

Online Dating and Females in the Academia: Is it an Issue for Commendation, Condemnation or Ambivalence?

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of online dating, interrogates the motivations for engagement, and examines the lived experiences of females in the academia on online dating. The paper is grounded in Walther's Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) and argues that e-dating as a western canon of love-quest, has altered processes of initiating first dates and maintaining romantic relationships. However, due to the stigma attached to using e-dating sites, literature is scant on the motivations and intriguing experiences of e-daters, especially, from females in the academia who are perceived not to adequately socialize due to their busy schedules, but encounter the phenomenon through readings, peer discussions, and/or active participation. The paper proceeds on these lines of theoretical assumptions and gathers data through cyberethnography of three dating sites: Africana, Vidamora and Plenty of Fish. Additional phenomenological data were gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews with eighteen purposively selected females from two higher educational institutions in Ghana. The data were thematically analysed and the findings indicate: online dating in spite of the dynamics of hyper personal perspectives of computer mediated interactions, involves three interrelated stages/phases: friendship, orientation, and intimacy. It is highly commended for altering hegemonic beliefs and patriarchal cultural discourses on the female being perceived as docile in initiating romantic relationships. Online dating has thus, become an empowering and liberating space for females to assert their sexuality in romantic relationships; constituting part of the rising new femininity in Ghana. Also, online dating is fraught with condemnations including fake self-presentation and cyber victimization, exploitation and heightened emotional infidelity. Engaging in e-dating is ambivalent and its thriving is at the behest of the individuals engaged in the phenomenon. The paper contributes to literature by concluding that online dating is prevalent among females in the academia who often suffer gender constraints in their quest for love due to a perceived strong personality, accomplishment, and level of thinking. The paper recommends efforts at enhancing security protocols on e-dating to help minimise impersonation and cyber fraud which are characteristics of e-dating which is an integral part of the contemporary era.

Keywords: *online/e-dating, condemnation, commendation, ambivalence, self-disclosure, stigma, impersonation, cyber fraud.*

1.1 Introduction

The Internet and the rapid expansion of social media use is a mark of the 21st century narratives where opportunities exist for the widespread use of new forms of media technology

including online chats, instant messaging, and other social engagements like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Linked-In and Snapchats among others. Indeed, the Internet World Statistics (2019) on indicates that a one-third of the world's population is socially active on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter and WhatsApp. This is an indication that the online space transcends the physical and require knowledge and interpretive insights into potentially unidentifiable opportunities including kick starting an online relationship (Hallet & Barber, 2014). One area of life tremendously affected by technology is the building and maintenance of romantic relationships and online dating systems play important roles in the social lives of many individuals in their quest for love (Meredith, 2020). In an era of computer mediated forms of interaction, researches on building relationships through technology has become the focus of social psychologist as well as communication researchers (Whitty, 2010).

Langmia and Hammond (2018) are of the view that opportunities abound for prospective partners (i.e. intimate, professional, academic etc.) to meet via the Internet per the invention, spread, and ubiquitous nature of the Internet. Similarly, Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis and Sprecher (2012) claim that the online space allows individuals to form social connections and romantic relations through cyber dating sites. James (2015) asserts that society is currently technology-driven and the millennial generation (i.e. people born beyond 1980) who are tech savvy and have access to the Internet cannot imagine their lives without computers, cable television, smart phones, and everything technology related. This affirms what Prensky (2001) averred that the millennial generation (i.e. digital netizens) is surrounded by computers, videogames, digital music players, video cameras and cell phones where the average student spends a conservative average of not less than 12 hours daily on different forms of internet related activities. In other words, the Internet has become an integral part of the lives of the 'digital netizens' and they cannot imagine their lives without technology. This is congruent with existing literature indicating that every facet of the millennial generation is affected by the power of the Internet, including the search for love.

Human beings have a need to belong and this is satiated by communication (Hall & Davis, 2017) which is increasingly being driven by technologically mediated communication (TMC) especially, e-dating. Finkel et al. (2012) are of the view that the term online dating is used in reference to the use of websites, applications and social networking sites primarily with a focus on offering users the opportunity to form romantic relationships. Studies have shown that online dating applications and sites are pervasive and have impacted the dating lives of many individuals (Sumter, Ligtenberg & Vandenbosch, 2017). An *Online Dating Magazine* managed by Tracy Joe reported in March 2019 on an approximated existence of 2500 online dating sites with more than 5000 online dating services worldwide. The report further add that only 25 of these sites are regarded as 'major' and also free to access outside the United States of America. 'Major and free' in the report are operationalized as any e-dating site with more than one million current, active and unique subscribers.

Online dating has become a pervasive means of seeking romantic relationships. Therefore, rather than relying on the intuition of elders, family members, friends, and especially, parents for the selection of prospective partners, e-dating is currently placing the romantic fate of love seekers in the hands of a mathematical algorithm called 'match maker' (Finkel et al, 2012). Dating sites have thus, radically, usurped the intermediary role of parents, relations and friends by providing a mediated platform or intermediary for prospective love seekers to meet. In most traditional settings, in Africa, parents and family members have intermediary roles to play regarding the search for a prospective partner (Oyewumi, 2003; Daldal, 2014). Usurping the role of parents or relations in spite of the mode (i.e. whether in-person or mediated) approximates enacting a 'cultural ignorance' unequivocally comparable to a taboo (African Child Policy Forum Report, 2013), especially, where marriage is perceived as the ultimate goal for most people within the age bracket of eighteen and thirty-eight years.

