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# ***ON-LINE DATING***

# ***IN EGYPT***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The internet's role in our social lives is growing by the day. Social interaction has now become the primary use of home computers (McKenna, 1999, p.2). In fact, the internet has now become an important player on the love and dating scene, as it is used by many to find love and initiate relationships online.

Ever since the internet's introduction to the Arab world, it has been shrouded in controversy. As much as Arabs hope to come up to date with the fast changing world, they justifiably fear for the social and cultural fabric of their society. Nothing could be more controversial than internet's use in marriage and dating.

Arab societies are very conservative where mixing of the sexes is concerned. In many communities, traditional marriage is the norm. As a matter of fact, in some the couple only meets once before the announcement of the engagement, throughout which they meet scarcely and chaperoned. The internet offers youths the opportunity to 'virtually' meet members of the opposite sex through chat programs like ICR, ICQ and MSN, where they can talk instantaneously for hours without fear of social exposure. Furthermore, several dating and match-making sites are now used by Arab youths, bringing to mind the old days where matchmaking was a paid service performed by particular ladies called "khatba" at the request of Arab families.

This paper will test a hypothesis that cyber-dating is now commonly practiced by Egyptian youths of the higher socio-economic class. A purposive sample for this study has been drawn from the American University in Cairo AUC, one of Egypt's most prestigious and expensive universities. Thus, most AUC students are likely to fit both the age and socio-economic criteria.

This paper will attempt to answer the following research questions: How common is

cyber-dating amongst Egyptian youths? What are the reasons why Egyptian youths resort to the internet for finding romance? What are the effects of cyber-relationships on Egyptian youths? Are there any gender differences in Egyptian youths' use of the internet for finding and pursuing romantic relationships?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Cyber-Relationships: an Overview:**

The use of information technology for finding and meeting new partners can be traced back to the mid 1960s, when attempts to use data from questionnaires, to match couples through the use of computers, were made in the United States (Hardey, 2002, p.571). Growing in popularity, the idea soon spread to private companies in both the US and Germany (Hardey, 2002, p.571). However, the veracity of this system soon became questionable, and at least one of the early companies was successfully persecuted and shut down (Hardey, 2002, p.571).

Today internet has brought back computer mediated matchmaking. Electronic mail, chat-rooms and instant messaging are now important means of communication between sexes. Numerous specialized websites have also been established for this purpose worldwide; examples of which are soulmate, interdate and match.com. In fact, the first Egyptian, Arabic-speaking dating website El-Nos\_El\_Tani was launched earlier this year.

Like the personals column published in newspapers, dating websites, hold profiles, personal and demographic information about individuals seeking partners (Hardey, 2002, p. 572). Members of the opposite sex can browse through the profiles and contact those deemed suitable. Contact is usually made on-line through the sites' e-mail system, to preserve individuals' anonymity and protect them against harassment (Hardey, 2002, p. 572). Individuals can choose if and when they respond to e-mails from potential partners (Hardey, 2002, p. 579). Communication is usually governed by a cyber-etiquette, such as turn taking in exchanging e-mails, maintaining a specific pace for communication, reciprocity in disclosing details about the self and mutual respect & politeness (Hardey, 2002, p.582). If such etiquette is not maintained, the user can easily block others and seize communications (Hardey,

2002, p. 579).

Internet dating sites are part a growing number of virtual places, through which users can purchase goods and services (Hardey, 2002, p.582). Dating sites vary between paid and unpaid systems; but most of them operate on a hybrid system where individuals can post profiles for free, but fees must be paid by those wishing to contact them (Hardey, 2002, p. 572 & 573).

Many argue internet is similar to face to face relationships, with only a few differences. Internet is arguably the easiest, most disinhibiting and most accessible way for meeting new partners (Griffiths, 2001, p.6). The most important quality of internet relationship is anonymity, which allows for disclosure and intimacy (McKenna, 2002, p.9). Furthermore, internet provides opportunities for relationships to get past the initial gates of embarrassment and fear of potential rejection (McKenna, 2002, p.11). . It also facilitates the opportunity for people with common interests to meet (McKenna, 2002, p.11).

Internet anonymity is integral in its functioning as a socialization or dating medium. The internet saves relationship time , as it allows disinhibition, intimacy and trust to form sooner and easier (Griffiths, 2001, p.6). In Face to face communications the bonds of trust and intimacy take more time to build; however, the anonymity provided by internet allows for the speedy build-up of such bonds (McKenna, 2002, p.9). Due to anonymity, people are encouraged to share aspects of their personality they may not reveal off line; this strengthens the relationship, and can even motivate its pursuit off-line (McKenna, 2002, p.16).

A study by Gergen, Gergen and Batron indicated that people meeting in a darkened room, are more able to disclose to each-other; and as a result like each other more (McKenna, 2002, p.23). This was validated by McKenna's experiment, in which opposite-sex partners were given the opportunity to chat on-line; then met offline

unaware they were meeting the same online partners (2002, p.26). After both encounters their feelings towards their partners were evaluated on a like/ dislike scale. Results indicated that participants usually liked their on-line partners more than their off-line partners (as they were not aware it was the same person). They reported their feelings to have stemmed out of their feeling that they knew and understood their on-line partners better (McKenna, 2002, p.27). This is best understood in light of the fact that internet's anonymity does allow for increased trust and disclosure, which in-turn creates amiability and familiarity.

