

**DATING IN THE DARK: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED
EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS**

by

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Dedication

This study is dedicated in loving memory of my Nan Winnie.

You inspire me every day.

Thank you.

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I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to:

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Abstract

Online relationships are becoming increasingly popular due to the availability, accessibility, and affordability of online social networking and dating sites. Individuals are progressively moving from meeting romantic partners face to face to meeting and engaging with individuals online. There is ample evidence to support the view that individuals do initiate romantic relationships online and often these relationships progress offline. The primary focus of online research had been conducted by communication and linguistic scholars while very little research has been conducted into the psychological conceptualisation of online relationships. In addition, there is a lack of available research pertaining to the development of romantic relationships online and more so in South Africa. The current study utilised Sternberg's Triangular model of love and the Johari window as a framework for understanding the concepts involved in online romantic relationships. The study specifically aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of individuals who engage in online dating. The parameters of the study included the elements that comprise the online relationship, the subjective meaning attached to the relationships, and the processes these relationships encompass. The study moreover aimed to explore the progression of the online relationship. The study used a qualitative, phenomenological approach using snowball sampling and semi structured interviews to collect data. Tesch's model of content analysis was used during data analysis while incorporating the four major processes in phenomenological research, namely (1) epoche, (2) phenomenological reduction, (3) imaginative variation and, (4) synthesis. The findings of the study generated a greater understanding of the complexities of online dating. Themes including online relationship development, the dynamics of online

relationships, how love, according to the triangular model of love, is perceived online and, self-disclosure online were identified through the participants narratives. These findings ultimately can be used for future research.

Key words: Cyber-Romance, Johari window, online relationships, relationship development, self-disclosure online, Triangular model of love.

Chapter One

Dating in the Dark: Introduction

1.1. Foundation

Chapter one discusses the basis for the present study which emerged from the current popularity of online relationships in modern society. The chapter begins by explaining the rationale for the study. Through understanding the foundation for the present research into online relationships, particularly in South Africa, as well as the context in which these relationship occur, the present study's research objectives can be defined and understood. The chapter furthermore reviews the methodological approach used in the study, and highlights the data collection and analysis procedures as well as important ethical considerations.

1.2. Rationale

The Internet is a worldwide connection of independently operating computer networks. This means that home, business, and organisational computers worldwide are connected on condition that they have access to the Internet (Baker, 2008). The Internet is becoming embedded in everyday life, influencing almost all aspects of an individual's home, work and daily social living. During the early stages of the computer in the late 1970s, the use of the Internet was primarily affiliated with universities and government agencies where it was used it to manipulate and analyse data. After the commercialisation of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, the Internet evolved into a medium used to build social networks and foster intimate relationships (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis & Sprecher, 2012).

The Internet is one of the most popular ways to find a romantic partner. Creating and nurturing romantic relationships online are now commonplace in today's society mainly influenced by the various social media opportunities available to individuals (Finkel et al., 2012).

From birth to death relationships are the core of human experience, individuals have a strong need to affiliate and relate to other individuals. Belonging to a group enables individuals to survive physically and psychologically (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006). The Internet is allowing individuals to meet their affiliation needs without having to meet others physically. It provides a space where individuals can bond and create relationships without meeting face to face. It can be concluded from the literature review undertaken in the present study that most of the research into online relationships has been conducted by communication and linguistic scholars; who have focused on the communication process and patterns that occur in online relationships (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). A further motivation for the study was the lack of available research pertaining to the development of romantic relationships online and more so in South Africa.

1.3. Terminology used in the Study

1.3.1. The Internet. In order to understand romantic relationships, the context in which these relationships occur needs to be explained. The Internet is a worldwide electronic system that carries digitised data from one place to another in that network. It is generally understood that cyberspace, or the Internet, is the space generated by software within a computer that produces a virtual reality (Whitty, 2003). Cyberspace is the home of thousands of groups of individuals who connect and share information,

discuss mutual interests, play games, and carry out business, and it is a social tool that links individuals across the world (Bell, 2001; Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). In the past decade technology and especially the Internet has become increasingly important in the everyday lives of individuals and it is often a primary source of communication after face to face communication as it is quick, easy, and efficient.