Rui and Stefanone (2018) state that social actors within this age bracket may be students in higher educational institutions or pursuing careers, and therefore, may be intentional about their engagements on dating sites. Indeed, the Pew Research Report (2018) also affirms the age bracket as noted, and argues that the millennial generation of this age group are the most active on the Internet with the Social media affecting every facet of their lives. This corroborates Quesnel's (2010) claims that about 52% of the millennial natives (i.e. in this sense females) are active on the Internet and social media and especially, those in the academia have one time or the other been exposed to online dating through literature, peer discussions, or active participation.

1.2 The Present Study

The study seeks to contribute to an understanding of the nature of e-dating and interrogates the motivations of engagement as well as examine the lived experiences of the female e-dater in the academia. Whilst previous empirical studies on online dating exist from different gendered perspectives, minimal studies have examined data from the point of view of females in the academia. In addition, Fernández-González, Calvete and Orue (2017), like Whitty (2010) argue that literature on e-dating, especially on women in general is scant because of the stigma attached to using the phenomenon. Meredith (2020) widens the gap by contending that whether as a tool for finding a soulmate or as a gateway to casual hook-ups, online dating has become a popular avenue for consumer demands and have extensively increased for people with busy schedules with inadequate opportunities to socialize. Observably, whilst some literature gives credence to existing studies on women and e-dating, most of these studies have been laced with western canons and perspectives and do not examine women in the academia in Africa, thereby, making such studies appear limited in scope. This is consistent with Smith and Anderson (2016) and Meredith (2020) who applaud scholarly works on highly opinionated perspectives on e-dating across cultures, and recommend researches with contextualized samples.

Presently, the world is experiencing the second era of the Internet referred to as Web 2.0 (and probably a third era of 3.0 soon), which is distinguished by its unique nature of ubiquity in computing, production and usage (Agboada & Ofori-Birikorang, 2018). Its resultant effect is the supremacy on Social Network Sites (SNSs) becoming a prime mode of mediated forms of social interaction in the digital domain which is also rapidly evolving. Panos (2014) had earlier avowed that the concepts of the culture of sharing, ubiquity, hyper connectivity, and hybridity are comprehensively needed by users to demonstrate how routine online social interactions could change the face of initiating relationships in the contemporary era.

Flowing from that premise, it could be assumed that the findings of Panos are indicative of how prospective online daters have been 'electronically enslaved' into commencing relationships with people they may never have meet in-person (e.g. where gays and lesbians are disguised as heterosexual; the aged presented as young and vice versa; and the economic unstable passing themselves off as high society or affluent people). Inferring from Panos' (2014) contributions it is significant to hypothesized in this paper that the Internet is progressively colonizing the mind sets, attitudes and belief systems of individuals into commencing relationships with perfect strangers they create social ties loosely on the bases of physical attraction, exchange of explicit images, fake rhetoric, and fake representation of identities consequential to societal expectations.

Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) in a quantitative survey, explored the impact of online dating on conventional offline dating patterns of selected Americans. Using data from the site; *How Couples Meet and Stay Together*, the paper indicated that online dating has democratized relationships and individuals are able to meet potential partners globally without a physical presence. The thriving, however, is at the behest of the individuals. Similarly, a qualitative case

study conducted by Lowe (2017) sought to harness an in-depth understanding of the inspirations for engaging in digital dating. The study which was anchored on Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory purposively selected twenty participants from Walden University on *Match.com* and *Facebook*. The study showed that prospective partners are enslaved by mediated forms of communication (e.g. online dating) and this is heightened by attributing factors including institutional ineptitude of marriage and society; limited options for the selection of potential partners; and absence of social introspections on self-expression.

The phenomenon of e-dating has been interrogated from diverse perspectives. For instance, from the feminist standpoint, Huang and Yang (2013) in a quantitative survey examined online misrepresentation, self-disclosure, cyber relationships motives and loneliness among teenagers in Taiwan. The findings indicate the use of technology and online dating in particular, have negatively impacted the moral upbringing of teenagers in Taiwan. Daneshpour and Fathi (2016), also from the point of view of the female as the marginalized in the society, investigated the impact of online dating on Muslim marriages in the western world. The study concluded that about 41% of Muslim women in the contemporary era perceive the Internet as a space to assert their identity, negotiate their cultural expectations of betrothal and arranged marriages and select their own partners for marriage. Rochadiat, Tong and Novak (2017), perhaps, extending the findings of Daneshpour and Fathi (2016), also explored how women constructed their identities and negotiated their religious and cultural roles during online dating. The findings affirm the power of e-dating as a space for women to free themselves in romantic relationships.

Similarly, Quesnel (2010) from the male standpoint in a hermeneutics phenomenological study in Ottawa, examined experiences of early career males between the ages of 23 and 30 years on the dating site: *Plenty of Fish (POF.)* The study justified the sampled population as intentional and states the age group is perceived to comprise careers with busy schedules with little or no social outlets to meet potential partners. The study alludes that POF is a user friendly site with search engines; an internal messaging system; a device to match users on some predetermined information; and a tool to monitor and track which members have viewed an individual's profile. However, the study contends that in spite of all these alluring features, the site is perceived to objectify and commodify the male gender according to specifications including geographical location, age, economic status, and sexual preference among others. In other words, the paper concludes that just as an individual can choose from cereals to cars with ease per varieties offered in a shop, the POF dating site also presents prospective love seekers with an array of preferences to guide their selection, thereby objectifying and commodifying the male gender.

