

How Far Will We Go for (Online) Love?

A Study of the Geographical Effects of Online

Dating

Kevin Tamerler

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Department of Global Studies and Geography

Hofstra University

Dr. Kari B. Jensen,

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Introduction

Relationships formed through online dating are an ever increasing proportion of relationships in America. While estimates vary widely, millions of individuals are engaged in online dating on the largest sites; each day millions of messages are exchanged, tens of thousands of dates arranged, thousands of connections made. The increasing digitization of romance is going to have many effects on American society: economic impacts, social impacts, and in the case of this study geographic impacts. I seek to study what effect the rise of online dating will have on the distances people travel for romantic attachments, and more critically on where individuals will end up settling down and living together. Increasing mobility and migration is a fact of life in modern, globalized nations; a large part of this migration can be attributed to economic or political reasons but some of it is attributable to more personal reasons such as finding a romantic partner. It is my belief that the capacity of online dating to link individuals over long distances will lead to an increasing shuffling of location for individuals as they move to be nearer to romantic, and ultimately marital, partners.

The basic recognized social unit in our society is the nuclear family, consisting of a married couple and their children. While this can vary, with some emphasis on extended families and the rise of single parenthood or divorced families, at root the social ideal that Americans strive towards is one of a census defined household with a married couple and children. The creation of this family unit relies on the institution of marriage, which in our society is facilitated through romantic selection by individuals seeking to engage in a romantic relationship and ultimately matrimony. The process of dating and selection requires first of all that the couple meet, and this can be facilitated in a number of ways.

Traditionally, this involved either proximity or social connections through others. It is this part of the process that is being increasingly replaced by an online dating site or service, introducing young, eligible individuals who may be interested in pursuing a relationship together. The key difference between the two processes for this paper is that if the future couple were to meet randomly or be introduced they have to, at least temporarily, inhabit the same physical space. This limits the geographic range of possible matches. However, with the rise of online dating the process of meeting and forming romantic attachments is detached from geographic proximity.

Online the early process of attachment forming and conversation can happen at any distance physically; emotional attachments are stretched over unprecedented distances. Ultimately, of course, the majority of couples do seek to meet and cohabit “in real life.” Assuming the process progresses, most couples will move in together or even marry; this will lead to at least one and possibly both partners being forced to uproot and move to be with the other partner. The implications of this, as the proportion of relationships which begin online increases, will be huge for where and how people live and migrate within the United States. This would be an enormous force creating mass migrations, not necessarily to or from specific areas but instead a sort of great and constant game of musical chairs. Whereas economic migration tends to lead to some areas becoming depopulated while others grow, romantic migration is more likely to be between and within areas.

Economic motivations for migration can often operate at transcontinental distances, romantic migrations will more often be simply between population centers in an existing metropolitan area. Websites generally allow for a certain search radius from your own location. They have a vested interest in making this radius as wide as possible for each user, because that will return the most possible matches for that user to choose from and

work their way through; using design choices such as locating users by postal code rather than address, and listing distances in miles rather than in travel time allows the site an ample amount of fudging. For example, my hometown postal code is suburban to rural and expands for ten minutes in every direction from the post office. Double that distance for two users sitting on far ends of their zip codes, and you have a twenty minute “fudge factor.” Users themselves will slowly expand their search radius, as they reject or run through more conveniently located options; another tactic common to online dating users is listing their location as a central urban district when they actually live in a suburb in order to cast a wider net. Thus, the tendency is there for individuals to meet and make a connection despite often considerable geographic distance, many times without realizing it.

In this paper I will use the experiences of individuals who have engaged in these sorts of relationships, combined with the theory created by other researchers, to illustrate how these relationships form, why their frequency will likely increase over time, and why this will have a huge impact on communities going forward.

Upon reflection, it will be seen that there are only a few reasons that motivate the majority of migrations within modern America: Economic causes (moving for a job, or a cheaper cost of living), moving for personal preference (a more pleasant climate, or a more amenable social sphere), and moving to marry or cohabit with a romantic partner. It is difficult to find much thought at all devoted to what might be termed romantic migration, whereas economic geography is well represented and considerable ink has been expended explaining why people are attracted to certain places and not others. Romantic migrations are made even more likely and important in that they are based in connections between two people, and either of them might choose to migrate due to

economic or social reasons. While these migrations are often less dramatic, often involving merely a move across a city or from one suburb to one lying on the opposite side of the metropole; they nonetheless will have a significant impact on such location-studies concepts as sense of place, ties to a given location, and most importantly the creation and maintenance of strong community in a given location. While an hour migration might not strike a geographer as comparable to sailing an ocean or crossing a border, it will still involve joining new churches or community organizations, new schools and PTA boards, getting to know new local zoning boards and elected officials; in short it will require the assimilation of the newcomer(s) into the new community, and their place in their old community being filled. Multiplied many thousands of times, this will have a huge impact on our communities and needs to be studied.

Methodology

The methodology I use to study this is a mix of reviewing studies done by others, interviewing individuals who have engaged in long distance relationships formed through online dating, and a small foray into exploring the particular communities active on a number of sites by creating accounts and making small exploratory use of those sites as a user.

While, as I stated above, the current literature doesn't cover this topic precisely, it does provide a huge array of analytical tools for understanding the online dating phenomena. Studies by both professional academics and amateurs seeking to satisfy their curiosity on the internet have analyzed many aspects of behavior on online dating sites. The site OkCupid in particular, deserves praise for publishing a blog of quantitative studies of its own website's users; pointing in particular to their behavior as it regards

interactions across gender and racial boundaries.

I interviewed 87 individuals who have dated online, 65 of whom have engaged in long distance relationships as a result. This will illustrate how trends in online dating can have an impact on the wider world. My interview subjects consist of several individuals who I know personally quite well who have engaged in online dating, a large number of individuals who volunteered to participate after being contacted through various online forums, and a number of people referred to me by the previous two sources. A large number of subjects were contacted through the online forum Reddit's subforum devoted to OkCupid discussion. Another large cohort came from the online forums on the online dating websites themselves. A small number came through using the online dating services themselves. Obviously this creates a certain sample bias, as those who gather online to talk about online dating constitute a certain subset of people who date online. The answers I got were likely more thought out, more verbose, and more widely experienced as a result. The average age was 26.8, the majority were college educated, 54 men and 33 women. It should be noted that for a while I exclusively interviewed women, because at first there were so many men that it was necessary to balance the genders. Also, the average user I interviewed had been using the site for at least seven months. This likely signals that these users had not 'succeeded' in finding a mate on these sites, since most people leave at that point. This could skew the answers in a certain direction, perhaps those who find what they are looking for would view the process differently. In several cases, I have had the opportunity to examine (with the consent of both participants) the online chat records containing the conversations around the coming together of long distance couples. Throughout the paper, where I am quoting from an interview it will be placed in quotes with the gender of the speaker in parentheses behind

it. All the interviewees were guaranteed anonymity as a condition of speaking to me, and as such will not be identified.