1.3.2. Communication online. Individuals access the Internet for numerous different reasons ranging from obtaining information, playing games, to forming relationships. One prominent aspect that is crucial to understanding social relationships online is the language that fills this cyberspace. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is the broad definition of all interaction that occurs via the web and is any form of data exchange across two or more networked computers. More frequently, the term includes only those communications that occur via computer-mediated formats (that is, instant messages, e-mails, chat rooms, World Wide Web) (Sprecher, 2009). CMC as defined by Cornwell and Lundgren (2001) can be synchronous (simultaneous), which includes being part of an online chat room where messages appear instantly and are replied to instantly, or asynchronous (delayed), such as emails which are received and may be replied to at any time. CMC is used by individuals, groups and organisations for many different functions, resulting in the evolution of an extensive social world (Klein, 2013).

1.3.3. Online relationships. An online relationship refers to a relationship between individuals which is initiated and maintained online via social networking sites, dating sites or other synchronous or asynchronous applications. No face to face contact occurs between individuals in the online environment as they communicate using

electronically transmitted information. The individuals participating in these relationships may have consciously searched for intimate partners, or met online as friends or acquaintances, and later developed romantic intentions (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006).

1.3.4. Online dating. The term online dating or Internet dating refers to the practice of using dating sites or other means to find a romantic partner. Throughout the present study online dating is compared with conventional offline dating. Offline dating encompasses the myriad of ways that individuals meet potential romantic partners in their everyday lives through non-Internet activities (Finkel et al., 2012)

1.4. Theoretical Underpinning.

Sternberg's triangular theory of love (1986) and the Johari window (Luft & Ingham, 1955) will be defined and explored to offer a theoretical understanding of relationships. These theories offers insightful interpretations in which to understand the influences of the lived experiences of online relationships. As such, the perspective has been utilised for the theoretical component in the present phenomenological study.

1.5. Objective of the Study

The aim of the study was to create an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of online relationships through the description of the subjective meaning the participants attach to relationships in an online context, and to seek common factors or patterns that emerge between the participant's involvement in these relationships.

1.6. Research Methodology

The present study used a qualitative exploratory-descriptive phenomenological research design. Descriptive research typically involves measuring a variable or set of variables, as they exist naturally (Gravetter & Forzano, 2006). Information collected focused on the words, sentences and impressions provided by the participants (Neuman, 2003). The research design was used to elicit the quality and texture of the participants' experiences while simultaneously clarifying the meaning attached to the phenomenon through its inductive nature (Smith, 2003). As a phenomenological approach does not include a series of techniques, the understanding of phenomenological processes was incorporated into the study and provided guidance in terms of the research design. The understanding was used to ensure the integrity of phenomenon being investigated (Smith 2003). The inclination towards description and interpretation occurs through the emphasis of subjectivity within a phenomenological study. As a result the focus of the present study was directed towards the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs of the participants (Smith, 2003). Phenomenology does not reduce the phenomenon into identifiable variables that are understood in a controlled environment but rather seeks to accurately capture the phenomenon within the context that it occurs (Smith, 2003).

Through the phenomenological approach and application of the four phenomenological processes, the study aimed to elicit and describe the lived experience of online relationships. The four phenomenological processes include epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings (Moustakas, 1994). These processes were applied to the study using four steps. Firstly the researcher read the entire transcript of each interview to understand the sense of each

participant's experience. Secondly, 'meaning units' were identified by bracketing all information that pertains to the phenomenon. The meaning units were reviewed to elicit the psychological insight within them. Finally, the meanings were synthesised to provide a thick description of the lived experience of online relationships (Smith, 2003). A discussion of how these processes were applied to the present study is provided in greater detail in the chapter on methodology.

1.6.1. Data collection. The data collection process consisted of individual, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were guided by an interview schedule but remained flexible to allow for an interactive process that was used to describe the experience of online dating.

The interviews were recorded using a recording device to ensure that the data obtained through the interviews was accurately captured. Once the interviews had been conducted, the data was transcribed verbatim by the researcher into text that was used during the data analysis process. Once a preliminary data analysis had been completed, participants were contacted telephonically to verify the information obtained from the interviews.