These assumptions constitute gaps in methodology and literature and establish the focus for this current study. Therefore, based on the identified gaps, this study is guided by these objectives: 1) to explore the nature of online dating (i.e. communicative dynamics, processes, and stages of engagement), and 2) to interrogate the motivations of females in the academia for engaging in e-dating by examining their lived experiences on the phenomenon. This study thus, adds to the literature on online dating from another gendered perspective by employing data from Ghanaian women in the academia.

1.2.1 Online Dating as an Emerging Phenomenon

The main concern of love is meeting the right person. However, Sumner and Ramirez (2017) elucidate that meeting a potential partner in a person's circle could be an uphill task and thereby limit prospective love seekers from accessing an array of partners. Degim, Johnson and Fu (2015) posit that in dating, two people engage each other in an effort to know themselves better and romantically kick-start a lasting relationship as a prelude to co-habitation, or marriage. Similarly, Wincentak, Connolly and Card (2017) claim that while the term courtship

could generally refer to selecting a potential mate, it could also connote a casual intimacy where individuals spend time together without any expectation of permanence. These submissions draw attention to the fact that individuals may have different reasons for entering into a relationship. Nevertheless, as long as the desire for romantic relationships remain paramount to human existence, people would continue to seek happiness, intimacy and social well-being everywhere including online space. Without doubt, and from these submissions, it could be averred that the evolution of technology has contributed immensely to playing the role of a go-between or intermediary in romantic relationships. Wincentak et al., further (2017) acknowledge that the Internet has democratized the search for prospective partners and online dating continues to grow in popularity. The study emphasises that online dating markets in the UK and America had increased, with about 70% of relationships having commenced from interactions on dating sites. Annually, millions of hopeful relationship seekers patronize dating sites with thousands creating profiles each day (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). Indeed, the extant literature suggests that online dating has been phenomenal with the introduction of several dating sites since its introduction in 1995 when the trailblazer dating sites: *match.com* and *eHarmony.com* were created (McCluskey, 2017).

The early 1990's experienced the era of great technological revolution in Ghana to encapsulate economic, political, technical, and socio-cultural lives of many Ghanaians (Quarshie & Ami-Narh, 2012). By 1993, Ghana had attained some level of internet connectivity by kind courtesy of the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Communication, in partnership with some multi-national organizations including Network Computer Systems (NCS), Pipex International, Ghana Telecom, and the British Telecom. Indeed, Internet World Statistics Report of 2019 states that access to Internet connectivity the world over is estimated at 3,885,567,619 billion with 1,246,504,865 users located in Africa. Whereas internet access was extremely limited in 1995, 10.6% of the Ghanaian population in 2012 had access. A massive surge to 18.9% in 2014 was recorded, equaling Africa's average due to a sharp rise in the ownership of computers by households and schools (GMDG Report 2015). Another report states that probably by June 30, 2020 Internet penetration rate in Ghana would be at 34.7%, bearing in mind the country's total population of approximately 29,656,723 million (Internet World Statistics, 2019). Facebook is the leading social media platform predominantly used by Ghanaians followed by WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram. The study places online dating as the fifth most patronized platform although it was unable to justify this assertion with data. In Ghana, the use of the Internet is progressively changing the face of communication and helping to shape the different ways by which people form and maintain relationships. However, data on online dating is scant and possibly non-existent because people who patronise online dating sites are often stigmatised (Eduonoo, 2018).

2.0 Analytical Framework

The study is underpinned by the Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008). This theory is an analytical framework developed in response to scholarly claims that computer-mediated communications follow a routine sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback dynamics which are not considered as key to impression formation and development of relationships. It explains how individuals use computer-mediated communication (CMC) to develop interpersonal impressions and to advance relational communication during online dating. The theory focusses on how communicators are able to adapt to the absence of nonverbal cues when using CMC generally restricted to textual symbols and codes to achieve similar levels of interpersonal communication)

The SIPT was reiterated to include the concept of hyper personal perspective in reference to relationships such as online dating. Under the familiar sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback categorization, the theory identifies four types of media effects (i.e. selective

self-presentation; over attribution of similarity; communicating at your own time; and self-fulfilling prophesy) which occur precisely because CMC users do not have access to a full range of communication cues (Walther, 2016). Specifically, the hyper personal dynamics depicts “how senders select, receivers magnify, channels promote and feedback increases enhanced and selective communication. In other words, the principles of SIPT proffer reasons to circumstances (i.e. in this sense e-dating) under which communicators could achieve favourable outcomes in spite of non-existing physical presence germane to impression management in building romantic relationships. The relevance of SIPT to this study is to enable us analyse the nature of the selected online dating sites with a focus on the phases of initiation and contents of the profiles, relative to processes leading to encountering a prospective partner. It is extremely important to mention that SIPT has been used extensively in studies on online dating from diverse viewpoints including assessment of attractiveness and how e-daters perceive one another through personal profiles (Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn & Hearst, 2018); the impact of alcohol/drug on social actors during coercion and information processing whilst engaged in online leading to a date rape (Ambrose & Gross, 2016); and online dating and the problems of filtering through excessive information (Best & Delmege, 2012).