The interviews were conducted via internet chat applications (54), occasionally via phone(8), and wherever possible I met them in person(25). The in person interviews were generally at a coffee shop or bar of the interviewee's choice so as to make them feel as comfortable as possible. The online chat interviews were mostly conducted via Reddit's chat function, Facebook messenger, or AIM. The quotes from chats were taken directly from the typed transcripts, occasionally with (interviewee approved) corrections to grammar and word choice. Where possible to preserve the original meaning, both explicit and implicit, I retained the original formatting and word choice. Where I felt it was necessary I notated these as (sic) to show that this was from the original. The majority of the alterations were to remove overly egregious "txtspk" used by the interviewee or to correct obvious errors due to a smartphone's autocorrect function, when I felt they would impair understanding the interviewee's intended meaning. I also censored profanity wherever it was used, so that it would not be a distraction. Where the interviews were verbal, I took notes during the interview and the quotes are from my transcriptions. When a quote that I thought was notable came up, I often asked for repetition or clarification, and worked with the interviewee to write it down in a form that got across their intended meaning. In some cases I found something in my notes later that I felt was appropriate to include, in those cases I contacted the interviewee and asked them to approve my transcription. In all cases the provided quotes have been approved wherever they could have been altered or corrected.

The interviews used the attached template questions (Appendix 1), but they tended to be phrased differently in each case. The topic of online dating is inherently informal and

private in nature; I sought to make my interviewees as comfortable as possible. Thus I normally chose not to use the original phrasing of the questions, and instead phrased them in such a way as to make the asking of the question less obnoxious. Particularly in the in person or phone interviews, using overly stilted language ran the risk of making the interviewee respond in formal and stilted ways. Instead my goal was to convince them to express the emotional and lived experience of their relationships, and thus to gain insight into them, so I phrased the questions as conversationally and naturally as possible. I became better at this as the interviews continued, so perhaps some of the earlier interviews might have gone differently had I had the experience of conducting the later interviews under my belt already. This is likely why a fair majority of the quotes are from later interviews. The questions are provided in the appendix, but keep in mind that the phrasing and ordering depended on the natural flow of conversation. However while the particular questions asked changed, I had this template in front of me and in mind during each interview.

Finally, I have engaged in exploratory use of these sites as a research method. I feel that it was very valuable to not just research the process of online dating, but to try, as far as possible without breaching ethical boundaries, to experience the process myself in the nature of a participatory observation method of research. The ease of making an account, and the disposable “spray and pray” nature of most online connections made this an easy and low risk endeavor. Most online conversations end after a handful of messages sent with no real conclusion, so a person disappearing after ten or so messages is hardly even a blip on most users' radar. Since my own experience would represent only half the story due to gender, I also recruited my research assistant Julia Rafatpanah to make her own fictional profile, which I could examine and to an extent control in order to see the process

from a woman's perspective as well as a man's. Both profiles used actual pictures of Julia and I, all information except names and other identifying information was accurate, and the profiles were written as near as possible to how we would write them if we were using the sites normally. The profile was essentially mine, but altered to prevent identification; which is actually a fairly common tactic used by online daters. By engaging with individuals on these sites, I was able to learn a great deal experientially and emotionally that was difficult to understand intellectually by merely reading about it. For example, I never truly comprehended the way that new women on the site are “treated” to vast waves of males seeking their attention. I had heard of it, but it was only when Julia had received 100 messages in one night and declared herself “Queen of the Internet” that I truly understood the way this experience was so completely skewed based on gender. In addition, one quickly comes to appreciate how expanding the search area is encouraged by the site in order to expand your matches; and how many individuals falsify their location in order to tap into the right markets. By utilizing the sites myself, I understood the jargon used by interviewees and the context in which they were speaking.

The primary dating sites/services studied here are Plenty of Fish (Often referred to as “PoF,” PlentyOfFish.com), OkCupid (“OkC,” OkCupid.com) and the smartphone-only Tinder (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.tinder>). While there are many online dating sites, with themes ranging from the general to the specialized, my interviewees tended to use these the most and they were by far the most widespread. Other sites used by interview subjects included ethnically specialized sites like Jdate (<http://jdate.com>, designed to connect young Jews) or topically specialized sites like FetLife (<https://fetlife.com>, designed to connect those interested in deviant sexual practices). However the majority of my analysis will use these three because the majority

of the respondents had at least used them at some point. They chose these sites primarily on the basis of price (Free/Freemium), many saw paying for online dating as an admission of being pathetic and lonely and would prefer to use a free website. The revenue model of OkCupid and Plenty of Fish is the “freemium” strategy based around free profile creation with advertising and purchasable upgrades. The sites are perfectly usable site without purchasing the premium membership; premium membership confers perks, for example premium users show up first under the “Meet Me” function for other users and they can see if a user they have messaged has read the message yet. While many users expressed skepticism of buying the right to put up a profile, a large number also were willing to purchase these upgrades to improve their experience once already a part of the site.

Plenty of Fish is advertised as “The World's Largest Online Dating Site” with millions of active users, unfortunately these statistics are next to impossible to verify. In general the site draws all kinds of users, ranging across ethnicities and income brackets; however it does tend to draw a more casual and less college educated crowd than OkCupid, a similar site using a similar freemium model. Politically and culturally, Plenty of Fish is more conservative and less high-brow than OkCupid. Browsing PoF you were more likely to run into girls and guys whose interests included “Trucks” or “Hunting” and favorite bands like country star Luke Bryant or rapper Machine Gun Kelly; while on OkC someone's interests were more likely to include “Queering Gender Politics” or “Protesting Oppressive Policies” while favorite bands tended towards indie rockers I had mostly never heard of. Interestingly, despite virtually identical features including a long written profile section, a space to itemize interests and favorite media, and various quizzes designed to match you with other users, OkC and PoF users choose to utilize these features entirely differently. PoF profiles tended to be short, grammatically unsound, and to the point.

Normally they expressed some preferences about potential matches ranging from the simple “should like Imagine Dragons” to the politically incorrect “white guys only.” (Interesting observation: ethnic preferences tended to be expressed most often when searching for an individual outside one's own ethnic group. In general it was black and Hispanic girls expressing explicit interest in white men, while white women were more likely to express a direct interest in black and Hispanic men. Possibly this is because the interest ran counter to assumptions so they sought to directly signal that they would be interested, possibly these individuals choose to date online because they find it harder to date outside their own ethnicity.) The profile would then move on to a few basic interests or facts about oneself such as “I'm really into Crossfit and you should be too” to “Philadelphia sports all the way.” OkC profiles on the other hand, generally take the form of long open letters, introducing oneself and one's whole life story. They tended to be longer, more literate, more specific and opinionated. The pictures chosen varied by website as well, with PoF users tending towards using whatever happens to be lying around while OkC users often sought to include pictures from multiple angles and engaged in fun activities meant to show mating quality. The users of each website tended to “curve” their expectations of profiles depending on the site, what users defined as a “sparse” or “empty” profile varied depending on the competition. Where 100 correctly spelled words gets you through a PoF profile with flying colors, OkC profiles of less than 500 often were rejected on the basis of “not telling me anything.”

Tinder is the wild card in online dating, a smartphone app with a unique model. A profile is made from the user's Facebook profile, using pictures from that profile and a few lines of facts about oneself. The user is then presented with other users photos and names who are located nearby, a user can then either “swipe left” (dislike/reject) or

“swipe right” (like/match), to indicate interest in those potential matches. Both OkC and PoF include similar functions labeled “quickmatch” and “meet me” respectively. They are among the most used features on these sites. The difference on Tinder is that the other user is similarly presented with pictures and choices. The two users only find out about each other if they both “swipe right.” There is no way to see who is using Tinder, or to get into contact with them, except if they express mutual interest with you. The goal is to limit matches to those who would be genuinely interested in talking to each other, rather than the spray and pray nature of other sites. Because of its lightweight, low commitment nature (rather than even requiring you to design a separate profile, Tinder scrapes the requisite info and pictures off of your extant Facebook profile) Tinder tends to draw the most casual crowd, interested primarily in low-commitment dating or even just in chatting online and seeing who is interested in them. This leads the user-base to take an extremely cavalier attitude towards matches, knowing that most likely they will not pan out to anything but nonetheless interested in taking a chance.