Furthermore, Internet partners have no access to each other's social circles, so there is no fear of ridicule or embarrassment (McKenna, 2002, p.10). McKenna resembles this to the "meeting on the train" phenomenon, where one usually feels comfortable confiding secrets to a total stranger (2002, p.10).

Another important reason why people resort to online relationships is the lack of gating. In real life relationships people use gates such as appearance or social skills to judge others and filter who they wish to date (McKenna, 2002, p.10)(Hardey, 2002, p. 575). Hence, internet initiated relationships, may actually be more successful as they rely on shared interests and character qualities rather than superficial or physical qualities (McKenna, 2002, p.11). Having such strong grounds, such relationships are likely to survive when gating sets in later, as people meet face to face (Hardey, 2002, p.580).

Research indicates that internet- initiated relationships, once taken offline are more likely to survive than off-line initiated relationships. In a study by McKenna, more than 71% of on-line initiated romantic relationships were still intact two years later (2002, p.22). This contrasts to similar research conducted on regular face to face romantic relationships (started and pursued off-line), in which only 55% of the relationships survived the two-year study.

Other factors contributing to the allure of the medium, may be accessibility, convenience and escape (Griffiths, 2001, p.6). The internet makes dating possible 24/7 from the comfort and protection of one's home. It also has no real-time conversational demands; the person decides when to engage in on-line chatting or check e-mail, which serves those leading hectic or busy lifestyles (McKenna, 2002, p.19). Furthermore, it provides an outlet for short-term comfort, excitement and distraction (Griffiths, 2001, p.6).

The debate over internet's social effects has been heated for years. Many warn of its psychologically hazardous effects and consequences. Kraut's acclaimed study claims that internet causes loneliness, depression and the destruction of social relationships, and is generally hazardous to psychological well-being (Weiser, 2001, p.723).

Beninger argues that online relationships are illusionary, shallow and often hostile (McKenna, 1999, p.6)

However, many defend internet mediated relationships, and argue in favor of their positive effects. Weiser's 2001 study demonstrated that social use of the internet may actually improve psychological well being (p.724). This was further validated in 2002, in a study by Shaw, who proved that internet decreased loneliness and depression, while increasing social support and self-esteem (2002, p.157). Another study by Kraut et. al. established that internet helps users increase circles of friends in real life communities (McKenna, 2002, p.29) According to Silverman, positive on-line relationships can help foster empathy, zest, empowerment and trust (2001, p.233).

A study by McKenna proves that internet mediated romantic relationships in particular reflect positively on psychological well-being. Twenty-five percent of the survey's respondents indicated that the relationship decreased their feelings of

depression, in contrast to only 2% reporting that it increased these feelings (McKenna, 2002, p.23).. Forty-seven percent reported it decreased their feeling of loneliness, in contrast to only 6% reporting it increased them (McKenna, 2002, p.23). Sixty-eight percent said it increased their social circle, in contrast to only 3% reporting a decrease (McKenna, 2002, p.23).

People most likely to use internet for dating are those who are lonely, socially anxious and unable to express themselves in face to face settings (McKenna, 2002, p.12). People who start and successfully establish on-line relationships are likely to take them off-line. In other words, they gradually “give up the safety and relationship-control of the internet, in exchange for greater physical reality and intimacy (McKenna, 2002, p.19). This gradually occurs through phone conversations, exchange of photographs , exchange of pictures & letters and finally meeting in person (Hardey, 2002, p.580). In a study by McKenna et. al. 63% of respondents had telephone conversations with someone they met over the net, 56% had exchanged pictures, 54% exchanged letters, and 54% met face to face, 9% were engaged and 7% were living together or married ( 1999 and 2002, p.17, 90). Nevertheless, the most important indicator of whether or not the relationship will go off-line (face to face) is its entry into a telephone phase (McKenna, 2002, p.19). Without engaging in telephone conversations, the online relationship is unlikely to turn offline (McKenna, 2002, p.19) (Hardey, 2002, p.580).

One of the most important concerns over online relationships is the lack of guarantee of the veracity of provided information. However, individuals do not often resort to lying, in fear of exposure upon face to face contact (Hardey, 2002, p.579).

Furthermore, research has proven that it is the disclosure of feelings not of facts about oneself that brings intimacy and relationship satisfaction (Mckeena, 1999, p.6).

Since cyber-dating translates into spending prolonged periods of time over the internet, many worry about the potential for internet addiction. A 1999 study has shown that 6 percent of all internet users are “addicted”, and another 10 percent are



abusers (Peled, 2000, p.43)(Griffiths, 2001, p.3). Internet dependency is a non-chemical dependency that may be passive (ex: surfing) or active (ex: chatting) (Griffiths, 2001, p.3). It also features the core components of addiction; namely, salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse (Griffiths, 2001, p.3). Research has shown that internet addiction, particularly for youths, can cause depression and social isolation (Sanders, 2000, p.241).