1.6.2. Data analysis. The four phenomenological processes of epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis of meanings was actualised through the application of Tesch's (1990) eight steps in qualitative data analysis. In using these steps, the transcriptions were reviewed until meaning was extracted and clustered into similar topics. The topics were organised according to their importance and given abbreviated codes. The codes were then applied to the transcriptions to determine if new topics emerge. Once all possible topics were identified,

the topics were categorised and new abbreviations were developed. The data contained within each transcription was then assembled into the descriptive categories.

To ensure the credibility of the data analysis and research findings, an independent research psychologist simultaneously analysed the transcriptions using Tesch's (1990) eight steps. Once the analyses had been completed, the researcher and the independent research psychologist consulted on their findings to ensure the integrity of the findings obtained.

1.6.3. Ethical considerations. Research ethics provide the researcher with guidelines to establish a balance between values, the pursuit of knowledge, and the rights of those involved in the research. The researcher maintained integrity throughout the research process and took the necessary steps to prevent scientific misconduct. To actualise the ethical considerations the researcher ensured the following: informed consent to ensure deception is avoided, accurate data collection, maintaining confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of participants, accurate dissemination of findings and maintaining competence within the researcher's professional role.

Informed consent was obtained by all participants through a written contractual agreement. Included in this contract was information regarding the aim of the study, the researcher, research procedures, potential risks, confidentiality, dissemination of results, and confirmation of voluntary participation as well as the right to withdraw from the study. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and request clarification prior to providing consent to ensure that all possible deception was avoided. The confidentiality of information obtained from participants as well as the use of pseudonyms ensured the

anonymity and privacy of the individuals. Furthermore, documentation collected during the process was securely stored by the researcher.

Although no potential psychological risks were identified, the researcher adhered to the principle of non-maleficence while conducting the interviews by ensuring that the discussion did not lead to psychological distress and thus become harmful to the participants. The researcher remained dedicated to the accurate investigation of the phenomenon and took necessary steps to ensure that all information obtained and disclosed through the study was not falsified during the procedure. A verification process with the participants also ensured the accuracy of the study's findings prior to the dissemination of the findings.

1.5. Conclusion

Chapter one provided an overview of the focus of the study as well as the methodology used to realise the researcher's goals. Chapter two follows with a contextualisation of online relationships, highlighting the pertinent research associated with relationships and relationships in the online context. Chapter three provides a comprehensive discussion of Sternberg's Triangular theory of love and how this could be applied in an online setting. The chapter explores intimacy, passion and commitment in-depth and in relation to online relationships. Chapter four provides a detailed description of disclosure and the Johari window (Luft & Ingham, 1955) and how this theoretical understanding could be used in an online context. Chapter five reviews the methodology implemented within the study. This review highlights the benefits of qualitative research designs as well as the appropriateness of a phenomenological approach in investigating the lived experience of online relationships. The chapter discusses sampling procedures

as well as data collection and analysis. In addition, observations made during the research process and ethical considerations pertinent to the study are examined. Chapter six provides the findings and discussion of the study's findings. Within this chapter the lived experience of the online relationships are described to create an in depth understanding of relationships in the online context, the chapter highlights common themes and patterns within the stories of the individuals. Chapter seven provides a summary of the study and highlights important outcomes pertaining to the findings of the research as well as the methodology used to extract such findings. The chapter concludes with implications of the present study.

The next chapter will provide a literature review of online relationships and explore the dynamics of online dating.

Chapter 2

Spinning a Web: The Internet and Online Relationships

2.1. Introduction

From what seemed like a very futuristic concept some 20 years ago the Internet has become a modern day necessity. The computer has evolved from a large machine to a simple hand held device allowing individuals to connect to a world of information in a matter of seconds (Whitty, 2003). South Africans are one of the highest users of mobile technology and mobile social networking on the continent, however, stationary Internet and computer ownership lags (UNICEF, 2012). While there is are very few statistics available regarding Internet use in South Africa, Lampen (2010) noted that in 2010 there were 5,3 million South Africans online. Individuals are constantly connected through emails, instant messages, calls, and social media 24 hours a day via new technologies such as cellphones and tablets. Technology brings with it some very interesting social dilemmas and concepts and the progression of this modern technology has unveiled a new form of instant communication whereby individuals can now connect rapidly, conveniently and globally.