To define terms used in this paper, to be “in a Relationship” is generally defined as a mutually agreed upon, mutually committed to agreement to date exclusively between two people. Long term relationship is generally used to mean that, *ceteris paribus*, the relationship will continue; i.e. it will take some definite action or failure for the relationship to break down rather than having an expiration date or simply ceasing to exist due to lack of effort. Long distance is obviously a hazy term, but will generally be used to mean all relationships at a distance beyond ninety minutes of average travel time. All these terms are my understanding of how they are used by the interviewees, and it's possible that where they appear in the interviewees' quotes they are used with different connotations or understandings, but this is as close to a generally accepted definition as it

is possible to reach when dealing with actively used slang terms. (Appendix 2 elaborates on my definition of terms).

Existing Theory on Online Dating and Illustrations from Interviews

In order to properly understand the geographical flows of online dating, one must first understand how people act when online dating and why it is that they act that way. The majority of the literature revolves around such questions of actions and motivations. The articles are drawn from a variety of disciplinary conversations, including technologists, philosophy, psychology, relationship studies, semiotics, and sociology. All these fields touch on the questions inherent in online dating, and as such have something to add to our understanding of how it is done, why it is done that way, and who does so or benefits from doing so. A brief review of several articles I found illuminating on the topic is provided below, with comments from myself and my interview subjects on the topics covered.

In her work *The Filtered Encounter* Kirsty Best (2012) focuses on the ways in which individuals sort through their online dating prospects. First she examines the algorithms and search coding and criteria that are used by online dating sites to filter the prospective matches. The effect of all this math on the process, and the lengths to which websites and individuals go to properly filter potential matches, makes one astounded at the fact that we humans ever managed to breed when our choice was based primarily on mere proximity and opportunity. These numbers take on an almost sacred significance for regular users of the site: a 90% match score or higher is often regarded as predestined for you. Several users commented on the mixed feelings of fear, intimidation, and excitement that result when one finds a particularly high match, one user likened making contact with a

“unicorn” (as he called them) to “applying for a dream job I'm not qualified to do.”

However, users also had their doubts as to the validity of the system, which Best (2012) supports in her paper. One female commented: “It's totally overwhelming when you first arrive, like you're being reduced to 1s and 0s. It's only after a few weeks that you start to get comfortable with it, but you still wonder how much it all means, you know? Do I really loathe the person who is a 95% enemy with me? Am I meant for the person who I match 99% with?” Best (2012) notes that, despite the best efforts of programmers, the algorithms quickly hit the upper limit of how well individuals can reasonably be boiled down to their essential attributes through online questionnaires, and the resulting matches are presented to the end user. Much of this is due to the userbase being unwilling to either answer questions or to answer them honestly. One user likened filling out the surveys from which they draw the match results to torture: “answering the endless f***ing questions on PoF (PlentyOfFish.com) is like pulling teeth with a socket wrench.” Thus, the results are at best approximate, in practice many users noted that despite the excitement of finding one's putative “perfect match” the match rankings were a rough guideline at best. “Yeah, the first time I got pumped for a 95% match, thought he was my one true love. But it wears off after the first 5 of them turned out to be duds. Now I just look for 60% or so, which means there are no dealbreakers and we like some of the same music.”(Male) Best (2012) found that for the majority of users the primary concern is filtering through this vast number of matches to find the ones that are worth trying to contact and establish a relationship with. This involves varying degrees of meta- filtering, such as manipulating the search and matching algorithms cleverly to produce the intended result; or looking for particular answers to questions that act as signals to indicate some unacceptable attitude, behavior, or attribute. “You pick up fast which camera angles

indicate what a girl thinks her body is missing. Chub: up and the to the side to catch face and [breasts]. Ugly face: Far off shots, sunglasses, moving and among others. You pick up fast which girls you avoid because they don't look like their pictures.”(Male) “Guys are predictable. They all try the same tired lines in their descrip. I fly past the bathroom selfies, the 'I want a girl who's serious' or the '420' in your activities. Those are my triggers!”(Female) The upshot of this, which I think Best (2012) insufficiently emphasizes, is that as certain traits or behaviors become triggers to a filter, people realize that others are filtering them as well. This leads them to lie in order to escape the filters of their own potential mates, leading to a cycle of escalating filtering. For example, many users filter crudely by weight or body type indicators used by the site. Because they realize that most will immediately skip a profile marked “Obese”, the Obese mark themselves “Overweight.” Over time as this becomes standard, people round up the indicators, creating more stringent filters and creating a 'language' within the indicators that is specific to the website and its community. “Word around the campfire for guys is that whatever a girl puts down as her 'looking for' she will be down for a casual f*** if you play it right. How much commitment she says she wants just tells you how hard you have to work for it.”(Male) “I look for the marks of a guy who is successful, f*** what they say to me. All of 'em front that they're rockin' a 100k a year job, but half of the a***** can't even talk about the job they say they have without forgetting what they said they did!”(Female) Best's (2012) conclusions are primarily negative towards the concept of a Filtered Encounter, seeing it as a kind of “shopping culture” in online dating, the result being that people's “dating energies” are sapped. “It's got to the point where it's more like buying a used car than asking a girl to be your girlfriend. Instead of trying to find out about them so I can see what I'll love about them, I'm trying to find out if there's

frame damage in their past.”(Male) Rather than the spontaneity and adventure of meeting someone in real life, the online dating game can become a series of checked boxes. “I used to meet a guy in college and if he was cute and taller than me I'd give him a shot, after all the HORROR(sic) stories you hear and go through as a girl on this site, f***, I've got so many more dealbreakers than I used to. Don't need to be wasting my time on this.”(Female) Her comments were a theme among many I interviewed: as the number of “failed dates” mounted users became more and more gun shy creating longer and longer lists of important boxes that must be checked or left blank for the relationship to go forward. This contributes towards increasing geographic distance in searches: as users filter out local matches, they search a wider and wider area for that perfect mate who checks each and every box.

Kim and Lee (2009) studied an important aspect of online dating when they looked into the correlation between self-esteem, sociability, the importance of romantic relationships, and use of online dating services in their 2009 study *Psychological Characteristics of Internet Dating Service Users*. Their findings were surprising, upending the established stereotype that the majority of internet dating service users were shut-ins with few social outlets outside of the computerized world of online dating. They found that users with high self-esteem and users who were highly sociable were more likely to use internet dating services, **provided** that they found a romantic relationship to be highly important to them. If they did not judge a romantic relationship highly important, then the correlation disappeared and high/low self-esteem users utilized the site at the same rate. This suggests that the stereotype of online dating users that is current publicly is wrong, and will likely disappear as the online dating space grows and more users come in contact with the wider public. When virtually everyone knows a successful

couple who met online, it will be difficult for misperceptions to remain. Kim and Lee (2009) theorize that the differential rates of use stem from the willingness of people with high self-esteem and sociability to self-promote, an essential feature of self presentation on an online dating site. Clearly, it is impossible to pigeonhole online dating users as merely self effacing shut ins.