3.0 Methodology

Since online dating is an emerging phenomenon, particularly in Ghana, in this study, we sought to gather data through cyberethnography in order to examine the nature of online dating and to familiarize ourselves with the dynamics of the phenomenon by using three dating sites, namely, *Plenty of Fish*, *Vidamora* and *Africana* which are perceived to be among the 25 free major dating sites accessible outside the United States of America (Online Dating Magazine, 2018). Having been conversant with its nature, it was important for us to access an understanding of the system and its motivations as well as the lived experiences of selected females in the academia through participant observations and in-depth interviews. Therefore, two major designs were used for this study: cyberethnography and phenomenology. The cyber ethnographic approach (Kozinet, 2010) was used because we sought to access a latent analysis of profiles of daters through a careful online observation and immersion into their narratives beyond the manifest contents. Further to that, the phenomenology was to allow an in-depth understanding of the motivations and lived experiences of the participants engaged in e-dating and to give room for the flexibility to generate themes for interpretations and analyses (Creswell, 2014).

In line with the cyberethnographic approach, we began by creating individual active profile accounts on each of the three dating sites. All our profiles were created to mirror regular interactions on dating sites as we went through the different processes of signing on and accessing prospective partners. To enable us keenly observe sustained communicative events such as initiating relationships and securing maintenance strategies, we allowed ourselves to be approached by prospective partners and to initiate conversations. Therefore, the data from the cyber ethnography gyrated around an understanding of the nature of online dating, its dynamics of engagements and the different processes or phases of engagement. Whilst on the sites, we familiarized ourselves with how to navigate the site to enable us become conversant with the processes of online dating. We also familiarized ourselves on daily basis with the breadth and depth of the content of the profiles through iterative readings where we searched for patterns and meanings from which thematic categorizations were outlined using systematic coding of semantic and latent meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2018). For ethical reasons, we declined offers from potential romantic partners and quickly contacted them offline (i.e. usually through emails) to explain our intentions for signing-up (i.e. for research.). The dating profiles were operational for 6 months, after which we informed our “supposed” partners of our intentions to exit the platform, and then deleted our accounts.

In deriving data from the phenomenology, we purposively used recruitment poster calls and the snowballing sampling technique to select eighteen (18) postgraduate female participants (e.g. aged between 20 and 40 years) who are actively involved or have ever participated in online dating from two institutions in Ghana: University of Education, Winneba and University of Cape Coast. It is important to provide some descriptive information on how the 18 informants were duly sampled between February 2019 and July 2019. First, we posted recruitment poster advertisements on online platforms of the postgraduate students in the two institutions and 6 women consented to participate in the study. Second, we shared the posters on some popular microblogs managed by a postgraduate students and we were able to access 4 more participants. Third, we initiated contacts with the 10 already sampled informants who also assisted us to contact 5 other informants using the snowballing sampling technique. Fourth, we recruited 3 more women during the participant observations on the three dating sites. Interestingly, 2 participants on the Vidamora dating site who had declined both the poster recruitment advertisement as well as the referrals, agreed to be part of the study when we met them online. A further interrogation with them revealed they had declined the earlier offer because of the stigma attached to patrons of online dating. This is in congruent with the assumption that literature is scant on females in online dating (Meredith, 2020; Whitty, 2010) due to the stereotypes on engaging in the phenomenon.

Although less intentional and direct, some preset marriage barriers against women such as age (i.e. between 20 and 40 years), also necessitated the selection of the participants for the study. According to McCluskey (2017), most individuals between 18 and 38 years are usually early careers or accomplished persons with busy schedules, and little time to socialize. They therefore, resort to e-dating with the hope of encountering prospective partners. Zheng (2019) extends this discussion and argue that most single women within that age bracket, especially in their mid-thirties or older, are usually professionals or entrepreneurs and are harshly judged and discriminated against by their male clients because of their age, accomplishment, level of thinking, or perceived strong personality. Zheng alludes that such women usually suffer 'gender constraints' because of their perceived strong personalities, economic accomplishments, and aspirations for egalitarianism at the 'marriage market' (p.191).

Each interview was conducted in a conversational manner and averaged around one hour. We used a carefully designed interview guide comprising thematized questions on likely intentions behind e-dating such as romance, companionship, attractive physical attributes, access to a pool of prospective seekers, and economic exploitation among others. Some questions gyrated around whether participants for the avoidance of stigmatization would preclude their relations in e-dating, since that is not often the case in offline conventional relationships –barring the fact that a prospective partner may not recognize the relevance of a human intermediary supposedly taken care of by the power of technology (i.e. internet or dating site). The participants also shared their experiences on e-dating, consequential to their cultural orientations, socializations, and expectations of the society, relative to the fact that e-dating cannot be subverted because it is perceived to be an integral part of contemporary platforms for meeting and initiating romantic relationships (Ambrose & Gross, 2016).

4.0 Results and Discussion

In recent years, although there is an emerging trend for late marriage in the Ghanaian society, existing literature shows that single individuals are keen to marry (Eduonoo, 2018). Hence, content of narratives in profiles are intentional. This section therefore, presents the findings and discussions, relative to these research questions: 1) what is the nature of online dating (i.e. communicative dynamics, processes, and stages of engagement)? and 2) What are the motivations of females in the academia for engaging in online dating and their experiences on it? The data was thematically presented using analytic processes of iterative reading,

transcriptions, coding and categorizations which are anchored on the assumptions of Kacprzak (2017). This helped us to clarify the data and enrich the content of the emerging themes.