This literature review will focus on exploring the formation of relationships and examine how traditional theories of romantic relationships compare to research regarding online relationships. The core differences between relationships that occur online and relationships that occur offline will be explored. The debate regarding whether healthy romantic relationships can be formed online will also be considered and reviewed. The chapter will then focus on the elements of traditional relationship development, namely,

affiliation needs, similarity proximity and familiarity, as well as the theory of relationship development according to Levinger (1980). A discussion of how relationships are formed online by exploring the underlying motivation for online relationships, the development of online relationships, and the risks involved with engaging in online relationships follows. Intimacy and self-disclosure will also be discussed briefly with emphasis on the themes that will be explored in the following chapters. The chapter will conclude by looking at the different ways that online relationships can be formed, namely via social networking sites and online dating sites, as well as the stigma of online dating and the element of control that individuals experience when using online dating sites.

2.2. Interpersonal Communication Online

Interpersonal communication is now the number one use for Internet in the home and has revolutionised the way communication takes place across the world for many individuals (Klein, 2013). It has allowed millions of individuals to connect, to communicate immediately in many ways over a range of means, and to develop all types of relationships including work, romance, and friendships (Ling Huang & Ching Yang, 2013; Sprecher, 2009; Van Staden, 2010). The present author notes that the opportunities to form relationships on the Internet have increased rapidly in the past decade by the formation of many chatrooms, social media sites, and online dating sites. Online communities are growing swiftly and are replacing the space left by the decline of traditional communities (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). Ruppel (2014) agrees and states that synchronous media technologies are supplementing or replacing face-to-face interaction in relationship development for a growing number of individuals. Hardey (2004) described the Internet as a new approach to meeting individuals and shaping

relationships, noting that new information and communication technologies are changing traditional paths to prospective romantic encounters. Relationships previously initiated and maintained primarily through face-to-face interaction are now moving to social technology and this is creating a new genre of interpersonal relationships (Donn & Sherman, 2002; Ling Huang & Ching Yang, 2013).

There has been extensive research conducted on the impact of the Internet on individuals' lives as well as the communication that occurs via the web. Most of the research regarding online relationships has been conducted by communication and linguistic scholars and has focused on the communication process and the patterns that occur online (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Hitsch, Hortacısu & Ariely, 2006; Ling Huang & Ching Yang, 2013; Suler, 2005; Whitty, 2007; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Contemporary researchers have now started focusing on the psychological impact online relationships have, and how these relationships are changing the traditional ideals and values of relationship formation, particularly of romance and dating amongst individuals (Hitsch, Hortacısu & Ariely, 2006; Ling Huang & Ching Yang, 2013; Ruppel, 2014; Suler, 2005; Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015). In order to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the nature of these online relationships, there needs to be less of a focus on the implications of the online context and more on examining the meanings users construct around their interpersonal online interactions (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). This study aims to explore the meaning individuals experience with their online relationships. As Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) explained, online relationship research should include an examination of how individuals understand and interpret their own online romantic experiences.

2.3. Creating Meaningful Relationships in an Online World

There is an ongoing debate on whether the formation of online relationships can be considered healthy and successful when compared to traditional face to face dating. Multiple researchers describe online relationships as: (a) highly impersonal and shallow due to the restricted nature of the medium (Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015), (b) interpersonal, but more restrictive than face-to-face relationships so that they take longer to form and to develop (Lea & Spears, 1995; Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015), or (c) accelerated, and so intense that individuals self-disclose rapidly and form deeply intimate bonds in a short time frame (Walther, 1996; Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015). All three perspectives emphasise the physical context of the Internet as a medium of communication (that is, lack of nonverbal cues, anonymity, asynchrony), and the impact this has on the nature of online relationships (for example, it makes them impersonal, interpersonal, or accelerated) (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006; Ling Huang & Ching Yang, 2013; McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). In the majority of this research the physical elements of the environment are seen as playing a major role in determining the nature of the relationships developed within that context. The emphasis on context diminishes the role the participants experience by focusing on the medium itself as the fundamental component shaping relational dynamics instead of the interpersonal experience of the online relationship (Riva, 2002).