Meredith Poley (2012) sought to further tease out the characteristics of online daters, positing two models of online dating: *Social Compensation or the Rich Get Richer*. In her essay she utilized polls of online daters and internet users to try to work out the nature of online encounters. She split the polled into two groups: the socially competent who were highly sociable, had high self-esteem and could easily navigate social situations; and the socially incompetent who lacked strong social circles and could presumably therefore not navigate the real-world dating ecosystem profitably. I have some degree of objection to this binary dualizing theory of individuals, it would likely have been more useful to draw the comparisons as a spectrum and try to plot a correlation. That aside, she succeeded in finding that neither hypothesis was exactly operating. The social compensation theory was sunk by the fact that socially competent people were more likely to use the websites, and that socially incompetent people showed a stronger attachment to face to face dating rather than online encounters. This indicates once again Kim and Lee's (2009) findings that online daters aren't always misanthropic basement dwellers. It is theorized that socially incompetent individuals found getting to know someone online difficult because of the same factors visible in Kim and Lee (2009): they are nervous about or bad at self-presentation and self-promotion, both traits essential to successfully dating online. However, the Rich Get Richer hypothesis was lost due to the fact that most socially competent individuals saw less benefit from online dating and therefore less interest in it.

The experiences of many that I interviewed indicate that these results might not indicate what the authors believe they prove, however. While socially competent users may perceive less benefit in dating online, this very attitude may be key to dating online successfully. Many users I spoke to talked about how “desperation is a stinky cologne”(Female) Appearing nonchalant and even somewhat uninterested was placed at a premium by users, with overmuch interest being read as a sign of desperation and consequently of being not worth it. Meanwhile, while socially incompetent individuals may prefer to date off-line, they often may have little choice in doing so and therefore the social compensation model may still address a significant portion of users. Meanwhile Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found in favor of the Rich Get Richer theory in their study of *Who Visits Online Dating Sites?* In the study, they polled a large group of Dutch internet users to find what characteristics were typical of online daters. They failed to find any correlation between online dating and education level or income. This is unsurprising, as both high and low status individuals have something to gain from engaging in online dating. Their third parameter, Dating Anxiety, was successful in showing a strong correlation between those with relatively low anxiety related to romantic relationships and those who use online dating services. This aligns with the above studies, in that those with lower anxiety and nervousness related to dating may have a stronger confidence in their ability to date online, and less fear of the social stigma associated with dating online. They suggest that these results contradict the widespread stereotypes of online daters, and that these stereotypes may be outdated. I would argue that these historical stereotypes are in part the cause of the correlation. The socially incompetent or high anxiety users are afraid of advertising their plight by dating online, while those who are secure in their self-esteem and ability seek to take advantage of any opportunity with no fear of any adverse social

stigma. Many users spoke about this fear of “giving up” and dating online: “I felt like dating online was admitting my cosmic loserdom”(Male), “I used a fake name and didn't show my face in my pics because I couldn't stand the idea of someone I know finding me.”(Female), “Litigation is a prestige and respect oriented field; I live in fear that one day every associate in my office will be passing around my OkCupid profile and I'll be a laughinstock...I waited a while before I started using it out of fear of that.”(Male), “Good girls aren't supposed to go out looking for boys, I should be turning them away not slutting it up online trying to get their attention! It took me a long time to get over that attitude and give it a try.”(Female)

I found that both the “Rich get Richer” and the “Social Compensation” model seemed to be playing out simultaneously, with socially competent individuals seeking out additional rent while concurrently the socially cloistered seek to compensate for their otherwise barren social lives. “I got into online dating because I had no idea where to find a girl. Then I got there and there were plenty of girls, but it was still a b**** and a half getting one to reply to me!”(Male) “I thought OkCupid was gonna be this paradise where guys would, [where] I could talk to guys. I get ignored at a club, because I'm nothing much to look at. Turns out, I get lots of guys blowing up my inbox, but most of them just want a hook up.”(Female) “All I do is go to work, come home, go to the gym, make dinner, watch TV. I don't meet guys naturally. So, I use online dating to give me a pool to work with.”(Female) These individuals, and many others like them, definitely demonstrated that the social compensation theory had some takers. On the other hand, as noted in some of those quotes, many “socially incompetent” individuals (or to be kinder or less judgmental: individuals who could not find sufficient opportunities via ordinary means) find that dating online does not mean an instant reversal of their fortunes. On the

contrary, many times I heard the same lines: “I thought I could beat the flat-brim douchebags from the bars once I got online...but the same guys are online taking ab shots in their mirrors and the girls still swoon over that b*****!”(Male) “It's just as hard to find a guy I connect with online as it was in real life. There are more opportunities, but just as few hits, so it washes out.”(Female) Users found that their expectations for the social order to be reversed and to have an easier time of it were not met, but that the added opportunities from online dating were often rewarding. This often leads them to cast a wider net, both in terms of attributes and in terms of geography; this in turn leads them to initiate long distance relationships and to be willing to stick with them despite the difficulties. Other online daters reported that they had perfectly satisfying romantic and sexual lives before using online dating, and used it as a sideline or to find a specific 'type' they found attractive. “I could go to a party and hook up, I do sometimes, but I made a PoF profile because it's easier and I can just run the app on my iphone in between and meet someone without any special effort.”(Male) “Taking hours to get makeup on, get dressed up, pre-game (drinking before going to a bar or party in order to arrive already drunk and avoid paying higher prices), go there, spend a few hours getting grinded on by f***** creepers, maybe meet one nice guy, wake up the next morning with a hangover and three thousand calories of booze to work off. Or just reply to a few messages a day on OkCupid and I'll get more done with less effort, and I can take it at my own pace.”(Female) “I really want my long term relationship prospects to be as educated as I am, but it's tough to find guys like that in my work and social groups. So I still date casually in real life, while hoping my mr. right on OkCupid falls into my lap.”(Female) I would also include in this category many homosexuals I talked to, who said that they found OkCupid or PoF helpful because the gay community can become too small and

insular given its small size outside of major cities. Using online dating sites to “bring in new blood”(Male) as one put it is a method for preventing a small dating pool from growing stale; rather than a strategy for avenging social shortcomings. This too leads to dating outside of a local area. Both online dating paradigms outlined in research can lead to the same result: more people dating over longer distances.

While these results may point towards reasons why people would choose long distance relationships, it still cannot be avoided that long distance relationships are universally considered inferior to being in proximity to your amour. Unanimously, every interviewee agreed that long distance relationships were to be avoided wherever possible, that they meant more effort and difficulties for less reward, and were to be used only as an absolute last resort. Nonetheless all but a handful of my respondents had engaged at one time or another in a relationship where they were at least one and a half hours travel time from their significant other. (I qualify this as the minimum necessary to be truly “long distance”, for further discussion see Appendix 2) How does one explain this paradox?

One explanation is offered by researchers Merkle and Richardson (2000), writing in the journal “Family Relations” on the differences between online dating and it's real world counterpart in their article *Digital Dating and Virtual Relating*. Their goal is to conceptualize online dating in terms of existing paradigms of dating and relationships. They see most in person relationships as progressing from personal proximity and acknowledgement, to “small talk”, and thence to acts of self disclosure and “getting to know you better.” It is through these psychologically risky and costly acts of revealing details about oneself that a relationship begins to shift from being an impersonal friendly relationship and transforms into a romantic attachment. Online dating inverts that process. The subjects begin remote from one another physically, but often in intense acts of self

disclosure either in the form of online discussion as the authors posit, or today in the form of an online personal profile which summarizes many likes, dislikes, personal characteristics, and criteria you seek in a mate. The authors make much of this inversion of intimacy, and I agree with their assessment. Whereas in an ordinary relationship, one is likely to see someone and speak to them for a long time before one learns their favorite films or most hated musical styles or preferred deserts, in online dating one will often learn all those things in the process of even deciding to speak to that individual. Many of those interviewed also saw this inversion in their own experiences. "It's weird when you first get an account online, and you meet someone and you know their favorite color and what they do and where they grew up before I even say a word to them. Then because you spend so much time talking before you meet up, you're practically best friends before you are in the same room. I'll have inside jokes with a girl before I've given her a hug. It's surreal."(Male) "I feel like online dating means eliminating secrets, because you don't want to reveal anything to them later on or they'll feel hijacked. You're under pressure to disclose everything that could possibly be somebody's deal breaker up front, because otherwise you're giving them an 'out' later on. Like if you don't tell them before you meet, you can't until you've been dating for months."(Female)