In this section, each research question is discussed with excerpts from the data accompanied by names of purported informants involved in this study. However, for ethical reasons, all the names are pseudonyms and do not refer to anybody known or unknown. The names have been purposefully used to protect the identity of the informants as well as the confidentiality of their information or stories.

4.1 Nature of Online Dating

The research question one (RQ1) was targeted at exploring the nature of online dating and it revolved around the creation of profiles and keenly observing the narratives in the profiles. The profiles comprised the bio-data of the daters, common affinities, age, specifications and preferences of gender, status, nationality, and sexual orientation (i.e. “LGBT”) as displayed on the dating sites: *Plenty of Fish*, *Vidamora* and *Africana*. As indicated earlier, the first line of analysis is premised on the themes embedded in the communication dynamics of the profiles and the latent and manifest meanings of the narratives perceived to be the bait to attract prospective partners for striking initial acquaintances. In view of this, the data from RQ1 generated three interrelated stages as themes: friendship, orientation, and intimacy.

First, the friendship phase is the first stage after signing up and identifying a preference. This stage is the ‘getting-to-know-me’ phase and it is characterized by overwhelming elements of self-disclosure. Due to the lack of physical presence (i.e. verbal cues), the potential partners probe each other through texts complemented by physical attractiveness in a displayed image, and an imagined body language when communicating. The informants indicated that the initial screening included looks and sociability of the male as well as their financial and occupational successes. Thus, the acquaintance processes and compatibility indicators involve profound levels of self-disclosure to an extent that it became difficult to determine the boundaries of self-disclosure. Rui and Stefanone (2018) argue that self-disclosure is typical of online relationships because daters are usually engaged in acts of impression management as they volunteer more than required information about themselves within a very short period. The concept of self-disclosure is built on trust perceived to be the foundation for every relationship. Self-disclosure is important for building rapport and ensuring effective communication (Bevan & Sole, 2014). Bennett and Tikkanen (2019) add that engagement in self-disclosure helps to reduce anxiety and dissonance from nervousness as daters attempt to disclose information beyond the level of bio-data. This is consistent with Finkel et al. (2012) who observe that practicing self-disclosure in traditional relationships is slower and consciously executed as individuals in e-dating are forced to go deeper into their connections. Interests, curiosity and infatuations as noted in online dating, are more pronounced. This is where the hyperpersonal dynamics become more relevant as the daters are compelled to assume a pleasant body language from prospective partners as part of impression formation initiatives and decision making using only the nonverbal cues.

Second, the orientation stage is actually an extension of the friendship stage and it is equally characteristic of probing and information seeking. Depending on the level of maturity, experience of the individuals and their self-understanding, curiosity, interest and infatuation are more pronounced at this level as they each try to put their ‘best foot’ forward. It is perceived that an appreciable level of trust which is based on impression would have been formed at this level, albeit any form of differences or prejudice. A remarkable observation from the data is the reversal of roles and the ability of the females to also assert their sexuality and initiate conversations. The intersection of age and gender inequality as espoused by Hitsch, Hortaçsu, and Ariely (2010) a study elsewhere was reflected in the data. Whereas the males emphasized attractiveness and age the younger woman, the females preferred older men within 10 years of

their age. They emphasized access to information on financial and socioeconomic status as core to the discussions at this stage.

Third, the intimacy stage is part of the penultimate stage of the orientation phase and it is characterized by the exchange of explicit images, pictures and provocative rhetorics, which often culminate later into in-person social engagements (Meredith, 2020). At this stage, reality sets in and the individuals are poised to go deeper once more in their connections. The individuals at this stage continued intimate conversations to include future goals and child-bearing among others. The stage is encountered more slowly because of its relevance as e-daters can begin the sharing of explicit images of themselves including their sexual orientation and commitment for purposes of evaluation.

4.2 Motivations for engaging in e-dating

Research question two (RQ2) was targeted at gathering highly opinionated data on the motivations of females in the academia in engaging in online dating and to examine their experiences on the phenomenon. The data was gathered through in-depth interviews and thematically presented to comprise: absence of intermediary influence, access to multiple partners concurrently, e-dating as a liberating and empowering space for the female; and rewriting the narratives on the commodification and objectification of the female. Each of these themes is discussed in turns and supported with excerpts from data, where necessary, to rationalize for stronger arguments.