Fortunately, cyber-relationships may not necessarily lead to internet addiction. Griffiths articulates three types of cyber-relationships. The first is a relationship that starts and continues on-line, with the couple having no intention to meet in person (Griffiths, 2001, p.8). The second is a relationship that starts on-line, but the couple eventually takes it off-line (Griffiths, 2001, p.8). The third is a relationship that starts off-line, but is maintained on-line (Griffiths, 2001, p.8). While only the first type may prove to be internet addictive, the last two are addictive to the person rather than to the medium (Griffiths, 2001, p.8).

### **Cyber-Relationships in the Arab World:**

Contrary to widely held stereotypes, the Arab world does not seem to have abstained from cyber-dating. Youths and women have evidently been exposed to it.

Unfortunately, since it is a new discipline, no literature covers cyber-relationships in Egypt. However, research has been conducted on other countries such as Kuwait, a similar country to Egypt in terms of culture, language, ethnicity and religion.

In Kuwait, the highest segment of internet users is university students (Wheeler, 2001, p.194). Fifty percent of Kuwaiti university students, -more females than males,-

reported using the internet for leisure (Wheeler, 2001, p.194). More than 30% admitted regularly using it to meet members of the opposite sex (Wheeler, 2001, p.196).

Cyber-relationships are usually forged with others from similar backgrounds, such as other Kuwaitis, Arabs or Muslims (Wheeler, 2001, p.197). Social and religious values help filter and buffer these communications (Wheeler, 2001, p.199). Many on-line couples meet in person, as potential suitors, and some end up married (Wheeler, 2001, p.197).

Such practice challenges cultural, social and religious norms and traditions. Kuwait is a conservative nation which does not encourage mixing of the sexes; the internet provides Kuwaiti youths with a chance to bend the rules with little danger of exposure (Wheeler, 2001, p.196). It also challenges the family's traditional role as a matchmaker, by granting youths more freedom of choice (Wheeler, 2001, p.196 & 198). It may already be starting to gradually change tradition, as most internet chatting takes place from 4 pm to midnight, a time traditionally reserved for family gatherings and visits (Wheeler, 2001, p.196).

Nevertheless, change seems to be still far off. Ironically, cyber-relationships may not yet be fully accepted, even by their own practitioners, as more than 61% of Kuwaiti youths stated that internet is negatively affecting morals and behavior (Wheeler, 2000, p.443). Thus, it appears that youths have not yet fully incorporated this phenomenon, and are still in the experimental phase (Wheeler, 2000, p.442).

Many predict that the strata reaping the most internet fruits will be Arab women. The Kuwaiti experience seems to validate this (Wheeler, 2001, p.194). In a culture where only men are allowed to initiate relationships, on-line dating empowers and frees women, as it frees them of the social inhibitions associated with their initiation of such relationships (Hardey, 2002, p.580). It is also safer than off-line dating, both physically (Hardey, 2002, p.580), and in terms of their reputation. It also provides women with a chance to better understand male thinking; an opportunity unavailable due to the gender segregation (Wheeler, 2001, p.197). This will be the case particularly with Arab countries that enforce strict laws and systems of gender segregation, like Saudi Arabia (Elmusa, 1997, p.350). This means that winds of change may soon rock traditional religious and social authorities (Elmusa, 1997, p.350).

## **METHODOLOGY**

A close-ended questionnaire (Annex 1) was constructed. The American University in Cairo AUC was chosen as a purposive sample, since its students have access to internet and computers, and possess the technical and linguistic knowledge necessary for internet use. Furthermore, they fit the criteria of being Egyptian youths.

Thus a total sample of 131 undergraduate students, ages 16 – 23 was pooled. The sample consisted of 61 males and 75 females. The increase in the number of females over males may be representative of the case in Egypt, where females exceed males in number.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

Out of the total 131 sample, 66 students (50.3%) admitted having used the internet for meeting

members of the opposite sex. There appeared to be no significant gender differences as 30 of these 66 students were males, while 36 were females. Since this paper researches the nature of cyber-relationships, the referred to sample hereon will be the 66 students who reported using the internet for that purpose.

### **Usership Habits:**

For those involved in online relationships, the mean time spent on the internet was 1 – 2 hours per day. Eleven spent 1 hour online daily, 13 spent 2 hours, 10 spent 3 hours, 9 spent 4 hours, 5 spent 5 hours, 4 spent 6 hours, 4 spent 7 hours, 2 spent 8 hours, 2 spent 9 hours, 2 spent 10 hours, and only one spent 16 hours. Only 11 students (16.6%) accessed the net for 7 or more hours a day.

There were significant gender differences. The mean for male access of the internet was 2 – 3 hours per day. The mean for female access, on the other hand, was 1 – 2 hours per day. Five males reported accessing the net 7 or more hours per day, in comparison to 6 females.

