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Aging Adults about Online Dating:
"I am back on the relationship market!"

Abstract: The incidence of increasing aging populations and the popularity of online dating point to the importance of examining aging adults' involvement in online dating. The study uses semi-structured in-depth interviews with 38 individuals from Slovenia aged 63 to 74. The analysis reveals than the majority of the participants claimed that they had access to a large market of potential partners by use of online dating. They used economic metaphors and related them with extremely positive expressions of recovery: we are alive again because we are back on the relationship market. Their decision to seek a partner through online dating meant that they were once again active in a socially important space, which stimulated a sense of revitalization. Even though the participants lived the majority of their lives under socialism, they have internalized the principles of the market economy and perceive their re-entry into the relationship market as their revival.

Keywords: online dating, older adult, later life, post-socialism, in-depth interviews.

Introduction

In the last twenty years, the Internet has created new spaces for developing relationships. Among them are various online dating sites that emphasize self-directed partner searches or rely on scientific algorithms for partner selection. They target a wide audience or aim at particular subgroups (e.g., religiously affiliated sites), and they may charge users to participate or can be free of charge (Finkel et al. 2012; Kreager et al. 2014). Internet dating is defined as a purposeful form of meeting new people through specifically designed internet sites (Barraket, Henry-Waring 2008). This definition distinguishes online dating from other online communication forms, such as e-mail, chat room, multi-user domains, etc., where friendships or relationships emerge mainly as by-products (Wang 2015). Online dating is also distinguished from earlier forms of mediated match-making, such as personal advertisements in newspapers and magazines, in providing larger user-based and more sophisticated self-presentation options (Ellison et al. 2006).

Online dating has today become a common and in some contexts even dominant, practice for seeking romantic partners (Sautter et al. 2010; Hogan et al. 2011; Rosenfeld, Thomas 2012; Manning 2014; Žakelj 2012). Data on the number of people who have created profiles on Slovenian online dating sites also shows the great popularity of online dating in Slovenia. In March 2016, the dating site Ona-on.com recorded the largest num-

ber of online daters in Slovenia, with 160,500 profiles, which is a substantial number for a post-socialist country with little more than two million inhabitants.

The majority of studies on online dating have focused on young and middle-aged adults (e.g., Valkenburg , Peter 2007; Barraket, Henry-Waring 2008; Whitty 2008), and only a few studies on older adults (Malta, Farquharson 2014; McWilliams, Barrett 2014), although the dynamics of romance in later life differ from romance among young and middle-aged adults (e.g., Bulcroft, Bulcroft 1991; Malta, Farquharson 2014). The phenomenon of aging populations and the increasing popularity of online dating thus point to the importance of examining aging adults' involvement in online dating (McWilliams, Barrett 2014). It is particularly important to analyze how people who lived the majority of their lives under socialism internalized the principles of the market economy and new technology. Since existing studies have neglected to examine how older adults who lived the majority of their lives under socialism perceived online dating, the present study tries to fill this research gap by using semi-structured interviews with 38 persons of heterosexual orientation between the ages 63 and 77 who are seeking casual or committed sexual and romantic relationships.

First, we create a theoretical background for understanding online dating. Next, we explain our methodologies. In the last part, we analyze our data and offer discussion and conclusions.

Theoretical Background

Older adults constitute the group recording the greatest increase in Internet usage in the past decade; however, usage varies greatly within this population. The presence of a computer at home, a job requiring computer use, age and education are important factors in predicting Internet use among older adults (Chang et al. 2015). Internet use has been most prevalent among young old adults (aged between 60 and 69), and Internet use rates drop significantly with increasing age (e.g., Erjavec 2014; Chang et al. 2015). This might be due to age-related changes in cognition, physical, and perceptual abilities, including changes in cognitive processing speed, reducing ability to allocate attention efficiently, decreasing visual acuity, and decreasing motor skills, which have not been taken into account in most hardware and software design (e.g., Charness, Boot 2009; Chang et al. 2015). This disadvantage may also affect the underrepresentation of older groups among online daters. Smith and Duggan (2013) reported that 3% of American adults over the age of 65 have participated in online dating compared with 17% and 15% of individuals aged 25–34 and 35–44, respectively. On the most popular online dating site in Slovenia, Ona-on.com, only 1.2% of daters aged over 60 years had been actively involved compared to 38.8% of daters aged 31–40 years (Kogovšek 2011). In contrast, Stephure and colleagues (2009) argued that older adults are more likely than younger adults to seek romantic partners online, in part, as a response to the diminishing satisfaction with and use of more conventional ways of establishing romances.