The most necessary update to their conception of online relationships, however, is almost certainly the search engine. Their paper fails to understand just how much of our lives are online today. Russell Belk (2013) engages with this topic of our online manifestations in revisiting his own concept of the "Extended Self," which he had proposed in 1988. The Extended Self is the psychological attachment we have to certain objects, persons or places; we make them part of our self and our identity in important ways. It is difficult for us to perceive ourselves in any meaningful way in the absence of

such things. Belk (2013) sees that this concept needs to be updated in the face of the increasing digitization of our world, and thus seeks to make the necessary changes to his theory. The original theory was oriented around physical objects, which Belk (2013) counters with the modern phenomenon of Dematerialization, which he argues is increasingly prevalent as music, the written word, computer programs, and communications are often found only online in digital form when we call upon them. For example where the music fan once had hordes of vinyls stashed in racks in their basement, now instead the music that they identify with is accessed online through streaming services like Spotify. Belk (2013) also sees, in particular relevance to online dating, our attachment to our online representations, our “re-embodiment.” We grow attached to these avatars as direct representations of ourselves, and see both our own and others' avatars as legitimate portions and representations of the psyche that produced them. This is critical to the online dating attitude of examining personalities based on online profiles and representations. If users did not see their own and others' profiles as representing their true intentions, then it would be impossible to use them as a way to meet and judge others as worthy or unworthy of our attentions. In particular, two of his updates to the concept of the extended self that he deems necessary due to this re-embodiment are critical. His concept of the “Proteus effect” by which individuals take on psychological characteristics from the avatar they present has quite interesting implications. For example, people with a physically intimidating avatar in an online game act more confident, while those with an avatar that appears elderly will act more cautiously. These changes even carry over after the game has ended, and the user has returned to ordinary life. This has interesting implications with people's actions while online dating. There is a strong impetus to create and present a profile that is attractive, confident, outgoing, and adventurous. By acting and

presenting themselves in that way, many users may begin to unconsciously manifest those traits both online and in real life. “A lot of times you fake it 'til you make it. I say to myself, like, 'ok, you're going to be fun tonight' and then I'm stuck in this box with him, like I can't change who I said I was.”(Female) The second important concept is Multiplicity, which deals with the creation of “alternative” personas, or “alts”, which one uses to express different aspects of one's personality. A user may have a primary persona and avatar by which one is a soulful, tasteful artistic type; while using a separate persona to act as an outgoing and adventurous partier. These separate aspects of personality can be purified and separated, and this is common in online dating, where users will often maintain separate profiles on separate sites so as to take advantage of different user bases on different services. Among those interviewed OkCupid and Match.com were considered the “serious” options, while Plenty of Fish was primarily for casual dating, and Tinder and Grindr were for casual sex. I heard these same distinctions from both men and women, which would seem to indicate that both parties in a conversation on any one of these sites might be active on other sites, looking for other things. A couple who form a long term relationship after meeting on OkCupid might both have accounts on Tinder, for example, where they search for more casual encounters. Yet while their relationship becomes serious through OkCupid, they would have taken a more casual attitude towards each other had they met on Tinder. These kinds of distinctions lie at the intersection of the Proteus effect and Multiplicity. Interestingly, as Belk (2013) realizes, this can create both positive and negative consequences due to the aforementioned prevalence of search engines and the availability of so much online information to everyone. Because multiple personas, either on dating sites or online social communities such as forums and blogs, may become visible to any potential partner and as a result the message can become

muddled. The self-righteous political pundit that you act as on left wing economics blogs, the thoughtful philosopher on religious websites, the swaggering fanatic on gaming forums, and the boyfriend material profile on Match.com; all these online personas can become visible to a potential partner, which complicates the image you have so carefully cultivated on the site. Stories of this kind of cross pollination abounded: “I make it a rule to look up every girl I meet on Facebook before I go on a date with her. I've run into a lot of dealbreakers on there. And f*** you if you claim that you don't have a Facebook, I'm not bothering to meet you. It's worth it to see someone outside of when they are trying to impress me.”(Female) “I mean like, it's petty and all, but once I met a guy who talked about nothing but the Phillies with me because I said I was a big Phillies fan on my profile. Well we traded Facebooks and his profile picture was him in a Mets cap! Like, yeah, maybe it's petty but why would you lie like that just to get into my pants?”(Female) “I keep profiles on OkCupid and on Tinder, I was talking to a girl on OkCupid who was real reticent and pure, making it clear she wasn't about to put out 'til we were in a relationship. Chill, whatever, maybe she'll be worth it. Well I got drunk that night and went on Tinder for lolz (sic) and who do I find? Same girl, but this time her profile pic is her leaning over in a bikini and her tagline is 'looking for someone for tonight.' Now before I didn't care, but somehow it felt wrong that I was put in one box because we met on this service instead of that one, so I ended it.”(Male) The majority of stories were negative, involving revelations of lies or perceived deception. Likely this is because online dating places such a high premium on trust that once betrayed, it can't be regained easily.

In a sense this inversion of intimacy is not just a part of dating online, but also of dating in “meatspace.” Personally, through Google prospective girlfriends have found

treasure troves of online comments and articles from or about me; when we had barely spoken up to that point. This front loading of information has an incredibly important effect on how relationships occur, catalyze, and grow in the internet age versus how they occur in real life. Rather than slowly revealing facts about myself, a potential mate equipped with my usernames on Reddit, RiverAveBlues, TheAmericanConservative, and Facebook would quickly have access to all kinds of opinions I've offered casually over the years. This situation leads to ever increasing measures taken to manage online information, and to keep that information compartmentalized to avoid cross contamination.

The result of the inversion of intimacy outlined by Merkle and Richardson (2000) and explained by Belk (2013) is that it's possible to form an incredibly strong mental attachment for someone without ever meeting them face to face. "You definitely can dream on people before you meet them. You're always supposed to round pictures down, assume a good angle. Well, get to like someone and you start to assume a bad angle, maybe she's prettier than that. You imagine their voice as smooth and sultry, their mannerisms as confident and sexy, their kissing technique is impeccable. They never live up to the fantasy, but it makes it seem worth it to go out of your way to meet someone."(Female) Large acts of disclosure of personal information become symbolic of intimacy in a psychological sense where physical intimacy is precluded. I noted among my interviewees and in my own experience of the services a progression of intimacy emerging. First came messaging on the site, then text messaging through some other medium, then exchanging pictures (it doesn't matter if the pictures are precisely identical to the ones on your profile, the important part is the act of giving it to someone), then meeting in person. The progression tends to function in such a way that where one begins

by saying 'Hey, we'll just make small talk, it's no big deal' it quickly reaches the point where you have invested considerable mental resources.