All respondents stated they accessed the net from home, many also from university. Only one male accessed it from an internet café too, and one female accessed it from a friend's home. There were no significant gender differences.

### **Cyber-Relationships:**

All respondents stated they met members of the opposite sex through the MSN sight; a general site owned by Microsoft network, which recently added a personal profile / dating section. Furthermore, it has an instant messenger system, which enables instant online conversations. What adds to its allure may be the fact that it is free of fees.

A majority of respondents also said they resorted (next to MSN) to ICQ and IRMC, which are instant chat sites, free of fees. Both these sites appeared years before MSN.

Only two females, in comparison to no males, mentioned using specialized dating sites; namely cupidjunction and one2onematch.

Only 34 out of the 66 strata (who dated on-line) stated the number of times they engaged in a cyber-relationship, as many could not recall. Almost half of these 34 students (17) stated they only engaged once in cyber-relationships. Three mentioned they engaged in them twice, 8 trice, 1 four times, 1 five times, and 1 seven times. Only three students stated they engaged in them more than 10 times; specifically 2 said 10 times, while one said 17 times. There appeared to be no significant gender differences here.

The mean appears to be that student engaged in cyber-relationships once. However, this mean is undermined by the fact that almost half the sub-sample could not recall the numbers of time, due to their frequency. Thus this is not a valid mean.

As for the type of relationship sought over the net, the mean was casual on-line chatting (37 out of the 66 students). The other types of relationships were not nearly as popular, since 9 sought online dating, 10 real-life short tem relations, 5 long-term serious relationships and 3 sought other types of relationships.

Nevertheless there were significant gender differences. Only 14 males (46%) compared to 23 females (63%) sought casual on-line chatting. On the other hand, only 3 females (8.3%) sought online dating and 3 sought real-life short term relationships; in comparison to 6 (20%) and 7 (23.3%) males respectively. However, while 4 females (11%) sought long-term serious relationships, only 1 male (3.3%) sought this type of relationship. One female in comparison to 2 males sought other types of relationships.

As for the time invested in the cyber relationship, the mean appears to be 1 – 2 hours per day. Out of the 61 students who reported engagement in cyber relations 1 chatted 15 minutes a day, 10 for 30 minutes a day, 12 for 1 hour a day, 16 for 2 hours, 6 for 3 hours, and 4 for more than 4 hours.

Significant gender differences were manifest here; while the mean time invested in the relationship by females was 2 hours a day, it was 30 minutes to one hour a day for males. In other words, females spent around four times as much time as males.

The most popular time for chatting is evidently late night. Out of the 66 students who date on-line, 33 prefer doing so in late night and 21 prefer the evening. With an exception of 2 females, no one does so in daytime or afternoon. There were no significant gender differences.

#### **Effects of Cyber-relationships:**

In terms of mood, 31 out of the 66 respondents experienced mood improvement, 23 experienced no mood change, and only 4 experienced mood deterioration. There were no significant gender differences.

In terms of loneliness 28 out of the 66 respondents experienced a decrease in loneliness, 23 experienced no change, and 7 experienced increased loneliness. There was a slight gender difference, as females appeared more likely to experience decreased loneliness than males; 17 (47%) compared to 11 (36%).

In terms of sociability, 19 experienced increased sociability, 35 experienced no

change, and only 3 experienced a decrease. There was a slight gender difference, as males were slightly more likely to experience an increase in sociability than females; 11 (36%) compared to 8 (22%).

As for self-acceptance 18 respondents experienced an increase in self-acceptance, 37 experienced no change and only 2 experienced a decrease. Again, a slight gender difference was present, as males were more likely than females to experience self acceptance; 11 (36%) compared to 7 (19.4%).

As far as self confidence is concerned, 19 experienced an increase in self confidence, 37 experienced no change and 2 experienced a decrease. Again, a slight gender difference was present, as males were more likely than females to experience self confidence; 10 (33%) compared to 9 (25%).

### **Reasons for Cyber-Relationships:**

As for the reasons students resort to the net for finding romance, all provided reasons were picked, -although not necessarily by both sexes. Further reasons were also added. The most commonly cited reasons were “I can express myself better over the internet” and “it provides me with comfort, excitement and distraction from my daily life,” both of which were cited 15 times each.

Of course there were extremely significant gender differences. For instance, no males chose “I am afraid for my reputation,” “My family does not allow me to go out much & keeps a close watch on me” nor “I do not have the time for social interaction due to my hectic lifestyle.” These gender differences are identified in table 1 and explained

in the analysis.