Understanding cognitive schemas and social cognition will offer a conceptual framework to examine how online romantic participants describe their relationships. It examines how individuals make sense of themselves, others, and the world (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006). According to social cognition, the meaning

of a given situation is intrinsically subjective, as the human mind actively constructs a reality beyond the original situation (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). The meanings individuals construct for given relationships are stored as relational schemata. Relational schemata are cognitive structures relational partners use to store fundamental beliefs about the development and nature of particular relationships (Taylor et al., 2006). Individuals' relational schemata hold the expectations, anticipatory assumptions, rules and beliefs that individuals use to understand and to assign meaning to relational behaviors (Riva, 2002). One of the most effective ways for individuals to make their relational schemata available to others is to share relational narratives or stories (Taylor et al., 2006). In other words, through studying online romantic participants' narratives researchers may begin to understand the meanings individuals assign to their online romances.

In order to fully comprehend the meaning that subjects attach to their online relationships, an understanding of the elements, formation, and course of romantic relationships and particularly those that occur online need to be explored and defined. The course of online relationships is essentially different from the path of development of what is considered traditional or face-to-face relationships, due to the environment in which the initiation and formation of the relationship occurs (Merkle & Richardson, 1999; Ruppel, 2014). Research findings have suggested that electronic communication provides a sense of intimacy without the emotional investment that leads to close and lasting relationships (Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson & Crawford, 2002). This situation, described as the 'boom or bust' phenomenon, is a phenomena where an accelerated process of intimate self-disclosure leads relationships to become passionate rapidly, and is a common occurrence in online relationships. The relationship will feel

exhilarating at first and quickly become eroticised but subsequently will not be able to be sustained because the underlying trust and true knowledge of the other is not there to support it (Whitty & Gavin, 2001).

Online relationships often also move in a reverse order. Individuals will meet online without any physical proximity or initial physical attraction, continue to discover each other and create a form of intimacy, and then meet face to face. In contrast, the development of a face-to-face, romantic relationship moves from the first encounter which is based on spatial proximity and physical attractiveness to the discovery of similarities, and to self-disclosure (Merkle & Richardson, 1999). CMC users are forced to rely on self-disclosure because they lack other strategies that are commonly used in face-to-face settings (Antheunis, 2009; Walther 2002). In meeting online, the more important shared thoughts and emotions are, the less important looks or physical attraction become. More durable relationships may result from the focus upon nonphysical factors (Baker, 2008). The formation of these durable relationships is important to understand, exploring their essence and essentially the meaning that is given and received from them will provide insight into their dynamics.

2.4. Understanding Relationship Formation

In order to gain an understanding of online relationships the phenomena and concepts that constitute an offline relationship need to be defined and understood. This understanding will offer a base to exploring online relationships and allow a deeper understanding of the motives, dynamics, and elements that are part of the formation of Internet relationships.

2.4.1. Affiliation needs in relationships- Why do individuals form romantic relationships? McClelland (1971) has defined a social need as a “recurrent goal state, usually detectable in fantasy, which demonstrably energises, directs, and selects behavior” (p. 19). The need to affiliate or feel a sense of belonging is a powerful, fundamental, and pervasive motivation. There are two social motives that influence an individual’s need for social contact. The first is the need for affiliation, which is a person’s desire to seek and maintain encouraging interpersonal relationships. The second is the need for intimacy, which is the desire to experience a warm, close, communicative relationship. There is a link between the need to belong and cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behavioral responses, and general health and well-being (Franzoi, 1996). The need to connect deeply with others has been described as a core human drive that allows individuals to survive both physically, and psychologically. The evolutionary perspective suggests that being part of a group has survival benefits (group hunting and sharing resources in historical societies is an example of this) and reproductive benefits (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006).

The need to belong is found to some degree in all humans in all cultures. There are naturally individual differences in the strength and intensity, as well as cultural and individual variations in how individuals express and satisfy this need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals show tendencies to seek out interpersonal contacts and nurture possible relationships until they have reached a minimum level of social contact and relatedness.