This relates to the sunk cost fallacy. The sunk cost fallacy is a concept within behavioral economics which observes that individuals often prefer to continue with a course they have already begun over beginning a new course, even if the costs are lower and the benefits higher for the new course. The sunk cost fallacy is termed an over application of the do not waste heuristic, encouraging us not to lose previous investment by attempting to salvage some value from it. This causes those who commit the fallacy to choose a less efficient and economically 'irrational' course rather than the superior 'rational' course because they do not want to 'lose' their previous investment, when in reality the previous investment is already unrecoverable and the only thing that matters for the decision is the future investment required to obtain benefits. For example a car owner might prefer to sink more than the value of their car into repairs, although they could purchase a functioning used car for less. Scrapping the car, however, entails admitting a loss on the original purchase price, and they would rather keep that loss mentally 'off the books' by repairing the car and continuing to use it. Coleman (2009) sought to understand the role of sunk cost fallacies in online dating by arranging a series of simulations in which polled users simulated the online dating process, then were offered a choice between the online date and an objectively superior blind date. A major degree of sunk cost correlation was found, with the majority favoring the online date despite the blind date's superiority. As people invest more and more into a date, in terms of spending time talking and getting to know the individual and in terms of the psychological cost of revealing personal information to the individual, they will become more and more committed to the individual regardless of the level of positive feedback

and reward they receive. These findings are very relevant to understanding why people will choose to date those farther away when dating online, even when they prefer not to have a long distance relationship, in that people will often begin talking to or engaging with an individual who lives fairly far away as a throwaway action, a “lottery ticket” on the off chance the person might be perfect. “If I see a girl who lives a bit too far away, but we really match well and she's hot, I'll message her thinking nothing will come of it but maybe a conversation, and on the off chance she turns out to be perfect it'll be worth the effort to drive that far.”(Male) “If a guy messages me and he seems friendly but he lives too far away, I'll talk to him because it would feel rude not to reply to a nice guy I'm interested in; and who knows maybe we hit it off and it works out to be worth it. But I never plan to make the trip. It just sort of happens that things develop...”(Female)

However, as conversation continues and emotional resources are invested into the relationship many individuals will find that they place a higher value than is rational on the continued success and progress of the nascent relationship. Once you have sunk hours into talking to someone, and revealed significant facts about yourself in the process, you want to salvage that investment; even if it means investing a significant amount of travel time to successfully facilitate a face to face meeting. Once face to face dates begin, there is an even bigger investment emotionally and often physically and financially. Each act increases the sunk investment of time and resources, increasing the urge to continue on to the next thing, which increases the sunk cost, which increases the need to see it through even further, and so on until in the words of one woman “I start out answering a message to be polite or 'cause I'm bored, next thing I know I'm in my car driving to some godawful place in the middle of nowhere because it's halfway between me and him.”(Female) This progressively larger sunk cost effect is often what leads people into initiating long term

relationships at considerable distances that they normally would not consider.

Another explanation for long distance dating I ran across from multiple interviewed users was that they viewed distance as an invalid reason to let a relationship, or potential relationship, go. "I didn't want to date long distance, but she was a good girlfriend and I couldn't bring myself to dump her over it. We broke up anyway, and it was messy and bad, but at least they couldn't say I didn't try."(Male) "Sure, it's not likely that he'll be my soulmate, but what if he is? What if he is the ONE (sic) and it changes my whole life that I miss out on this one chance to make it work, all because I hate skype calls?"(Female) Some viewed it as a sign of cowardice to give up over a little thing like a few hundred miles, others suffered from a severe "Fear Of Missing Out" that forbade them to foreclose on the possibility of happiness for fear that it would prove to be their best opportunity. There is also a huge stigma against "settling" for any inferior partner if "you can do better." Logically, assuming that long distance is essentially a negative multiplier on whatever value a partner provides, a relationship with a slightly inferior but acceptable partner who lives close by would be preferred to a long distance relationship with a slightly superior partner. However, when I posed this question during interviews very few men and only one woman replied that they would take the closer partner. The reasons given were illuminating, ranging from "I'll hate that I'm settling because of things outside my control, and I'll take it out on the [inferior partner]"(Male) to "My friends will look down on me for not doing [long distance]"(Female) to "once you f*** someone hotter, someone mediocre just won't get it [going] for me."(Male) All of these responses point towards a common attitude in modern romantic culture: You have to do the best you can possibly do, and to do any less is a personal failure that marks you as either a coward or yourself inferior. When I discussed this theory with later interviewees, one woman replied

that in her opinion “it's because we come up watching romantic comedies, and in every romantic comedy, there's the guy/girl that is ok but not great for the protagonist(a) (sic) and then the guy/girl who is perfect for the protagonist(a) but who requires some act of bravery or skill or sacrifice, heroism, to be with...So we set ourselves as the protagonist(a), as the hero, and as a result we have to do whatever it takes to be with the best one or else we failed our heroic test. And sometimes that means sitting on a midnight bus for three hours.”(Female) (Note: I obtained permission from this subject to include the fact that she was at the time of the interview in a three year long distance relationship, at a distance of 3.5 hours one way, which she describes as “hellishly difficult.”) I find her argument compelling, but regardless of the source it is undeniable that many feel an obligation to engage in a long distance relationship, even if they would prefer not to.

The final reason why Online Dating encourages long distance relationships is because the services in a sense depend on leveraging the absence of geography as a limit to provide a sufficiently “well stocked” selection of matches for each user. Many users outside of major cities, or even in outlying neighborhoods within the cities, complained that most online dating services are perfect for city dwellers but leave them out in the cold; there are fewer matches and those that they do get are farther away and harder to get to. For a large number of Americans living in suburbs or small towns/cities, there isn't a large or thriving social scene at which to meet other singles. “Your options around here are basically OkCupid or some bar. I don't love OkCupid, but I know I'll hate the bar...”(Female) But without those more distant matches, there likely wouldn't be enough to keep a functioning userbase going on these sites in these areas. “When I first started going on PoF, I kept my search radius extremely tight. But quickly I made my way through all those guys, either rejecting them outright or going on one or two dates then

finding no spark or seeing the whole thing not work out. Suddenly the only guys who came up in my matches were retreads, and I suspect I had blocked half the rest. So I started looking at guys further and further away.”(Female) “After a year or so, you go through everybody around you. Either you've talked to them and it's gone nowhere, you block them or they block you, or your profile is just so old (a join by date of more than two years ago is a deal breaker for me, like why haven't you found someone by now?) so I made a new profile. Same name, new pictures. A lot of girls I had stalled with before worked out the second time, most of them didn't remember talking to me and if they did I pretended that I didn't remember talking to them since it was normally just a couple messages.”(Male) The locations listed on the site are also notoriously unreliable, whether this is because the website itself does it poorly or because people sabotage them and then use technological error as an excuse or a little of both is unclear. “I live about an hour and a half from Philadelphia, all my matches are in Phillie. But an hour and a half is too long to go for a first date, even if I do all the driving it freaks girls out. So, I lie in my profile and say I live about halfway between where I really live and Phillie. That's enough that I can come to Phillie without freaking them out for a date. And if they want to go back to my place at some point, I just fib and say that I moved farther away. Once you're already dating they don't care, but you have to get your foot in the door first.”(Male) It seems to be a common practice to list oneself in a major city like New York or Boston to find matches there when one really lives in a suburb. The sites themselves also make distance difficult to filter for. While you can search based on distance, the “Match” functions almost always provide a 25-50 mile radius; which depending on traffic patterns and travel modes can be huge. In addition, there is no tool to prevent people further away from viewing/messaging you. Even in my short experimental time on the website, particularly

when my research assistant browsed as a straight female and when I took a brief foray listing myself as homosexual, even if you yourself were looking close by you would get messages from hundreds of miles away. When you look at their profile, that information is often tucked away in some nondescript corner, it's easy to proceed into talking for a while without noticing it. From there it leads naturally into the inversion of intimacy, the sunk-cost trap, and the “romantic comedy rule” that geographic distance is an insufficient reason to ignore a potential romantic prospect; these together are a recipe for a long distance romance, even if that is not what the user was seeking to begin with.