In an investigation of the initiation and progression of new late-romantic relationships among older Australians (60+ years), Malta and Farquharson (2014) found that older adult romantic relationships were meaningful, important, and sexually intimate; however, few led

to cohabitation or marriage, with these older adults preferring to date or maintain separate households. In line with Giddens' (1992) ideal of "pure" relationships, their research indicates that older adults are looking for egalitarian relationships based on emotional and sexual equality, albeit not necessarily based on cohabitation or monogamy. Specific contexts of older adulthood—particularly the need to maintain cordial relations with their children, to protect their inheritance, the desire for independence, and an unwillingness to undertake daily care activities for their partners—were key reasons why these older adults did not elect to marry or cohabit. All their participants desired long-term, committed relationships; however, they were not willing to settle for something that was less than ideal. Online dating gave these older adults the means to pursue this ideal by allowing them access to many more potential partners than would otherwise be available. They also found that older adults easily entered and exited relationships and that this was especially so for those participants who had been initiated online compared to those who had been initiated face to face.

McWilliams and Barrett (2014) examined aging adults' involvement in online dating, in particular, how aspects of online expectations and experiences are shaped by age and gender. Their study reveals that men seek committed relationships whereas women desire companionship without demanding caring roles. Women moved more slowly toward new relationships, taking time to address their feelings or attend to children's emotional needs. They used online dating as a way to dip their toes into the dating pool and test the waters. In contrast, men were most comfortable with being partnered and saw online dating as providing a way to dive head-first into new dating opportunities. Differences between men's and women's dating timetables resonate with gendered family dynamics: women felt obligated to care for the needs of others while men felt a sense of entitlement to a caretaker. Different barriers to dating increase the appeal of online strategies: men faced narrow social networks while women faced competition from younger women and friendship norms that limited the pool of eligible partners.

Analyses of online dating profiles (e.g., Alterovitz, Mendelsohn 2009) and online daters' reports (Hitsch et al. 2010; McWilliams, Barrett 2014) show that older adult daters screen for youthful characteristics and attempt to convey youthful images of themselves. Men sought physical attractiveness whereas women were more selective than men and valued intelligence, socio-economic status, and abilities over attractiveness. With age, men desired women who were increasingly younger than themselves whereas women desired older men aged 75 and over, when they sought men younger than themselves. In constructing profiles, women focused on their looks and sociability and men on their financial and occupational successes. McWilliams and Barrett (2014) explained age-related shifts in women's and men's dating preferences with the gendered nature of health, longevity, and care work. Men's shorter life expectancies and higher prevalence of heart disease and cancer may contribute to older men's preferences for youthful partners who can offer care and assistance; women had a preference for younger partners with whom they could enjoy active lifestyles, thus reducing the risk of demanding care-giving roles.

Every earlier form of mediated match-making, such as personal advertisements in newspapers and magazines, were primarily based on negative stereotypes. Darden and Koski (1988) found that the use of the personal advertisement in print was considered a deviant

activity. Most of their participants expressed feelings of embarrassment, reluctance, and secretiveness. Since online dating entered the mainstream public consciousness in the 1990s, the stigma associated with personal advertisements was initially extended to online dating (Finkel et al. 2012).