The formation of social bonds is also associated with positive emotions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals with high levels of intimacy motivation tend to

enjoy higher levels of happiness and subjective well-being. The effects of belongingness on mental illness parallel those of physical illness. Rejected children have a higher incidence of psychopathology than other children. Marital status also has strong relationships with mental illness. Individuals experience higher levels of positive emotional experiences when they are in a committed, supportive communion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary (1995) concluded that mental hospital admission rates are highest among divorced and separated individuals, intermediate among never-married individuals, and lowest among married individuals. The benefits of social support are established. The availability of social support buffers individuals against the ill effects of stress and the idea that the psychological therapeutic process is facilitated by close personal bonds, reaffirms this.

The need to belong to a group with similar interests and goals as well as self-esteem needs or a sense of self-worth are more widely met via the Internet due to the vast number of channels available to connect with individuals from around the globe (McKenna & Bargh, 1999). Individuals are increasingly turning to the Internet to meet important social and psychological needs, including affiliation and intimacy needs. The occurrence of fulfilling intimate relationships in an individual's life is one of the strongest predictors of happiness and emotional well-being and this is particularly relevant to online environments, where large numbers of individuals can conveniently meet and interact in a variety of online social settings (McKenna & Bargh, 1999).

The concepts of initial attraction, proximity and familiarity, and similarity are also central in both online relationship as well as offline relationship development as they

constitute the fundamental aspects that are central to who and why individuals initiate relationships in an offline setting.

2.4.2. Initial attraction, proximity and familiarity, and similarity- How do individuals form romantic relationships? Love and attraction in the Western world are seen as foundational to the formation and the basic bond between families. Proximity according to Taylor et al., (2006) is defined as the physical distance between individuals. The closer individuals are spatially the more likely they will be attracted to each other. Research has shown similarity to be an integral part of a relationship that contributes to love and attraction. Online individuals are able to connect regardless of their physical distance from each other, individuals connect from different countries, cities and regions. It is important to consider the ambiguity of proximity on the Internet, it is not considered as the spatial closeness of individuals instead it is the increase in communication between individuals which produces familiarity (Rietchard, 2007).

Attraction is also known to be fostered through familiarity. Familiarity as defined by Taylor et al., (2006) is described as repeated exposure to an individual increases liking for that individual. There is some evidence that mere frequency of exposure can create a degree of attraction between individuals (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Ruppel, 2014). Online individuals are constantly connected and frequent contact with others is possible with little inconvenience or cost, from the comfort and safety of one's own home or workplace (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Electronic communication creates a feeling of greater closeness with others, regardless of their actual geographic location.

Similar interests, values, beliefs, ideals, and attitudes between potential partners is a very important feature in interpersonal attraction (du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw, 2008).

With regard to online relationships, research points to attraction being highest when the partner is perceived as being both physically attractive and attitudinally similar to oneself (Brehm, 1992; Taylor et al., 2006). The Internet increases one's chances of connecting with like-minded individuals due to the computer's ability to rapidly sort along many dimensions simultaneously (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). The unique structure of the Internet allows individuals to quickly and easily find others with similar interests. For example, by joining a site that is about loving dogs, individuals already are connected to a wide array of individuals who share a similar interest (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). When considering online dating sites, the present author notes, that individuals share a similar goal (to find a potential partner), and this creates a similarity between the individuals which creates the possibility of a connection. Individuals can skim through a person's social media profile and decide whether they share common interests before engaging in any communication. The fact that all the information is present for potential partners to see automatically increases the feeling of similarity (Heino, Ellison & Gibbs, 2010). Initial impressions online are based on how someone describes and expresses him/herself. Interestingly, unlike face-to-face relating, the importance of physical attractiveness in CMC, as a relationship determinant, is minimised by the ability to know someone through intense mutual self-disclosure and intimate sharing of personal information such as dreams, ideals, and future goals (Merkle & Richardson, 1999). Online, the more intimate information individuals disclose about themselves, the higher the level of interpersonal attraction (Antheunis, 2009).

These factors contribute to the reasons individuals form relationships as well as how and why individuals connect romantically. The process of relationship development

similarly needs to be explored and defined to holistically understand romantic relationships both on and offline.

