to provide counselling services effectively. This will enable guidance services to spread their tentacles and render counselling services even when the clients are far away or out of sight.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that;

Counsellors should organize enlightenment programs to create awareness among online dating site users about electronic abuse, including cyberbullying, harassment, and other forms of online mistreatment. They should guide both male and female undergraduates on the various challenges associated with online dating. This guidance will assist students in handling situations where fraudsters may deceive them by posing as prospective suitors online.

Online counselling services should be extended to online daters. An online counselling forum that includes online daters should be created, managed, or facilitated by a guidance counsellor to sensitize online daters about the potential problems of online dating and help them make informed decisions.

Counsellors should also enlighten parents on the importance of taking an interest in their children's online activities. Also, counsellors should utilize valuable information shared by online daters to establish rapport with individuals, irrespective of age. Finally, counsellors-in-training should be taught how to effectively manage and render counselling services to different kinds of online clients.

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