Geographical Impacts of Long Distance Relationships

The act of engaging in a long distance relationship has very different consequences for the communities and social networks of these individuals. Far beyond the inconvenience to their personal lives, it will have reaching impacts as these relationships become more common.

Many of those interviewed volunteered stories about how their long distance relationships had impacted their social lives at home. “It got to the point where I felt like I was on the bus going back and forth from my place to hers more than I was either with her or hanging with people at home. It ate my social life in one bite.”(Male) “I went into it knowing it would be different dating a girl who lived far away, but I wasn't prepared for just how much time I spent hours away, or at some crappy diner we'd meet at in between and how little time I'd have otherwise.”(Female) Some focused on how going far away for a date sucked time and energy away from friendships they had in their hometowns: “I lost touch with a lot of my friends while I was dating him. I think that's natural when you're always traveling long distance to be with someone. But I wasn't prepared for when we

broke up, and suddenly I had no friends in Scranton and hadn't talked to my friends in Harrisburg in months. Just when I needed friends and social support the most, I hadn't been hanging out with them in so long they barely cared.”(Female) This story touches on a common theme: friendships and close personal relationships must be invested in, and if that time is being invested elsewhere then those relationships slowly grow less close. The distance involved can also prevent friends or family from the hometown from meeting or really getting to know the significant other in question: “I'd probably been dating her four months before she met any of my friends or my parents. They knew her name, maybe had seen a picture of her I'd shown them, but they didn't really get to know her. The dynamics get f***y because by the time she does meet them, everyone doesn't want to piss everyone else off. She's my 'facebook official' girlfriend so my friends know they're stuck with her. She knows she's in it for the long haul and has to get these people to like her. Everyone is nervous and insecure and worried about who I'm going to pick if it comes to a gunfight. You know what it's like, when you're eight or nine years old and your parents introduce you to the kids of someone from work, and you can't have any fun because you're too scared to get into trouble? It's like that, and nobody ever gets to be friends. It's always two separate groups of people.”(Male) This 'us and them' dynamic can contribute to a perceived or actual need to choose one over the other, driving those who choose their significant other further away from their friends. The consistent point among those who didn't face this choice was the presence of activities that kept them interacting with others socially within their hometown as more or less of an obligation. Common activities included close friends at the workplace, at church, in recreational sports leagues and gyms, and community volunteer organizations. Since these friendships were more associated with attending regularly scheduled activities than with individual choice.

Unfortunately, the nature of a long distance relationship can become too all consuming and eliminate or limit these activities as well. “I used to be a Scoutmaster for my local boyscout troop, but it's tough to balance that with a two hour drive into Jersey once a week so it kind of fell by the wayside. It's a shame, but you do what you gotta do, ya know?”(Male) This was another common story, and to me is one of the more important consequences of such a rootless process of romance that eliminates community ties by limiting the amount of time contributed and one's sense of being a part of that community. “When I was dating someone close by, it's like we were a unit. I went to her concerts, she went to my work functions. I met one of my most important clients at her holiday party, she got her apartment through one of my coworkers' cousins. It expanded my circle of friends and hers. Now that I'm dating a girl an hour away, I don't have that. We go to each other's things sometimes, but it's always more formal and less friendly as a result, and anyway what do I need with a friend in another city?”(Male) As long distance relationships becomes more and more common, and given the trends of increasing online dating and the young average age (26.7) of the interviewed it seems like they will, this kind of uprooting will effect more and more organizations. Informally, it seemed as though the most robust relationships were those through social organizations that were more obligatory rather than leisure oriented; work, school and church (for the pious) were the most robust. This makes intuitive sense, since decreasing the amount of free time that someone has will likely not effect work or school at all, and for someone who is a pious believer church is obligatory. Those who lived in small towns or some close knit urban areas reported fewer problems with lost social networks than did those who lived in suburbs. This follows, since where individuals run into each other more often in day to day life they will tend to lose touch less, while in suburban environments and large cities

the anonymity of scale means that you need to put in personal effort to see someone. A high degree of community involvement seemed to correlate with better outcomes and less bitter breakups, but this evidence is more or less anecdotal at best. This is going to be an issue faced more and more as online dating grows more prevalent, especially since as noted above most don't intend for it to happen originally, many don't even realize just how far things have gone until they are already deep into it. "It eats up time slowly, like one moment it's just a weekend jaunt for fun and the next it's every free moment you have."(Male) Oftentimes, long distance relationships are less planned than slid into; through a slow process of sunk cost traps and increasing commitment.

Conclusions

In the long term, most long distance relationship participants wish to cohabit. "I figured we'd move in together given we were together long enough. Who was going to quit their job was awkward, but ultimately I worked for a large enough firm that they could transfer me to another closer agency easier than she could so I bit the bullet and we rented a house in her town."(Male) "I loved my home, but I loved him more and that was the end of the story."(Female) "Look, for a gay man in rural Pennsylvania there are only so many opportunities. I can get another job, I didn't think I could get another boyfriend. Now of course I'm looking for both, but better to have loved and lost right?"(Male) Thus while the short term consequences of online long distance dating may seem relatively small, in the long term it can be a serious source of up-rootedness and internal migration within the United States. Increasingly this is becoming an age of constant movement, but normally economic reasons are cited as to why. However, I posit that people are just as likely to move for a marriage as for a job (perhaps doubly so, as both partners may have to

move to a new place if both of them are to find a relevant job not too far from each other)

As noted above, numerous users stated how online dating is increasingly “the only game in town”(Male) in many smaller cities and suburbs. “The infrastructure to meet someone just isn't there. There's nowhere to go on a Saturday night to meet someone.”(Female) Many also pointed to the fall of homosocial friend groups as one of the reasons why this is increasingly the case: “I have lots of single male friends, and lots of single female friends, and they both complain to me about being single; but I'm uncomfortable hooking them up with each other because what happens if it goes sour? Especially with how casual some people can be about sex, and how different people can conflict on it or view the same relationship completely differently, it's just too big a risk. It can completely ruin friendships.”(Female) This was a common theme, of being unable to date for long within a friend group and thus be forced to seek mates farther afield. For many this means dating online, and dating at a distance. So the trends show that online dating and long distance dating are going to constitute an ever increasing portion of romantic relationships, and that these migrations to be together or to cohabit are going to be ever more important to how we think about a sense of place or of where people choose to live. To close with one of the more telling quotes from an interviewee: “I feel like all my friends scattered once after high school to go to college, again after college when they got jobs, and now I feel like the friends I made when I first went to work in New York are all scattering to Connecticut or New Jersey or Pennsylvania when they meet a man and decide to move in together.”(Female) Perhaps in time the romantic migration will be considered just another natural phase of life, but for now it certainly seems as though settling down means first traveling somewhere else to do it.

The conclusions I believe it is possible to reach are these: that online dating leads to

long distance relationships, and that long distance relationships lead to migration in both the short term (visiting) and the long term (moving), that this migration will have impacts on communities from which people come and on those to which they go. Online dating is increasingly common, and as its usage grows so will these migrations. As this will have a growing impact on our society, it will be important to understand how it happens, why it happens, who it happens to, and how to mitigate any negative effects of it. A theory of migration for romance will form a key element of understanding migrations in 21st century America, and hopefully this study will help to point in the right direction.

