



“_____ is the New Biggest Dating Trend”

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Introduction

This summer, Samantha Rothenberg, an illustrator on Instagram, created a cartoon depicting flaky dating behavior using Microsoft Word's old-school icon, Clippy, who would pop up at random instances to ask users if they needed help with writing a letter or formatting a resume. Inspired by this behavior as well as Rothenberg's unpleasant experiences with her ex, the cartoon has Clippy stating: "Sometimes I pop up for no reason at all. See, the truth is, I'm damaged, flaky, and not particularly interested in you. But I don't want you to forget that I exist." In a testament to the supposed relatability of these sentiments, the cartoon went viral. Rothenberg stated in an interview with lifestyle magazine *Refinery29* that paperclipping— when a former interest sends a message, randomly, resurfacing months after having ended contact to stoke the flames and keep options open— is "wildly common." She explained that there's something "empowering about putting a name to an action" so that victims of paperclipping can move on with their lives without being strung along (Smith). The coining of paperclipping, coupled with Rothenberg's reasoning behind its creation as well as the rise in the use of other dating terms such as "ghosting," "benching," and "breadcrumbing," then brings about the question: why are we compelled to label problems that come about in modern dating with specific terminology?

In approaching the answer to this question, we must first look at the development of 21st century dating, and the changes to the dating scene that have come about as a product of online culture. After that historical background has been staged, we can then study the usage of dating terminology and their frequency, and by whom specifically these terms are used. Key in this

research is also the importance of understanding the psychology behind labeling and why humans choose to label behavior in the first place.

Analyzing the reasons behind why we label dating trends, can, at face value, appear to be a frivolous pursuit. But understanding the impulses behind these very human behaviors in an era where increasingly, the ways we interact with each other are changing, is critical in making us more mindful when it comes to our relationships with each other. By looking at the differences that have come about between the analog and digital means of dating, it can be hypothesized that while the ways in which we date have changed, our understanding of these differences has yet to catch up. Because of this, dating terms are then necessary to explain behavior that is created through the gaps that exist in between dating in the physical world and its emulation through online dating. In other words, this paper hypothesizes that dating terms have begun to proliferate because of the ways that online dating fails to fully replicate the traditional dating that people are subliminally used to. The actual terms themselves are then arguably a byproduct of the human desire to grasp the perceived but misunderstood differences.

The Mindset Behind Modern Dating

To begin our considerations of this hypothesis, it's important to look at the historical background of dating and what changes have come about. Moira Weigel, a postdoctoral scholar at the Harvard Society of Fellows and author of the book *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating*, outlines how dating as we understand it today came about as an inadvertent byproduct of consumerism during the industrialization of the 19th century. The custom that developed at the time of men paying for women's dinners meant that people were more inclined to shop around for the best options and investments of their time (Shulevitz). Here, we see a relatively recent

historical culture and attitude of exchange behind dating that was scrutinized by those who preferred the process of courtship. However, the economic views behind dating have arguably been furthered and reinvented with the modern age. As one Stanford study conducted by the university's Department of Sociology displayed, more and more people are finding significant others using online methods, without using directly mutual social circles. In fact, while the most popular way for heterosexual American couples to meet was overwhelmingly through friends and family from the end of World War II until 2013, meeting online is now the most common means of beginning a relationship (Rosenfeld).

This statistic, when considered along with the consumerist mindset behind dating, leads to two essential conclusions. The first is that people increasingly expect relationships to offer a certain level of a return on investment for their time, effort, and money. Because dating was historically recast to be more business-based than relationship-based, it can be deduced that daters have also transformed, to be more particular with the people that they choose to pursue. The second conclusion is that the use of technology in dating has opened up the pool and mediums that people can turn to in order to find their ideal matches. Essentially, people have become more overtly picky as facilitated by the connections that technology allows for.

So What's Up With Online Dating?

Herein lies another critical concept— that of dating and, more specifically, that of online dating. For the purposes of this paper, online dating can be defined as the process of meeting prospective significant others through digital means. While online daters can meet and go on dates in person, the interpersonal relationship is primarily and initially fostered online. Online dating is unique to what will be called traditional dating that begins through face-to-face

interactions, as it allows participants to extend their social circles past what would typically be most accessible in a naturally occurring social environment. The parameters of online dating will also extend to both app-based and Internet-based sources that bring together single individuals.

Based off of this definition, studies have found that dating people beyond one's natural social environment can create a vacuum where friends and family are out of the picture in contextualizing a person and his or her values. In other words, online dating limits the ability to frame a person. Because of this, people are also then more likely to date people with lesser common ground between them— in the previous model of dating, meeting through mutual connections would guarantee a certain extent of commonality (Fetters). This issue of the context vacuum, coupled with the relative anonymity of online dating that disconnects users from each other and limits accountability, could be one reason that accounts for this culture of bad behavior in dating that in itself leads to a dating term being coined. Importantly, through this study, we see that online dating isn't a perfect substitute to meeting people in traditional ways. Regardless, though, in pairing what we learned from the previous section with this information, we know that individuals now rely to a far greater extent on meeting through online dating over meeting through mutual connections. We already see that issues like the context vacuum can place modern daters in situations with people that they may not have much in common with, arguably setting the stage for greater conflicts to occur. We also see that despite these differences and complications that come with online dating, people are still overwhelmingly turning to sites and apps. It is here on these online domains that dating terms run rampant in describing behavior.