Madden and Lenhart (2006) argued that individuals in the youngest cohort had significantly more favorable views of online dating than older users. In contrast, Stephure and colleagues (2009), who conducted an online survey among 175 participants aged 18 to 64, found that age was unrelated to stigma.

Perception of online dating may depend on involvement in online dating (Donn, Sherman 2002; Wildermuth 2004). People with first-hand exposure to dating sites tend to express more positive opinion than those who receive second-hand exposure from friends and the media. Online dating is not a particularly prominent topic in the media, and there still exists a preponderance of negative stories about the "dark" side of Internet romances and those who seek partners online (Anderson 2005). However, in their analysis of Canadian newspaper and magazines Wada, Clarke, and Rozanova (2015) illustrated that the articles emphasized that a growing number of older adults were seeking casual or committed sexual and romantic relationships online, thereby normalizing the use of the Internet as a means of finding dates. In addition, some studies show that opinion about online dating tend to grow more positively as one's immediate social milieu provides less bountiful access to potential romantic partners (Madden, Lenhart 2006; Sautter et al. 2010, Doan, Meyers 2011; Hogan et al. 2011; Finkel et al. 2012).

For online dating, the phase of online partnership building following key characteristics distinguishes it from offline dating: access to a large pool of potential partners; lower fear of rejection; greater anonymity and privacy; faster disclosed intimacy; more frequent presence of harmless untruths; reduced importance of physical appearance; greater importance of personal characteristics and of skills in written expression; choice based on the principles of homogamy; emotion and rationality defined selection of partners; self-marketing; blurred boundaries between love and market; greater time flexibility; and encouraged self-reflexivity about tastes and preferences (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Illouz 2007; Illouz, Finkelman 2009; Hogan et al. 2011; Finkel et al. 2012; Žakelj 2012; McWilliams, Barrett 2014).

Method

We used semi-structured in-depth interviews to address our research question: How older adults who lived the majority of their lives under socialism perceived online dating? In the methodological literature, it is widely recognized that if handled properly, semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most likely way to obtain in-depth information about the feelings, experiences, opinion, and perceptions of research subjects (Schutt 2001).

To ascertain the perception of online dating, we used snowball sampling or chain sampling. We asked some aging adults to help us find participants over 63 who were actively looking for sexual or intimate relationships. The participants were thus actively seeking casual or committed sexual and romantic partners and wanted to talk about online dating. Such purposive sampling is an acceptable method in exploratory research as it allows

researchers to identify particular types of cases through in-depth investigation (Neuman 1997; Malta, Farquharson 2014).

The total sample consisted of 38 retired adults—19 men and 19 women—between the ages of 63 and 77 at the time of the interview who were seeking casual or committed sexual and romantic relationships. All participants were Slovenian, heterosexual, middle-class, and urban. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2015 and were conducted by phone and face to face with participants depending on their preferred interview mode (Malta, Farquharson 2014). The participants were asked to present their opinion and practice of online dating.

The data were analyzed using an established qualitative analysis technique (for more, see Yin 2003). Themes and sub-themes were identified, and we proceeded to map and interpret the themes, searching for patterns, associations, concepts, and explanations in an effort to make sense of the data and find the best way to present the information gathered.

The participants are referred to by pseudonyms followed by their age, for example, Ines (69).

Results

Online Dating as a Large Market of Potential Partners

Most participants (23) argued that online dating was useful for finding sexual or romantic partners because it enabled access to a large market of potential partners. The main characteristics of these participants were that they used online dating sites, or they had heard from friends/relatives about positive experiences. Notably, most of those respondents were women.

They used economic metaphors to describe online dating with a positive connotation, such as relationship "market." Moreover, the online daters were characterized by explicitly positive connotations: "advanced," "free," and "youthful." Typical was perception of online dating from Jasna (68), which was based on access to great offers of potential partners in the "market"; you can, therefore, get "the best offer":

When we lived in socialism, we sought partners during work activities and other gatherings. But today, we seek our soulmates on the Internet. Times are changing, and we have to change therewith. We must go on. We must always stay youthful. […] I think that everyone, not only young one, should accept a new way of life and be active in seeking the right partner. […] I like online dating because it has a great offer for people with whom I can talk. And I believe that I can really get the best possible choice. Here, we all are on the market… so you get the best of what the market offers, not only those people who you know. The best you can get on the market!