Future topics to research could include both broader and narrower studies. Broad statistical surveys, particularly those that used data directly from online dating applications and sites, could throw light on how frequent this phenomenon is in the population as a whole. Equally, case studies of individual relationships and communities could see more in depth as to the causes and impacts on communities of the practice. Historical studies of how common this kind of migration has been historically, and whether it is indeed on the rise, would help to place this phenomenon in context. Studies in the field of technology could look into how changing technology and our relationship with devices change the ways in which we interact online, and change or could change both the nature of online dating services and how we use them.

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Appendix 1

In-Depth Interview Questions

Name:

Age:

Level of education:

Location

Where did you grow up? What kind of area was it (Urban, rural, suburban, small town etc.)? Were you wealthy or poor growing up, both relative to the US in general and to your immediate neighbors and community?

Where do you live now? What kind of area is it? Are you wealthy or poor now, both relative to the US in general and to your immediate neighbors and community?

Have you lived anywhere else for a significant period of time?

Where do you want to live on a permanent basis?

Have you traveled extensively in the US or abroad? Do you want to? Would you consider living abroad for any considerable period of time?

Romantic History

Note to self: It will definitely be necessary to pack a shaker of salt for these answers.

Some things will need to be interpreted.

How extensively/actively have you dated? Was this experience primarily positive or negative? How do you feel about dating as a practice?

Do you prefer to be in exclusive relationships (serial monogamist) or to “play the field?”

Do you tend towards one or the other? Have you spent the majority of your recent past single or taken?

Are you currently in a relationship? For how long? How serious do you see it as? (How serious is it objectively in your judgment?)

What is your opinion of the current romantic scene/dating pool? Both local to you and at a societal level?

Online Dating

Have you ever dated online? For how long, at what intensity, and how successfully? Did you feel good or bad about the experience afterward?

What is your overall impression of online dating and of people who date online?

Do you feel you have an acceptable number of options to meet potential partners locally to you?

Would you like to begin/continue dating online? If you said you didn't have enough potential partners around them but have or would like to date online, would you want to date online even if there were enough opportunities to meet people locally?

Do you think of the pool of people you meet online as being better, worse, or the same as the pool of people you would have the opportunity to date in real life?

How common is online dating among your friends and peers?

Long Distance Relationships

Have you ever dated someone at a significant distance from your home? How far/long of

a trip was it? Was it a significant burden on your life at the time? Did it have any effect on the relationship? How did you meet the person, and how did you end up dating at a distance?

What's the furthest distance you would consider dating someone?

If you or a romantic partner was forced to move, would you stay with them at a distance or choose to break things off? At what distance, if any, would you be forced to break things off?

Would you ever move to be closer to a romantic partner, or to live with them?

If you married, would you want to live together? Is this a requirement?

How do you feel about people who choose to move to be with a romantic partner? What if it has a negative effect on their career prospects or takes them far from family and friends? Is there a gender component to this?

Based on your personal experience, is it common or uncommon for people to have long distance relationships? To move to be with a partner?

Appendix 2

Defining Relationship Terms

For purposes of this paper I use the following definitions of the terms Relationship, Long Distance Relationship, and Long Term Relationship.

Relationship in the romantic sense when used in this paper means a mutually agreed

commitment between two individuals to date each other exclusively until such a time as they agree to end it. In two cases I encountered mutually agreed upon polyamorous relationships, and in several more cases clear instances of infidelity, but for the most part the definition holds true. This committed relationship is mostly defined that way, I suspect, as a result of Facebook selecting that as their adjective to describe a non-married pair-bond between users. Facebook-official is often an adjective used to describe the difference between a lesser hook-up or friends with benefits arrangement and the more serious phase of romance. One interviewee even told me that “Having sex without having it on Facebook is the millennial equivalent of living in sin.”(Female)

Long Term Relationship is simply a Relationship that is expected to be a going concern for an extended period of time. Normally the assumption is that a couple, when describing themselves as in a long term relationship, will remain together unless they have a personal falling out; and it is strongly implied that if they remain together long enough they will eventually move in together, get married, and possibly have children. Thus the primary difference is the assumption that it will go on indefinitely until there is a reason for it to end; rather than when either party grows bored, finds someone else, or some expiration date arrives (such as one partner beginning school or finding a new job). Now all, those events do occasionally serve to end relationships, but when they do they are generally seen negatively. To quote one interviewee: “It's essentially a non-legal marriage, with the expectation that kids are off the table until actual marriage. All the traditional obligations of marriage, sexual and personal, are in there. It's just lesser importance, but essentially the reasons you can break it off are the same just lesser.”(Female)

Long Distance Relationship is the most touchy definition as it's essentially personal. What one person considers long distance another person in another town might have to drive that far to get to a decent grocery store. I ruled out using physical distance in the

definition because it's so relative depending on where you live; traveling 5 miles in New York City is a very different thing than traveling 5 miles in rural PA so it tells you nothing about how people will behave. Time is also to a degree relative, but for the most part it does a good job of capturing the relative similarity of a girl from Queens dating a guy in the Bronx and a guy in Harrisburg seeing a girl in Allentown. In general I found that interviewees treated traveling similar distance more similarly than they treated physical distance; although this doesn't completely rule out physical distance having an effect. There is a strong psychological notion of physical closeness embedded in the conception of a relationship: while behaviorally the Queens-Bronx relationship functioned similarly to other relationships with similar travel times, the participants seemed to feel less physical detachment and were more comfortable with the distance emotionally; whereas crossing a state line or especially a national border was met with an enormous degree of trepidation for both participants. Two interviewees in a relationship lived near Niagara Falls on the U.S. Side and in Toronto respectively, they both demonstrated a great deal of psychological distance even though they were relatively close physically, the national border serving as a Rubicon across which they could have no faith in the good intentions of others. For the most part, this is the psychological effect of distance: a fear that you cannot trust those around your significant other to keep your interests in mind. The less you identify with the residents of the area, the greater the fear. Several times I heard something along the lines of: "It's not that I can't trust him, it's that I can't trust the guys there. I don't know them, they don't know that I exist, there's nothing I can do."(Male) or "I don't know anybody in New York except him. No one would know what he was doing."(Female) or "She could have another boyfriend, I'd never know."(Male) This is why physical distance has some effect in addition to travel/effective distance. However, in general I used travel distance as my rule of thumb, because this affected how people

behaved. For the purposes of this paper, I defined any travel time of over one hour and a half as a long distance relationship, since in general that seemed to be the point at which a sea change occurred in how people viewed their relationships in interviews. Obviously there are substantive differences between living in the same building as someone and living eighty nine minutes away, and there are substantive differences between living ninety minutes away and living ten hours away, it is clearly not a firm demarcation but in this paper I will refer to any relationship around ninety minutes or longer as long distance and any closer as an ordinary relationship.

In general the average “Long Distance Relationship” discussed in the paper and in my interviews was approximately a travel time of two to two and a half hours, with the majority falling less than that and a few outliers skewing much higher (especially since true travel time for a plane flight is compounded by getting to and from an airport and ever changing TSA regulations). The longest surveyed were transcontinental relationships that could take as long as 24 hours total travel time. However, of the relationships surveyed the majority were closer than 2 hours. I separated them in my own mind into multiple categories based on how people seemed to view them. Two hours or less could constitute a day trip, returning on the same day without spending the night. Two hours to four hours could be a one night trip. Greater than four hours generally meant a long-planned three to four days together or longer. Each of these stages necessitates a different outlook on the relationship as a whole, and on how it interacts with the social fabric of the individuals involved. For the most part I didn't distinguish between them in the paper in order to avoid overly complicating the analysis, instead dealing primarily with generalities about all long distance relationships. However, a fertile direction for further research would be to look into the difference between these stages.