And Now, We Have Ghosting (and Co.)

A dating term, which is typically catchy and self-descriptive, explains an oftentimes negative action that is employed in a relationship. These words unofficially work themselves into popular culture until they are widely understood and used. Linguist Gretchen McCulloch explains it best when she says in her book, *Because Internet*, that Internet slang has developed to reflect the subtleties and nuances of behavior behind physical interactions, essentially “restoring” the bodies to online texts (McCulloch). Words that label dating trends, then, in their nearly exclusive description of activities that occur via online methods, can be understood as attempts to clarify otherwise murky behavior. The conclusion that dating terminology has developed alongside the growing technologically advancing dating scene is duly evident by looking at how the actions that are labelled are almost always shaped by digital interactions.

Although most dating terms are unofficial, they are standardized enough that a simple Google search will bring about a few repeated words. Again, much of these behaviors are rooted in digital actions, and like paperclipping, oftentimes begin with an offhanded comment or sharp-witted Internet user. Looking at one example, ghosting, labels the behavior when one party cuts off all contact with the former partner, typically through text and phone call, much like, as the name suggests, a ghost. After actress Charlize Theron confessed to being a ghoster at the end of one of her relationships in 2015, the story was picked up by *The New York Times* and, though the term had existed throughout the mid-2000s, its use because of this instance in particular skyrocketed (Safronova). The life cycle of ghosting mirrors that of paperclipping, in terms of its rise and popularization by news sources. We can see, then, that dating terms are birthed when a clever name is applied to a frustrating behavior in dating, and when people find the name relatable enough to repeat until it’s commonplace.

To look at another example, consider benching, which was first coined by opinion writer Jason Chen in 2016 in a piece written for the New York Magazine. In this case, we see terminology that is used in one context applied to a slightly different context in the dating scene. Chen explains that he used benching as a sports metaphor—likening benching a potential love interest as the same as keeping a sports player on the roster, but not in the game. In other words, “benchers” keeps people around by liking social media posts and engaging with them alone, but never letting them have a chance to actually “play the game” through an in person meeting (Chen). For both ghosters and benchers, it’s been argued that the reason for such prolific negative behavior in the online dating sphere lies in the fact that social media and online dating means that people can avoid difficult conversations. The context vacuum examined above can arguably also play a role in limiting the need for accountability and attachment to anyone met online through an online “marketplace” of connected users, exacerbating the need for terminology to explain behavior that historically may not have existed at such a large scale.

The Invisible Hands at Play

The reason for that may also be, in part, due to the framing of online dating as a potential substitute by the businesses that offer these services. Looking deeper into the ways that online dating works reveals a complicated tangle of algorithms that attempt to emulate and calculate compatibility where friends and family once did. Nick Paumgarten explains in his essay in *The New Yorker* how the algorithms behind dating websites like Match.com work to take indicated preferences on their site as well as implied, revealed preferences that users might not state specifically. A person, for example, may say that he or she prefers to date people with green eyes, but in reality reach out to people with brown eyes in their profile pictures. The algorithm

being perfected by Match.com takes into account both the stated and revealed preferences to approximate the most compatible match that correlates with the two sets of data (Paumgarten).

All this goes to show that dating sites and apps go to great lengths to sell an idealized and streamlined experience in a digitized age. Dating sites are now a multibillion dollar industry, and they benefit from advertising their services as the best means to meet people of interest (Paumgarten). This leaves site and app users, then, with significantly new and difficult terrain to explore. What we know at this point is this: the ways in which we date have changed, and that brings about new difficulties with contextualizing partners met off online sources, while also negating the need for accountability and decorum when “shopping” for partners. It can also be argued that people are relatively ignorant of these arising problems because of the ways that dating sites work to mask the differences and lapses between real-world and online-based interactions. But just because people are explicitly unaware of these problems does not mean that they don’t exist, and it also does not mean that the effects of said problems aren’t felt implicitly. Here, then, we see another potential reason for why dating terminology has become so popular to describe behavior in an evolved and poorly understood dating scene.

What’s New(s)?

But the repetition of dating terminology does not come solely from individuals looking for explanations. Ghosting, as explored briefly above, also gained traction in part because of an article from *The New York Times*. If other dating terms follow similar tracks in their proliferation, then, it can also be argued that new sources play a large role in popularizing terms and trends. Another quick Google search into ghosting and other dating trends brings us headlines that tout the urgency and relatability of certain trends that are bound to, as one title

puts it, “ruin your life” (Willis). The headlines don’t stop there, with similar language being used to emphasize that these trends and terms are ideas that “you need to know about” (Petter), and that are “probably happening to you” (Thomas).