**Table 1**

**Reasons why youths resort to the net for finding romance**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total</b>
I am shy.	5	2	7
I am not able to start conversations	3	5	8
I do not believe myself attractive	1	3	4
I am afraid of rejection or embarrassment	3	6	9
My social life and social orbit do not include many members of the opposite sex.	6	4	10
I seem to have a lot of acquaintances of the opposite sex, but had not met my match	2	3	5
I can express myself better on the internet.	7	8	15
There are no obtrusive others on the net; just me and the person.	4	4	8
I am afraid for my reputation, if seen publicly with members of the opposite sex	2	0	2
I feel dating is religiously wrong.	6	1	7
I feel dating is a social taboo.	3	2	6
My family prohibits me from dating.	5	1	6
My family does not allow me to go out much and keeps a close watch on me.	6	0	6
It provides me with comfort, distraction and excitement from my daily life.	7	8	15
I do not have the time for social interaction due to my hectic lifestyle.	2	0	4
I do not easily trust members of the opposite sex, and would rather remain anonymous to them until I am able to forge a bond of trust.	4	2	6
Withdrawal from the relationship is easy and less painful.	3	7	10
Other reasons (Please list) .....			
- Was not actively seeking romance on net, but it was a coincidence	7	3	10
- For fun & entertainment	3	4	7



### **The Nature of Communication:**

When it comes to the nature of the on-line relationship, most respondents (24) stated they never exchanged photographs online. Only 15 stated they rarely did, 12 sometimes and 7 often. None stated they always did. As for gender differences, it seems more females than males never exchanged their photos online. The number of those doing so rarely or sometimes is less than their male counterparts. No females stated they often nor always exchanged photos.

As for online video conferencing the vast majority (43) stated they never did. Only 8 did rarely, two did sometimes and two did often. No one stated they always did. There were significant gender differences as all females said they never did.

As for online voice chat the majority (29) stated they never did. Seventeen rarely did; 5 sometimes; and 7 often. Only 1 always did.

As for exchanging telephone numbers, the majority (21) stated they never did, 19 rarely did, 7 sometimes did, 7 often did and 4 always did. There were gender differences. For example 13 females never did, in comparison to 8 males; and 4 males always did in comparison to no females.

The norm is that sometimes youths disclose their true identity. Eleven respondents said they never did, 12 rarely did, 20 sometimes did, 13 often did and 8 always did. Again gender differences were present. For example, Only 2 females always disclosed their identity, in comparison to 6 males.

The norm is that sometimes participant share their deepest emotions with their cyber-date. Twelve respondents said they never did, 14 rarely did, 21 sometimes did, 7 often did and 2 always did. As is clear by these numbers, the tendency not to share deepest emotions is higher. No significant gender differences were present.

As for chatting in Arabic using Latin letters (ex: bel3araby), the norm seemed that they often (18 respondents) or always (18 respondents) did. Twelve respondents said they sometimes did, 3 rarely did and 7 never did. No significant gender differences were present.

The majority (28 respondents) always used emoticons. Eleven reported they often did, 11 sometimes did, 2 rarely did and 6 never did. There were no clear pronounced gender differences.

### **Differences Between Online & Offline Relationships:**

As for the differences between on-line and off-line relationships, all reasons were chosen,- although not by both sexes. Gender differences were so manifest that a general norm or mean was not workable. These differences, are cited in table 2.

The most commonly cited difference, by males, was that “online relationships never worked.” The most cited difference by females, on the other hand, was that “online relationships made it easier to drop your guard and be yourself.”

The most significant gender differences were that whereas 15 females stated that “on-

line relationships make it easier to drop your guard and be yourself,” only 8 males stated that reason. Also, 9 females in comparison to 1 male selected “On-line relationships make it easier and safer to share your feelings.” No females chose “I do not care if my on-line date is lying about facts, it is emotions that matter to me”.

**Table 2**

**Differences between on-line and off-line romantic relationships**

<b>Difference</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total</b>
Online relationships are deeper	1	2	3
On-line relationships are quicker to form and bond	10	9	19
On-line relationships make it easier to drop your guard and be yourself	15	8	23
On-line relationships never work	11	10	21
On-line relationships give others the opportunity to deceive you	12	9	21
On-line relationships make it easier and safer to share your feelings	9	1	10
I do not care if my on-line date is lying about facts, it is emotions that matter to me	0	6	6
Other (P lease list) .....			
- Depends on the person	2	0	2
- Only if you know the person in advance	0	2	2

**Going offline:**

Out of the 66 respondents who had been involved in online relationships, 24 reported the relationship developed into a face to face (offline) relationship, while 37 reported it did not. Five did not provide valid answers.

Out of those reporting that their online relationship developed into a face to face (offline) relationship 11 were females and 13 were males. Those reporting it did not were 16 males and 21 females.

Those who chose not to take their on-line relationship into real life did so for all the span of provided reasons. Some added more reasons. Gender differences were so pronounced that a most commonly cited reason was not applicable. Details are provided in table 3:

**Table 3**

**Reasons why the on-line relationship is not pursued off-line**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total</b>
I like to keep my privacy	9	6	15
Like to be in control of my relationship time	7	4	11
Do not want to risk being seen in public and exposed	3	2	5
I can not go out because of my family	6	0	6
I am afraid the relationship may be negatively affected	1	5	6
I still can not make up my mind whether or not I can trust the person	13	3	16
I am afraid my partner will not like me if we meet face to face	1	3	4
I have been untruthful and am afraid of disclosure	0	1	1
Because of the same reasons I listed in question 8	3	3	6
Others (Please list).... - Do not believe online relationships can develop into real ones - Geographical distance			

From the above table we notice that, for females, the most commonly cited reasons for not pursuing the relationship off line, was “I still can not make up my mind whether or not I can trust the person,” while for males it was “Like to keep my privacy.”