Absence of intermediary influence

The advent of online dating has changed the face of traditional offline relationships of regular visits and painful phone calls to just clicking a button (Hammond & Cheney, 2010). The digital era has simultaneously increased the number of options available for prospective partners to choose from an array of partners without any form of interference or coercion from third party or intermediaries (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). This notion was a motivation for seven (39%) of informants who attested to indulging in e-dating. As already, indicated, the intermediary role is performed by relatives, friends and social networks of church members, especially in the case of Ghana. This is consistent with the hyperpersonal principle of the social information processing theory (Walther, 2016), where senders/prospective partners could select potential partners through texts messages and symbols so the receivers could magnify the texts and send expected feedback to initiate conversations, continue in that tangent and move the relationship to the next level without any form of interference. In other words, the concept of hyperperson allows the individual to solely form impressions on their suitors on favourable outcomes through the mediated communicative events. This is also affirmed by Levesque and Caron (2004) who support the introduction of communication technologies in romantic relationships as being able to ward off unwanted prejudices and negative perceptions from family and friends. We also observed that ten (56%) of the participants were in online dating because they felt they were matured enough to make decisions on loved ones without parental or societal prejudice or approval like the case of offline relationships. Gladys, an informant, offered a frank and straightforward answer which left a deep impression and introspection on us:

I met a guy online and we are doing fine. I am older than him and I know my parents will not approve of it. Secondly, he is from an ethnic in group in Ghana that they have always stereotyped. I know they will disapprove of it because of their level of prejudice and so they don't need to know anything about him. At this point in my life I don't need permission for whom I want to date. That would be prejudicial. We are happy together without their inference. If we decide to marry one day, we would know what to do. E-

dating to me is the best thing. It's devoid of prying eyes and I solidly endorse it (Gladys, Informant 7).

The excerpt from Gladys suggests that she has a strong personality and is level headed with a mentality of her own rights which allows her to justify the values guiding her perceptions on dating in spite of the stereotypes enacted by society as something shameful. Based on her submission, she may be stigmatized in both traditional and socialist cultures as a result of her age constraints but that does not take away her desires to go ahead with what she feels right to do. The open celebration of her engagement as shown in the data is very profound and she could be described as a budding anti-moralist in a contemporary post-socialist Ghana. The informant has demonstrated her commendation for online training and it is in tandem with Daneshpour and Fathi (2016) that the online space has allowed most women to negotiate their identities and subvert stereotypes.

Access to multiple partners concurrently

The principles of 'Doing gender' posited by West and Zimmerman (1987) conceptualize how femininity and masculinity are codified and manifested in everyday interaction. In that regard, traditional gender performances require the female to be passive in initiating relationships, relative to the man who is perceived as masculine and assertive. Gender and heterosexual romantic relationship remain a primary frame for women on traditional patterns and it is expected that a woman's fidelity should be one male at a time, whilst the male is allowed to be polygamous and date several partners concurrently. Men and women are "to do gender" so they are perceived as meeting the ideals of heterosexual femininity and masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In line with these assumptions, 11 (61%) of the informants said they are in e-dating because the dating sites provide an array of multiple partners to select concurrently as they "do gender". They accentuated that being on dating sites is motivating because it does not gyrate around prolonged protocols and pleasantries as warm ups. Everybody on the site is poised to commence a relationship which makes the selection processes easier and more accommodating. Araba Lucy an informant clearly indicated:

After reading about online dating I was intrigued about the fact that I select what I want from a pool of suitors concurrently from different dating site. My enthusiasm was heightened after my first attempt and I was amazed at the number of suitors who contacted me. Everybody had signed up to commence a relationship and there was no lengthy drawn-out conversations. I got acquainted easily and I realized that the pain of having been stacked to an unpleasant partner in an offline relationship had been needless and regretful. The phenomenon is the best for our generation because of our overreliance on the Internet and anything technology related. I would go for it any day (Araba Lucy, Informant 3).

Araba Lucy is thus affirming the relevance of e-dating and its preference, particularly, for the millennial female. In essence, the institution of heteronormativity which disempowers the female is reduced and she can negotiate the ingrained patriarchal culture of selecting from a pool of men simultaneously without prejudice. The informant's declaration corroborates the enslavement dynamics espoused by the electronic colonialism theory (McPhail, 2014) where users of the Internet and mediated communication cannot imagine their lives without technology, perceived to be the best option for all aspects of their lives. It is clearly obvious that to this informant, online dating has altered the processes of initiating relationships in traditional male-controlled cultures and should be encouraged.

E-dating as a liberating and empowering space for females

The online dating platform was perceived as an empowering and liberated space for most of the key informants to free themselves and to articulate their true selves; altering processes for regular offline dating initiations. The participants indicated that their motivation was anchored on the fact that as women in Ghana who have been socialized into waiting for proposals from the male, e-dating was a unique opportunity for them to reverse that role and deconstruct their mind sets on romantic relationships. This is consistent with Oyewumi's (2003, p.26) declaration that in some African communities in the 21st century, the woman is still relegated to the peripherals when it comes to the initiation of romantic relationships as a precursor for marriage; an important decision for the woman.

Daldal (2018) in her work, *Rethinking the Possibilities of Hegemonic Femininity: Exploring a Gramscian Framework*, perhaps, agrees with Oyewumi and also bemoans how the female as a subordinated group, is conditioned to accept, believe and be disempowered to initiate important decisions about themselves, including romantic relationships. This shows that the rules of traditional dating system in offline dating are perceived as exploitative of women where the male, in most cases with the help of other women, are tasked to be 'in charge of dating', for other women. Ironically, such a major decision about the woman is not made by herself alone but mostly by men, sometimes with the help of coerced women to swallow the bait of their choice, as a sign of adherence to the demands of a perceived culture and tradition. Indeed, a review of the literature on African women as averred by Ibeku (2015) in the analysis of feminism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus*, is that the woman is often consigned to respect the decisions of relationships regarding whom to date or eventually marry. The data as such, reinforces the subjugation of women as shown in literature and underscores reasons for the existence of more dating sites for 'only females' than there are for 'only men' (Online Dating Magazine, 2018).