The language used by these news sources, particularly in their headlines, is noteworthy because of the psychological studies that have shown how headlines that are even subtly slanted to one opinion over the other can serve to misdirect their readers (Ecker et al.). A well-written headline that draws attention to certain details or facts can activate a particular set of existing knowledge regardless of the content of the article itself. In these cases, regardless of whether or not a particular dating behavior is actually occurring to a person, the headline predisposes readers to believe that they are, in fact, victims to ghosting, or orbiting, or breadcrumbing—whatever the trend may ultimately be. Even those who may not have used such a term otherwise are then more inclined to associate with the term. Thus, we can see an array of news sources capitalizing on the popularity of dating terminology and presenting its use as necessary and life-changing. Although a vast majority of these pieces are arguably “fluff” articles, news sources can gain from writing about and attracting readers to a dating problem that they deliberately frame as being incredibly relatable. Paired with what we know thus far, then, we now understand that dating terms enter into vernacular when popularized by individuals, famous or not. But we also see that news sources play a role in shaping how that term comes to life—by phrasing, strategically, headlines to emphasize the ways that said term ought to apply to an individual.

This also brings about the principles behind mimetic theory, first proposed by philosopher René Girard, which posits that, as the name describes, human desire is mimetic.

Girard explains that human desire is not linear— a person wouldn't think along the lines of "I want this because this is desirable to me." Rather, the theory holds that we desire what *other people* desire. For example, Person A may look more attractive to Person B because Persons C, D, E, and F all like Person A (Garrels). Mimesis is the theory that can explain, at least according to Jeremy D. Larson, the prevalence of "relatability" in popular culture in his commentary in *The New York Times* (Larson). With the clever phrasing of dating news framed with relatability in mind, conceivably, people are more likely to feel as though dating terms also apply to their lives and to use them liberally in their own lives.

The Power of the Label

These conclusions address *how* terminology comes to the forefront of describing dating, but do not fully answer *why*. To understand this, we must first understand the reasoning behind why people may choose to, and are motivated to, label behavior. Consider the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistics, which holds that one's perception of the world is shaped by his or her native language. One particular study of this hypothesis focused on the differences in words for colors across cultures, verified the conclusions first set forth by Sapir and Whorf by displaying that in instances when people were forced to classify objects by subtle color distinctions, they relied heavily on lexical classifications to judge which objects belonged where (Kay). Put simply, the people that didn't have the words to describe subtle hue distinctions— for example, in English we have a range of blues that include cobalt and sky blue— were inhibited in their ability to classify objects. So, in the context of color categorization, terminology helped greatly in helping sort. Applying this logic to the dating terms, what this study presents as lexical classifications may aid in clarifying behavior that may not have been otherwise understood.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis can, in some ways, explain the need for dating terminology to exist in the first place. While the study above worked with colors, its demonstration that the ease of categorization and the existence of terminology correlate applies to what we see with words like ghosting and paperclipping. Modern day dating is not only different from relationships historically because of the medium in which it takes place on, but studies find that differences also lie in the ambiguity of dating today. Just looking at the fact that unmarried cohabitation is a rising trend in Western societies highlights this ambiguity (Lindsay). Beyond studies, looking at popular culture also points to a lack of a clear social progression of relationships from courtship to marriage. Without this clarity, there is also an absence of a social script that defines how we're expected to act in relationships (Elejalde-Ruiz). The muddled waters of ambiguous relationships provides grounds for a desire for structure and categorization that, again, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis reveals is fodder for dating terminology to be created.

Conclusion

The hypothesis at the start of this paper posited that dating terms came into existence because of the changes that online dating has made in the formation of relationships. The premise was that, because of online dating sites and apps that sell their services as an equitable substitute to traditional dating, people further misunderstand issues like the context vacuum that arguably leave the door open for the problematic behavior that is ultimately labelled. But the original hypothesis leaves most of the responsibility of the creation of dating terminology on, essentially, the vast practice of online dating as a whole. However, the research of the paper shows that dating terms can be traced back to more external factors— whether that be the individual dater and their desire for a successful, transactional relationship, or external news

sources that latch onto phrases to write pieces on, overhyping the relatability of such terminology.

Generally speaking then, the findings of this paper reveal the interconnectedness of online dating— not only do sites and apps open up the playing field and options available, that same technology can be used to place us in situations of incompatibility and also to proliferate terminology where it would once have simply remained in the rhetoric of a few individuals.

While this paper focused primarily on the issue at stake from a lens of internal issues, such as by looking at how online dating sites themselves can potentially and inadvertently create a niche for dating terms, these findings display how there can be further inquiry and study into all of the outside forces at play in what was once, historically speaking, strictly interpersonal.

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