Significant gender differences were manifest, as significantly more females than males cited “Like to be in control of my relationship time”, “I can not go out because of my family” and “I still can not make up my mind whether or not I can trust the person.” Furthermore, significantly more males than females selected “I am afraid the relationship may be negatively affected,” “I am afraid my partner will not like me if we meet face to face,” and “I have been untruthful and am afraid of disclosure.”

As for those who chose to take their on-line relationship into real life, they did so for all the span of provided reasons. Some added more reasons. Gender differences were so significant that a most commonly cited reason was not applicable. Details are provided in table 4.

From this table we notice that the most commonly cited reasons among females for choosing to pursue the relationship off line was “I want more intimacy” and “I want this person to be part of my real life,” while for males it was “I got bored communicating on-line”.

Significant gender differences were manifest, as significantly more females than males cited “I want more intimacy,” “I want this person to be part of my real life,” “I am serious about my relationship & want to pursue it in the light” and “I fell in love with the person.” Furthermore, significantly more males than females mentioned “I got bored communicating on-line.”

**Table 4**

**Reasons why the on-line relationship is pursued off-line**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total</b>
I got bored communicating on-line	2	4	6
We face technical problems on-line	2	2	4
I want more intimacy	6	2	8
I want this person to be part of my real life	6	2	8
I feel ready to take the relationship into the next phase	3	2	5
I am serious about my relationship and want to pursue it in the light	4	0	4
I fell in love with the person	4	2	6
I only used the internet to find my match, not to date on	1	2	3
Others (Please list).... - Found we had common friends	1		

Those who pursued the relationship offline, they usually did so after around one month of online courtship. One person took the relationship offline (face to face) after less than a week, 3 after a week, 5 after a month, 2 after 2 months, 3 after 6 months, 1 after 8 months, 1 after 10 months, 2 after a year and 1 after more than a year.

However, this mean is not a valid, due to the significant gender differences. While the mean for females appeared to be one month, the mean for males appeared to be one week.

Four females took the relationship face to face after a month, 3 after 6 months, 1 after 10 months and one after a year. No females reported doing so before a month of online courtship. On the other hand, a male reported less than a week of online courtship prior to a FTF relationship, 3 reported a one week courtship, 1 reported a month, 2 reported 2 months, 1 reported 8 months, 1 a year and another more than a year.

Seventeen respondents stated that telephone conversations interceded between the online and offline phases of the relationship; 7 of these were females, while 10 were males. In contrast, 6 respondents stated they did not undergo such a phase; 4 of these were females, while 2 were males.

As for the duration the relationship lasted offline, no pattern or norm could be worked out, as it ranged across the continuum, with the least being one day and the most being five years. Five said they were still engaged in online- initiated relationships, taken offline. Females reported longer duration than their male colleagues.

### **Friends' & Families' Opinions:**

Most respondents reported their friends accepting their cyber-relationship. This was the case with 26 respondents, in contrast to 12 who said their friends did not accept their relationship. Eight respondents indicated that they did not inform their friends of their relationship.

Significant gender differences were present. Seventeen females in contrast to nine males reported their friends accepting the relationship. On the other hand, 6 males in comparison to 2 females reported they kept their friends unaware of the relationship.

Most respondents (22) reported their families were unaware of their cyber-relationship. Fifteen respondents indicated their families did not accept their relationship, in contrast to 6 who reported they did.

The only significant gender difference was that 10 females reported their families did not accept their relationship, in contrast to only 5 males.

## **ANALYSIS**

Internet dating is now prevalent in Egypt, as more than half of the sample (50.3%) admittedly practices it.

### **Usership Habits:**

Internet addiction is an important issue where it comes to cyber-dating. While Griffiths sets more than 11 hours/ day of internet access as an indicator of addiction, Sanders sets it at 2 hours or more. For our purpose here we will use a middle ground average of 7 hours or more, as an indicator of internet addiction. In light of this, 16.6% of the student sample are internet addicts; a rather high rate compared to the 6% worldwide (Peled, 2000, p.43) (Griffiths, 2001, p.3). Hopefully, many may be addicted to the person in the relationship not to the medium. However, further research on addiction rates in Egypt is recommended, especially that internet here may be a new medium undergoing an experimental phase.

### **Cyber-Relationships:**

The fact that hardly anyone (except for two females) resorted to specialized dating sites, may be explainable by students' limited financial resources, as well as Egyptian suspicion of online financial transactions.

Apparently both sexes do not take the medium seriously as a mode of forging serious relationships. Instead they view it as a medium for casual chatting and flirting between the sexes. Again, this may be due to the medium's novelty, which renders them it still in an experimental phase. Their use of it for leisure is in line with Griffiths' description of the net as a medium for comfort, excitement and distraction (2001, p.6). This also brings to mind the fact that in Wheeler's study, 50% of Kuwaiti university students, reported using the internet for leisure (2001, p.194).