Rewriting the narratives on commodifying and objectifying the women

Using the market metaphors of people as products and dating sites as shopping malls or makers, Zheng (2019) indicates that e-dating is a representative avenue for the explicit penetration of the logic of the market owing to the creation of seemingly economic-based personal profiles that emphasize efficiency through the sharing of relevant information relative to making an informed decision in the selection of a partner. Eleven (61%) of the informants intimated online dating has helped them to challenge traditional passive roles of commodification and objectification into becoming a proactive consumer where maximize their chances of meeting suitors of their choice on dating sites. We gathered from the informants that being gender-neutral consumers and assuming proactive roles of approaching potential partners themselves had helped to challenge the stereotypical notion of being tagged as the passive femininity in waithood for the male to make the first 'move'. It is an age old major traditional courtship convention in Ghana that the male should initiate the invitation of love for the female and not the other way round. Enthusiastic women woman can only make advances for fear of stigmatization. This assumption is noted to be inscribed in many female e-daters in offline relationships prior to moving online. One informant explicated that being proactive online is clearly an indication of re-writing the narratives on courtship in the Ghanaian context where the female is often described as the 'supporting partner' and not the 'protagonist'. The roles have been reversed and the female is no longer the docile persona in the quest for a partner.

Rewriting the narratives or scripts on gender roles of invitation by being proactive, as noted by Zheng (2019), is susceptible to contrivances of neoliberal market economy which contributes to changing the gender landscape in courtship in Ghana. For instance, 2 (11%) informants intimated that they have been empowered to subvert the conventional gender

socialization which makes them inept at making the first move on a potential male suitor to becoming confident and active females adept at 'shopping' for their preferred partners. They added that, from a more objective perspective, being bound by traditional gender norms, and waiting for the male's invitation is not a trait of contemporary females who are gender-neutral consumers and entitled to pursuing their set goals including the quest for love. In essence, the pre-emptive ways of re-writing the gender narratives and norms of traditional cultures is deconstructed bringing into its wake a new wave of a radical female a mentality to make her own choices online.

Why online dating is condemnable

As discussed already, online dating offers many advantages which serve as the motivations for engagement for potential suitors. However, there are disadvantages that should be considered by individuals contemplating using online dating systems should consider. It is important to note that although some of problems discussed in this paper are also inherent in traditional conventional offline dating systems, what is discussed is perceived to be more prevalent and unique to online dating. As long as human beings desire to love and be loved in the pervasive era of the Internet and use of computer mediated communication systems, the phenomenon of online dating would remain an integral part of daters in the contemporary era. With the ubiquity of the Internet, the field of eligible is no longer limited to a person's community, workplace or neighbourhood. Unique opportunities abound on dating sites to complement offline relationships (Meredith, 2020).

Therefore, the overarching goal of the second part of RQ2 is to examine the lived experiences of the informants on online dating. In pursuit of this goal, we discuss these themes which emerged as accentuating condemnation for online dating: fake self-presentation, exploitation, heightened emotional infidelity.

Fake self-presentation and cyber victimization

Gibbs, Ellison and Heino (2006) stress that online dating is prone to misrepresentation and deception by people with fake identities. This is confirmed by 9 (50%) informants who claimed they encountered fraudsters with fake identities who had created profiles to lure unsuspecting individuals into relationships. These people with sinister motives of exploitation had created profiles with fake information including scammed images purported to be their physical appearance. Fake self-presentation as a condemnable act in online dating occasioned in three forms in this study: fake representation of age; fake representation of image as youthful masculinity and vice versa; and fake representation of financial or socioeconomic status. Gendered preferences with age inequality is noted to shape conceptions of looking for an 'ideal partner'. Being a misnomer, all the informants averred they had encountered fake representation of individuals in terms of chronological age and the image of youthful masculinity displayed in profile accounts.

Consequently, 15 (83%) informants shared their experiences on how aged males who had intentionally displayed profile images of younger youths with the sinister motive to lure females into romantic relationships. Additionally, 10 (56%) informants claimed they had rather encountered cyber victimization from young men who had masked their chronological age with pictures of older men to also attract potential older women. This is an affirmation that the issue of youthful masculinity is recurring for prospective males desiring to balance authenticity with attractiveness and vice versa (Whitty, 2007). During an interview, Diana shared her excruciating experience on the issue of fake self-representation and cyber victimization:

Online dating is rife with scammers and fraudsters with fake identities regarding the use of chronological age and pictures in profile accounts. This is more profound on free dating sites. I encountered a young man who kept his identity well-hidden, even after

we had moved offline. I was 10 years older than him but he acted so maturely that I never doubted him. After exploiting me emotionally and economically, I realized he was fake. I have experienced cyber fraud and body shaming on e-dating and I will never endorse it. (Diana, Informant 6).

Diana's experience on online dating affirms the level of mistrust and fake identities occasioned by the ubiquity of the Internet and the fact that some sites could be accessed free of charge. This is also not to say that paid sites may not be fraught with all quandaries of representation that the informant is ascribing is free dating sites.

