

# Looking for Love in All the Right Places: Defining Success in the World of Online Dating

## Introduction

Dating websites are a frequently studied form of social media where people measure the outcome: Did I find a partner? While users of these sites have this clear measure, researchers have not examined the explicit outcomes of such activity. Instead, past studies have focused on the characteristics of individuals who use online dating sites (Stephure et al., 2009; Sautter et al., 2010), how individuals represent themselves on different online dating websites (Hancock & Toma 2009; Ellison et al., 2009), and the search strategies individuals utilize to find a partner (Fiore et al., 2010; Hitsch et al., 2006). Our study fills a gap in social media research by examining publically available success stories collected through a systematic random sample from success sites affiliated with three of the most popular online dating websites in the United States, Match.com (n=544), eHarmony (n=213) and OkCupid (n=61).

## How Dating Success Sites Work

Submitting a success story to an affiliated success site is a straightforward process. Individuals first authenticate using the account they originally utilized on the website and then submit a story along with a description of the current relationship status, often determined from a controlled vocabulary including: Dating, Engaged or Married. The act of entering information on a success site is an expression that at least one member of the couple views the outcome as a “success”. Couples also have the option to include location information, tips for other daters, and specifics about their relationship. The structures for this information vary across site, with Match.com having the most structure, and OkCupid giving the most freedom. Success sites are a simple, measurable expression of a successful social media outcome.

## Findings: Three Dimensions of Success

Our exploratory study seeks to understand what social media success looks like in online dating. We examine three dimensions of the success stories included on the three online dating success websites: 1) The location of the “successful” couples, 2) The varying definitions of success between sites based on the user-defined status and 3) The lexical content of the stories submitted to these sites to identify cultural dimensions associated with success on each site. The findings represent a unique examination of the distribution of online dating activity that has a very specific outcome (success defined by the user) in the United States. Our findings demonstrate that dating websites may have inherent cultural dimensions that lead to adoption by certain subsets of the population looking for a certain relationship outcome. These findings have implications for all forms of social and participatory media and inform future research that extends beyond online dating websites.

Our first finding demonstrates that there is no regional bias in site utilization; people use these dating sites with consistent frequency across the United States. There is, however, an increased likelihood of overall site use as population density rises. For example, online dating activity occurred at a higher frequency in the high population density states of Texas, California, Michigan, New York, Florida, and Virginia, while there were no participants from the low population density states of Montana and South Dakota. There are, however, low population density islands. For example, there are 6 profiles from Match.com that are listed as being from a small town in the

southern US with a population of 3,000. This is the fourth highest number of success stories for any city, in the US. The top three cities with the highest number of success stories in our sample are Houston (n=11), Chicago (n=9), and New York City (n=8). This anomaly and preliminary analysis of the stories associated with these profiles suggests that social networks in the real world do influence online social network adoption in the case of online dating sites. This is an interesting area for future research.

Our second finding is that the measures of “dating success” are different for each of the three web sites. This finding is illustrated in Table 1. eHarmony’s success stories are mostly comprised of married couples (84%), whereas the number of married couples on Match.com (46.7%) and OkCupid (23%) is significantly lower. Additionally, the number of eHarmony and Match.com success profiles increases from Dating through Engaged to Married, whereas OkCupid’s frequency decreases from Dating through Married. Success on eHarmony is defined as marriage, whereas success on Match.com is more evenly split. OkCupid users most commonly define success as “dating.” This has important implications for the measurement of success of relationships in social media. Success is contextual and participant defined. With future studies we will explore how different measures of success become self-perpetuating on dating sites, or change over time as clients evolve. One also might expect the clientele on online dating sites to turn over more regularly than other forms of social media. Understanding these rates of change may provide an additional, implicit measure of success.