As for the gender differences in the types of relationships sought over the net, the fact



that more females use it for casual on-line chatting with the opposite sex and prefer this over any other type of relationship, may for the first while seem ironic. However, social and cultural reasons are at work here. Egypt is a fairly traditional society where dating, especially amongst youths is frowned upon. This social norm is more restrictive of females than males. Thus, the net for many females may be the only outlet for forming any type of relationships with the opposite sex. Hence, they maybe exploring their gender identity, testing waters of romantic relationships unavailable for them in real life, and getting to know how males think; a reason similar to their Kuwaiti counterparts' in Wheeler's studies (2001, p.197)(2000, p. 443).

Another possible explanation of females' reported preference for forming casual online relationships may be reactivity. Many females feel it is taboo to admit they are actively seeking a relationship and would rather appear they did not. Such female view is in line with Hardey's findings regarding women's inhibitions to initiate relationships; a role typically viewed as a male role (2000, p.580). This also explains why more males than females admitted seeking on-line relationships.

As for the significant difference between male and female pursuit of a short-term real life relationships through the net, once again social norms are at play. To many females, the social sanctions associated with public exposure outweigh the transit pleasure of a short term relationship. On the other hand, the fact that more females than males sought long term serious relationship, is in line with gender role and social expectations.

The reason females invest four times as much time as males in their online

relationship, may be due to the fact that males have more liberty to engage in other activities such as going out, and FTF dating.

The fact that most students choose to engage in online relationships late at night, may link back to Griffith's statement that online dating provides comfort and distraction at the end of a long day (Griffiths, 2001, p.6). It is also somewhat similar to Wheeler's findings about Kuwaiti youths accessing the in the afternoon till midnight (2001, p.196). However, more factors may be at play; such as a desire to escape parental supervision or not to keep the phone engaged during calling hours (as most homes access the internet through telephone lines).

### **Effects of Cyber-Relationships:**

The research proves that internet relationships reflect positively on respondents' mood, sociability, self-confidence, self-acceptance and feelings of loneliness. This is in line with research findings of McKeena, Weiser, Shaw and Silverman.

Females are more positively affected by the internet,- compared to males,- where it comes to loneliness. This may be due to the fact that internet provides them with an outlet or a valve through which they can meet new people. Males on the other hand, enjoy more freedom and thus more opportunity to meet and engage in relations with others.

Males being more positively affected than females in terms of sociability, self acceptance and self confidence, may once again be resultant from cultural & social reasons. Although Egyptian social norms discourage cross-gender relationships

particularly at the young age, these sane norms seem to tolerate (if not encourage) such behavior on part of males. Furthermore, most males experience peer pressure to form relationships with the opposite sex as a form of macho proof. Their ability to do so over the net, -especially if they had been unable to do so offline-, makes them experience an increase in self acceptance and self confidence, which may in turn translates into increased sociability.

### **Reasons for Cyber-Relationships:**

The most commonly cited reasons for initiating relationships over the net were “it provides me with comfort, excitement and distraction from my daily life” and “I can express myself better over the internet.” The first reason is in perfect lining of Griffith's description of the net as a medium providing comfort, excitement and distraction from daily life (2001, p.6). The second reason is in perfect harmony with McKeena’s research which stated that people are better able express themselves over the net due to its disinhibiting nature, which stems from its anonymity and lack of gates (2002).

Where it comes to reasons for choosing to date through the internet, gender differences appear most manifest, for cultural and social reasons. The aforementioned Egyptian double standard in cross-gender relationship, appears to be behind most of the differences in gender justification for on-line dating. This explains why significantly more females than males chose “I am afraid for my reputation,” “My family prohibits me from dating,” “My family does not allow me to go out much & keeps a close watch on me” and “I do not easily trust members of the opposite sex, and would rather remain anonymous,” as reasons why they resort to internet dating.

The fact that significantly more females than males choose to date on-line because they feel FTF dating is "religiously wrong," is surprising. Even more surprising is the

small number of females who “feel dating is a social taboo.” Perhaps the reason for this is that religion is deeply embedded in the Egyptian society, that it is often used interchangeably with social norms.

Many of the gender differences in the reasons why respondents resort to the internet for finding romance, are cultural. For instance, -as Harley stated- men are expected to make the first move; that explains why more males than females chose “unable to start conversations” and “afraid of rejection or embarrassment”, as reasons why they resort to the net for romance. It also explains why significantly more females than males added “they were not actively seeking romance over the net,” (either truthfully or in reactivity). Furthermore, more females than males reported being “shy;” a typical gender characteristic.

### **Nature of Communication:**

When it comes to the nature of online communications, technologically advanced modes of communications, such as video conferencing and voice chat, are unpopular. Exchanging telephone numbers and photographs are also unpopular, -at least in the beginning, - because they erode the anonymous nature of the internet. This is in line with McKeena’s observations about internet anonymity (2002, p.9).