Above mentioned statement also shows that the majority of participants emphasized the difference between dating in socialism and online dating. They though that aging adult should be adjusted to a new situation, i.e. capitalism. For them, the only worthy and admirable people in contemporary society are those who have taken responsibility for their own lives and are active on the relationship market.

Most participants used economic discourse by describing the practice of online dating as an efficient consumption of time and money. They argued that online dating enabled

them an optimal choice of partner, requiring less money and time as in conventional offline dating. According to Majda (69):

For me, online dating is good because I spend less time and money for the best possible man. I do not need to go on a thousand impossible meetings, which are a pure waste of time. You know, we do not have much time to find the right one. If I imagine what I want to do, I really do not have much time. And it is also cheaper than other gatherings. And that, for pension, is very important, especially now in this time of economic crisis. Yeah, I think that online dating is a very efficient use of time and money.

Some of the participants explained that online dating gives them a sense of power and life. These participants connected metaphors of recovery with those of an economic nature. Their key message was that online dating helped them to come alive again because they were back on the relationship market. Statement from Hermina (72) focused on the emancipatory role of the online market:

I like it because I feel like I'm live again… It literally runs oxygen through my veins. Before that, I just vegetated at home. Most of my friends have died, are ill, or are depressed. And I was the same: only negative thoughts and emotions. You know how it is … Then, my neighbor pushed me out of the house, and I started to attend a computer workshop. And there they showed us the online side. It is easy to make a profile. I do not know if I will meet some face to face, but it does not matter… It is important for me to talk to someone with whom I can entrust my hidden thoughts. And you see, I'm back … I'm back on the market, I'm alive again. I do not know how else I can explain my experience.

Ten participants who did not use online platforms for dating or had already negatively experienced casual or committed sexual and romantic relationships on the Internet also used economic metaphors and described online dating as an online relationship "market," however, with the negative connotation. They argued that online dating was connected to an unrealistic relationship market. With the use of attributes with negative connotations, such as "unrealistic," "unreal," "fiction," "fake," they presented their opinion that the relationship market only existed offline. This "fiction" market is a place for those who already had some weaknesses in real life, "losers" or "desperate people" who were not successful in finding a partner offline. They used economic discourse to argue that online dating has not enough quality to be called "real" relationship market. The typical statement came from Anton (75) who explicitly expressed that online dating was not part of the "realistic relationship market" and that it was used only by "losers" who are "desperate" and could not find a partner in "real life":

Online dating is not a realistic relationship market. It is used only by losers who are so desperate that they search for a wife on the Internet. They can't find her in real life. The real relationship only occurs when you can see a woman in the eyes and feel her energy.

Optimal Choice of Partner

The participants' statements also show that online dating predominantly bases on the possibility of using optimal choice in partner selection on online dating sites, by which their potential pain of rejection could be reduced. They expressed, for example, "I can choose the best possible partner" (Tina, 68 years old) or "I can select an ideal man," (Ana, 66 years old). These statements show that our participants used economic discourse of rational choice to describe the selection of intimate relationship. Participants also revealed that the

age of the participants who were "running out of time" played an important role. At this stage of their lives, men and women have certain expectations and are not making compromises.

Majority participants argued that the fear of rejection can be reduced by searching for an ideal partner who would appreciate their qualities. Online dating enabled them to come in contact only with those persons who were suitable for them; it was not necessary to make compromises. Marija (74) explained:

Online dating offers me the opportunity to find just the right one, the right person without making compromises. There can always be a match between the features that somebody is looking for and those that can be found. In my life, I made too many compromises; I am now forced to make no more.