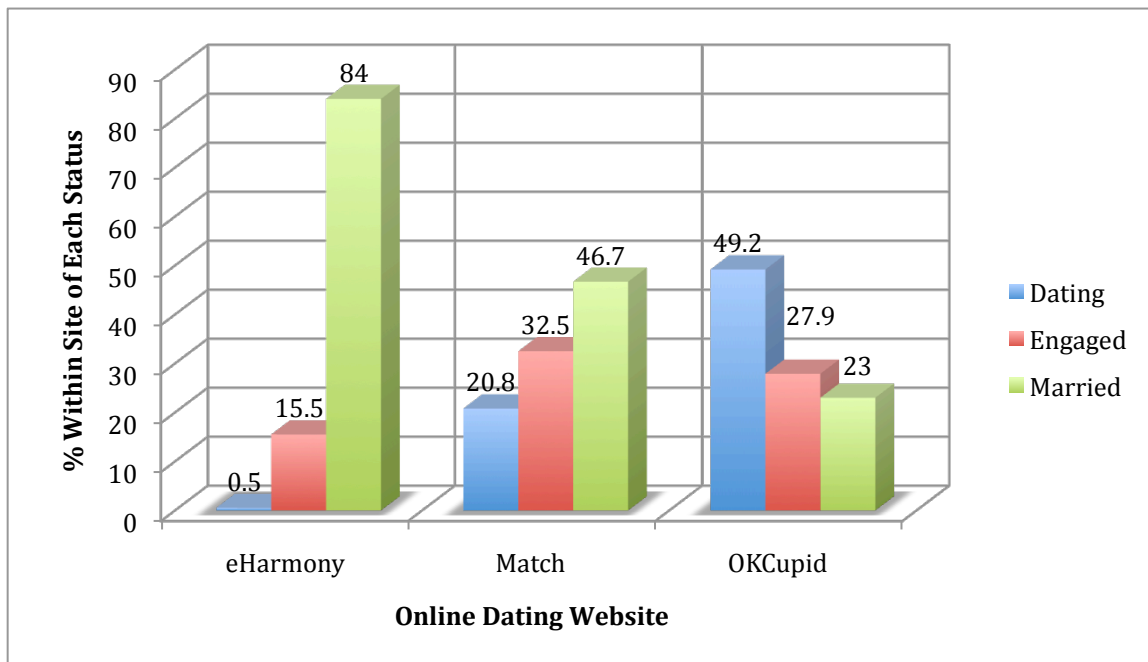


Table 1: What “Success” looks like for different Online Dating Websites

The third finding demonstrates a difference in the content of the words utilized in the success stories. The most used word within each set of stories was the name of the dating website where individuals met. This illustrates that when describing a successful relationship individuals refer to the mechanism in which they met at a very high rate. One of the most frequently used phrases that

appeared in almost half of the profiles was a derivative of “Thank you (Online Dating Site).” This indicates that the technology utilized for finding a partner was a salient aspect of the success stories and that the couples may attribute some level of their success to the technology.

Additionally, Both eHarmony and Match.com success stories were found to have a higher frequency of phrases related to more serious aspects of relationships, such as “the rest of my life,” “rest of our lives together,” and “asked me to marry.” OkCupid success profiles were found to have a higher frequency of phrases dealing with the situational aspects of dating such as “we decided to meet,” “on the phone,” and “to get to know.” This demonstrates that individuals that utilize different dating sites have different definitions of success and highlight different aspects of the relationship process, possibly related to or determined by the status of their relationship. The motivation for the different definitions between online dating websites is unknown, but as noted earlier they may also be associated with cultural dimensions inherent in each website.

Our three findings from this exploratory study of online dating websites provide a first glimpse into success measurement among social media users. These findings direct future work to qualitatively analyze the success stories themselves, and extend our measurement of success through interviews of couples not reflected in the current sample. These steps will help to build a better understanding of online dating site adoption and what constitutes success in a particular type of social media.

Although the study analyzed online dating websites that are primarily utilized in the English speaking world, these findings and the proposed follow on studies are salient to other social media technologies. Individuals utilize social technologies differently and although much of this usage is dictated by explicit cultural attributes, there may be many implicit cultural attributes that dictate adoption and utilization of certain technologies. Measuring success in social media use begins with sites like these, where the measure is clear and user defined. The explicit and implicit cultural aspects of “success” may dictate and influence information behavior by individuals that utilize these websites, and as a result, may further contribute to the establishment of a subculture within the technology.

## References

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