Females are more adherent than males to the anonymity privilege of the internet, as they seem less likely to exchange photos, video confer, give out their phone numbers or disclose their identity. Again, this is the social value at play, as females are more discouraged than males to pursue cross gender relations.

Youths appear to have developed an Arabic internet language, composed of Latin letters, and numerals to substitute for Arabic phonetics missing from the English language. This is in line with Alterman's observations, on Arab youths overcoming language barriers over the internet (2000, p.22).

Contrary to McKeena's findings (2002, p.10), respondents were unlikely to share their deepest emotions online. Thus, Egyptian youths may be using the medium differently than Westerners.

Research had shown that women resort more than men to emoticon (icons symbolizing emotions) use in on-line relationships (Morhan-Martin, 2000, p.687). However, although emoticons were reportedly highly used, the study shows no pronounced differences between men and women where it comes to emoticon use.

#### **Difference Between Online & Offline Relationships:**

Females evidently are more able to drop their guard, be themselves and share their emotions on the internet, than males. Thus, the anonymity factor described by McKeena affects them more. Again, this could be for the same aforementioned social pressures.

Previous research, had indicated that it is the disclosure of feelings not of facts about oneself that brings intimacy and relationship satisfaction (McKeena, 1999, p.6). The fact that no females in comparison to 6 males selected "I do not care if my on-line date is lying about facts, it is emotions that matter to me," may point towards this rule applying to males only. Further research is needed to uncover the reason behind that.

#### **Going Offline:**

Many factors control whether or not the online relationship will go offline. Reasons why females do NOT take their relationships offline are very different from males'.

Females choose not to do so for social reasons; namely, “Like to be in control of my relationship time”, “I can not go out because of my family” and “ I still can not make up my mind whether or not I can trust the person.” While the second one is obvious, the first probably refers to their desire to escape parental surveillance. The third expresses fear for reputation or fear of being manipulated by their partner due to their inexperience. This inexperience is resultant from their lack of opportunity to form relationships with the opposite sex, due to social restrictions.

The most commonly cited reasons why males chose not to, were “I am afraid the relationship may be negatively affected,” “I am afraid my partner will not like me if we meet face to face,” and “I have been untruthful and am afraid of disclosure.” All these reasons indicate personal or psychological issues.

The reasons why youths choose to take their relationship offline vary significantly between the sexes. While females do it for emotional or sentimental reasons, such as falling in love or craving more intimacy, males do it for more medium-related reasons, such as getting bored with the medium.

When it comes to taking the relationship off line and into a face to face setting, females appear to wait longer than males. This is because of their lack of experience compared to males as well as the associated higher risk.

After the relationship was launched online telephone conversations were usually held before the couple met offline (McKeena, 2002, p.19)(Hardey, 2002, p.580). This was evidently demonstrated in this research. Ironically though, females seemed more inclined than males to venture off-line without this phase.

Deep and meaningful off-line romantic relationships do form over the internet and become stable with time (McKenna, 2002, p.9). This was demonstrated as respondents reported their internet relationship continuing offline for periods as long as two, three and five years. Furthermore, many reported they were still involved in this particular relationship. One even indicated that she had become engaged to her partner and were now preparing for marriage.

**Friends & Families Perceptions:**

Cyber-relationships are generally acceptable by peers, although they are kept safely hidden from families. This may indicate that with time they will become fully acceptable in the Egyptian society, as this generation grows up and become parents of another generation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The hypothesis was proven as more than half the original sample reported involvement in online dating. Both sexes seemed to be involved in online dating, although for different reasons.

It was obvious that male concerns for initiating an online relationship or taking it offline were more psychologically oriented, such as “do not believe myself attractive” or “afraid my partner will not like me if we meet face to face.” This indicates that one of the main reasons why males resort to cyber-relationships is lack of self-confidence. This is validated in light of the fact that more males than females said the relationship increased their self-confidence. A lack in self-confidence may have stemmed out of their inability to form or initiate off line romantic relationships, resulting into a greater lack of self confidence; thus forming a viscous circle. Their eminent desire and need to form relationships with the opposite sex may have stemmed out of peer pressure and gender role expectations.

The case is very different with females. Females are more pressured by social norms NOT to form relationships with the opposite sex. Their search for a relationship that does not risk social sanctions and goes unnoticed by their families is evidently why they resort to the internet for relationships.

Thus, the internet provides middle grounds in cross gender relationships, which seem to work in everyone's best interest. Apart from its positive effects on their psychological well-being, it provides them with the opportunity to explore their gender identity and gain insightful information about entering into relationships.

The internet's relative novelty to the Egyptian society renders it in the experimental phase. Thus, it is regarded by many as a medium for leisure and entertainment, rather than for the pursuit of long term serious relationships. Evidently, its potential is undermined!

The older Egyptian generations seem oblivious of the internet's potential impact on the social arena. As more Egyptian couples meet over the internet and more of them get married, more serious attention will probably turn to that medium. How long will this take? Only time can tell.



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