Anonymity and Privacy of Relationship Seeking

Most of the participants also stressed the level of anonymity as decreasing social pressure in online dating. A statement by Jane (66) emphasizes the importance of anonymity in the process of seeking a partner:

I like that everything on the Internet is anonymous, that no one can recognize me. You have the opportunity to avoid those whose company you do not care for. In ordinary life, you are always followed by some people who you probably want to avoid. If you are a little more known in this city, most people could recognize you. However, your profile allows you to remain unknown, and you can really talk only with the man you choose. For me, it is important that the man is expressing general knowledge.

Some of the participants only had online relationships, and they were highly appreciative of the anonymity and privacy. They perceived the disclosure of intimate relationship as infidelity and abuse. "It is crucial that our relationship is ours only… that nobody knows about it," said Irena (63).

Almost all participants expressed that online intimacy based on intensive emotional presence since physical intimacy was not as important. Primarily female participants said that they had an opportunity to reveal deep feelings to anonymous people, which was easier than to identifiable people. According to Ivana (75):

Online dating means a lot to me because I can share my thoughts to someone without knowing him. And I'm not afraid of him. I can reveal my deepest thoughts to him, which I have never revealed to anyone. And this honesty connects us. I do not even need to meet him. I know that I can tell him my most painful memories.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study sought to identify how older adults (63+ years) who lived the majority of their lives under socialism perceived online dating. The study showed that the majority of the participants, primarily single and female, had used online dating or received positive information about online dating from their friends or relatives. Their positive perception of online dating and greater use of online dating sites compared to men can be explained by a general positive opinion about the introduction of innovations in all areas of life (intimate, family, work, and social life) as well as active involvement in different parts of the social life of a majority of these women who were socialized in socialism (Burcar 2009). Thus, most

women who spent most of their lifetime under socialism are unlike today's women who are accustomed to actively introducing various innovations to different parts of their lives.

The majority of participants claimed that they had access to a large market of potential partners by use of online dating. They used economic metaphors, such as online dating as comprising a relationship market, which indicates that they perceived the seeking of romantic or sexual partners as a form of economic transaction (Illouz 2007). The participants also used economic discourse by describing online dating as an efficient use of time and money. The colonization of economic discourse in the field of intimate relationships can be explained as a trend toward the rationalization of intimate relationships (Illouz 2007; Illouz, Finkelman 2009), the rise of the enterprising self (Rose 1992), or the increasing dominance of consumerist culture in all areas of society (Bauman 2007). However, it is surprising that individuals who spent most of their lives under socialism have been applying economic discourse to describe intimate relationships. Even more surprising is that they related the economic metaphors with extremely positive metaphors of recovery: we are alive again because we are back on the relationship market. This opinion bases on dominant neo-liberal ideology, which was quickly adopted by post-socialist countries after the collapse of socialism, arguing that there is no alternative to accepting neo-liberal capitalism (Štefančič 2015). The mainstream media and all other ideological state apparatus unequivocally taught that the only worthy people in contemporary society are those who have taken responsibility for their own lives and are active consumers on the market (Bauman 2007). In our case, this means that the individual is worthy only when she or he is active on the relationship market. For the majority of the participants, the decision to seek a partner through online dating meant that they were once again active in a socially important space (relationship market), which stimulated a sense of revitalization.

Participants who constructed the negative opinion about online dating also used economic discourse: economic metaphors with the negative connotation. They perceived online dating as an "unrealistic relationship market." However, they did not construct a subversive social message since they considered market per se as something very positive. For them, online dating has not enough quality to be "real" relationship market.