On a similar tangent, Pomah another informant, condemned online dating and fake self-representation occasioned by people with fake financial and socioeconomic status. She shared her experience in cyber victimization occasioned by her involvement with an older man who had faked his chronological age by displaying the youthful picture of his son. She claimed the imposter victimized her through blackmail:

My experience in online dating has been painful and that is why I am no longer in it. I dated a younger man who passed off as older also presented himself as a dentist. We dated for 8 months until I visited to realize the agonizing truth. His profile picture was indeed his son. During the period of self-disclosure I had shared very important and sensitive information about myself with. He blackmailed me with it when I threatened to report him to the appropriate authority. But for the police I wouldn't be here today. As for online dating, one can go into it to satisfy their curiosity but not for a serious romantic relationship because a lot of the people out there are fake (Pomah, Informant 11).

Both Diana and Pomah have shared different stories on fake identification from different angles and each story is embedded with logics on why online dating should be condemned. It could be seen that from prospective suitors, meeting a love seeker was simply an act of exploitation and to others, a platform for 'game playing' and to express their individuality as fraudsters. This finding is consistent with the assertions of Huang and Yang (2013) that misrepresentation is rife on dating sites because individuals are usually unable to determine the boundaries of self-disclosure and cyber fraudsters take undue advantage of these lapses to exploit and victimize unsuspecting users.

Cyber Exploitation and Heightened Emotional Infidelity

The proliferation of computer-assisted communication has resulted in 'virtual communities' with people perceived as self-governing bodies with their own rules and norms of "netiquettes, especially on courtship (Meredith, 2020). One reason for condemning online dating is the fact that people within the age bracket of the sample are digital natives perceived to be enslaved by the electronic media. Twelve (67%) informants did not endorse online dating because they perceive it as characteristic of emotional exploitation, emotional infidelity, and a high rate of split-ups. They claimed it is easier to end a relationship online than offline and commence another one or date people concurrently. Infidelity comprises three different categories: emotional, sexual, and a combination of both emotional and sexual infidelity (Merkle & Richardson, 2000) and each of them was identified in the data as the lived experiences of the informants. The data revealed that an online dater could easily walk out of a relationship without recourse to the level of economic or emotional investment from the other partner because it is easier to commence another relationship on a different dating site.

Adriana, another informant, also attested that she invested emotionally into an online relationship and shared seductive and inappropriate pictures of herself to a 'supposed lover', only to be blackmailed by him when she threatened to walk away after some months. She added that unsuspecting partners often fall prey to promiscuous people who date multiple partners on different platforms without any form of commitment. Such people regard their ability to juggle

between their ‘captured preys’ as playing a game where the preys naively tug along with perhaps, a high sense of expectancy. This revelation in data is contrary to the principles of the SIPT as espoused by Walther (2016) on the relevance of CMC in processing information accurately for online daters. Adrian could leveraged the body language of her suitor as complimentary to the processes of impressions management. However, this was impossible because of the absence of nonverbal cues and the whole process of getting –to –know the prospective suitor was purely on the basis of text and images without any form of physical human contact

E-dating as Ambivalent

The empirical data showed that while e-dating is perceived with its own merits and demerits, six (33%) informants were ambivalent with the phenomenon and proposed the level of engagement as key to redefining the scope of the phenomenon. The informants indicated that although online dating varies significantly from conventional dating, it was important to weigh the expectancy against the demands of the contemporary era regarding the use of CMC and the pervasiveness of technology. Mariama had this to say:

Where I meet my partner is irrelevant to the expectations of the relationship. The Internet is another world and I will not turn down an eligible suitor because I met him online. What is Western or African about meeting somebody? Nobody is colonized by the Internet because we all have our expectations in a relationship. We need to eschew these primitive ways of thinking and take advantage of the opportunities that all relationships off and not necessarily the medium. To me just as not all offline relationships work out so are online relationships. I don’t see any difference. It depends on the individuals and their level of commitment (Mariama, Informant 1)

Without a shred of doubt, the contributions from Mariama is consistent with Degim et al. (2015) that individuals in the contemporary era could explore all avenues for love as long as the desires of engagement remain essential to their basic needs. Human beings would progressively seek happiness, intimacy and social well-being, irrespective of where and how they meet their prospective partners. Thus, either aided by the tenets of the ECT or principles of SIPT, online dating can neither be condemned nor commended. People would be ambivalent about it because relationships are not predictive variables and they can fail or succeed irrespective of the medium of engagement.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The virtual space is an extension of the society and the need for love is not bound by space. The nature of engagement in online dating is examined in three distinctively interrelated stages: friendship, orientation and intimacy. The phenomenon is highly commended for altering hegemonic beliefs and patriarchal cultural discourses on the female as docile in initiating romantic relationships. Thus, e-dating is perceived to be an empowering and liberating space for females to assert their sexuality in romantic relationships as they have the power to access potential suitors themselves; constituting part of the rising new femininity in Ghana. In spite of the overwhelming motivations for online dating, the system is perceived to be fraught with condemnations including fake self-presentation and cyber victimization, exploitation and heightened emotional infidelity. Engaging in e-dating could therefore made on individual decisions of ambivalence depending on the levels of engagement of the participants.

The paper contributes to literature by concluding that e-dating is prevalent among females in the academia because of their busy their schedules and the fact that they suffer gender constraints by seeking for love by virtue of their perceived strong personality, accomplishment, and level of thinking. The paper also recommends efforts at enhancing

security protocols on online dating sites to help reduce the high rate of impersonation and cyber fraud.

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