The next participants' perception of online dating is also based on economic discourse, i.e. on the possibility of using rational choice in partner selection on online dating sites, by which their potential pain of rejection could be reduced. This means that by using the rational choice of the ideal partner on online dating sites, the participants tried to minimize the risk of rejection, feelings of loss and regret, and the anxiety of possible refusal. According to Salecl (2010), this idea is in line with the neo-liberal values of contemporary society that glorify choice in order to reduce risk or at least foresee it. In recent decades, the choice represented by rational choice theory has become a standard for assessing reality in developed countries. Rational choice theory assumes that people will always try to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs. Consequently, life choices become similar to consumer choices, e.g., searching for the right partner is like a search for hair shampoo. However, today's society—which glorifies choice and the belief that the rational choice is always positive for people and that people always have full information at their disposal for the optimal selection—neglects the impacts of external factors, such as other people, and internal factors, such as unconscious desires and wishes.

That economic discourse was dominant in the field of intimate relationships where it has been confirmed by statements of those participants who expressed negative opinion about online dating. They used rational choice as a standard for assessing reality. For them, choosing a partner via online dating sites generated a major sense of responsibility in relation to the fear of failure and anxiety regarding regret, which can ensue if the choice of a partner turns out to be wrong. According to Salecl (2010), the illusion of rational and infinitive choice can cause feelings of anxiety that an individual will not choose an appropriate partner. Since rational choice is supported by the idea that the individual is responsible for his or her own life, the illusion of a rational choice of a partner on online dating sites can, therefore, result in fear, thus discouraging people from engaging in online dating. Age also plays an important role. The interview data revealed that fear of the wrong choice was greater among older adults than younger ones. The participants no longer had the time to experiment with partners. Part of the explanation can also be related to the fact that such opinion was expressed by men who were mostly less active and more afraid of risk-taking during old age than Slovenian woman (Mastnak 2004). They feared the loss of their "successful man" identity, which they cultivated during their working lives in the context of wrong partner choices.

Thus, our participants who spent most of their lives under socialism internalized the principles of the market economy and perceived such principles in seeking casual or committed sexual and romantic relationships. Such quick acceptance of neo-liberal ideology could also be partly explained by the fact that most of our participants have not experienced hard reality of life in capitalism as the majority of the younger generation had. They had mainly kept their jobs until retirement and used other benefits of socialism (e.g., housing, pension, and healthcare insurance) while also enjoying consumer advantages of capitalism (Burcar 2009).

Our participants also emphasized the possibility of experiencing emotional intimacy rather than physical or sexual intimacy. In contrast to other studies (Malta, Farquharson 2014; McWilliams, Barrett 2014), we found that online intimacy primarily encompassed sharing intimate thoughts and feelings. The majority of participants were satisfied with sincere communication with anonymous partners about their feelings and life experiences. Part of the explanation could be found in the individualization of society and the incidence of less personal relationships among older adults (Machielse 2015) for whom online dating sites can present an important means to communicate their own feelings and thoughts. Part of the explanation can also be related to the fact that this opinion was expressed by women who were more willing than men to express emotional intimacy than sexual intimacy (Malta, Farquharson 2014). McWilliams and Barrett (2014) can also aid us from their finding that older women, in contrast to men, seek companionship through online dating. Notwithstanding, online intimacy does lack some key elements, hence the reference "cold intimacy" (Illouz 2007).

Our participants also expressed other benefits of online dating—such as anonymity and privacy—which are not specific to this cohort as the participants were identified by authors who have carried out studies on younger and middle-aged populations (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Illouz 2007; Illouz, Finkelman 2009; Hogan et al. 2011; Finkel et al. 2012; Žakelj 2012; McWilliams, Barrett 2014).

The study confirmed Donn and Sherman's (2002) and Wildermuth's (2004) finding that people who did not use the Internet for online dating attached a negative stigma to intimate online relationships. Our participants expressed only a few negative stereotypes, which indicate a relatively low level of stigmatization of online dating and online daters. They characterized online daters as losers and desperate people who, in their offline lives, could not find a partner.

Since the study of population was categorically urban and middle class, future studies should also include cohorts from rural populations and other classes. Since the study uses a small and convenience sample, the findings cannot be generalized to a broader population of older adults. Therefore, future studies should use random sampling and quantitative surveys.

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