2.4.3. Traditional (face to face) relationship development. When considering traditional face to face relationship development, Levinger (1980) proposes a concise five-stage model of close relationship development (initial attraction, building a relationship; continuation; deterioration; ending) characterised by systematic increases and decreases in the involvement levels of participants within the relationship. Knapp's (1994) relationship development theory that consists of 10 stages, expands on Levinger's (1980) model and aptly explains the development of offline relationships. Stage models have been widely tested and applied over the past 40 years to explicate the steps of romantic relationship development and decline (Ruppel, 2014). This theory could be used to explain online relationships. The following six of the ten stages are especially descriptive of intimate, romantic relationships and close friendships and could be implemented to explain online relationships.

1. Initiation. This stage comprises of expressing interest in making contact with a potential partner. Creating a favourable impression is paramount in this stage and individuals will often behave in socially acceptable ways and be aware of their words. For example, pulling out the chair for a woman at a restaurant may be a man's way of creating a favourable impression. This stage is often initiated by a physical attraction between two individuals.

2. Experimentation. This stage involves uncertainty reduction, which often involves sharing information on a 'safe' level by creating small talk. Individuals will often make a decision about whether to pursue the relationship any further by whether the potential

partner matches the individual's own personal style. For example, there may be initial physical attraction toward a potential partner which fades after hearing that the person is involved with something with which the individual does not relate to.

3. Intensifying. In this stage interpersonal relationships now begin to emerge. This stage is characterised by active participation, mutual concern and the awareness of possible commitment. Feelings about the other person may be openly expressed during this stage and individuals begin to see themselves as 'we' instead of separate individuals.

4. Integrating. As the relationship strengthens couples are identified as a social unit and the individuals start mirroring each other's behaviour. Commitment develops strongly in this stage of the relationship and individuals assume continuity. Trust is exceptionally high and individuals can disclose intimate information without the fear of being rejected.

5. Bonding. The individuals involved in the relationship construct symbolic public gestures to show society that their relationship exists (for example, marriage). Cultural and social norms have a heavy influence on this stage.

6. Differentiating. During this stage the need to re-establish separate identities begins to emerge. Individuals introspect to find their identity within the relationship. The key to successful differentiation is maintaining a commitment to the relationship while creating the space for autonomy and individuality. It must be noted that healthy long term relationships stay in this stage for the majority of the relationship (du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw, 2008).

The final four stages of Knapp's (1994) model explains how the relationship dissolves which is not a focus of the present study and therefore will not be discussed.

These four stages could however be used for future studies regarding online relationship termination. It is important to understand the elements of offline relationships in order to transfer this information to inline relationships.

2.5. Cyber-Love: Exploring Online Romantic Relationships

The Internet can provide connection and community, and may facilitate romance, especially for individuals with limited options such as the elderly, individuals with disabilities and those isolated by distance or time limitations (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006). The Internet offers an opportunity for individuals to find friendship, love and sex online, although this is limited by the digital divide of inequality between those who have access to the Internet and those who are computer literate (Couch, Liamputtong & Pitts, 2012). Recently the popularity of online dating as an acceptable way to meet partners has increased and has broadened out from a once marginalised and stigmatised activity, to a conventional social way of connecting with possible partners (Antheunis, 2009; Couch, Liamputtong & Pitts, 2012). Online romance, or cyber dating, has emerged as a distinct type of contemporary relationship (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006). The digital component of meeting individuals online removes any stigma attached to a particular individual or group and allows more freedom regarding with whom to connect and how to connect. The Internet is allowing individuals to meet their affiliation needs without having to meet others physically. It similarly provides a space where individuals can bond and create relationships without meeting face to face. Individuals are connecting and ‘living’ in cyber space in which intimate social bonds and relationships are being formed continually without any physical connections.

2.5.1. The underlying motivation of Internet relationships- Why do individuals form relationships online? The three A's of the Internet, commonly referred to as The triple A engine, explains that there is a tri-factor, namely anonymity, availability, and affordability that drives online relationships (Leiblum, 1997).

Anonymity refers to the concept that the user is in control of their self-presentation. Anonymity can be explained as “those engaging in online relationships can choose to present a detached attachment or absent presence characterised by features of oppositionality : distance vs. immediacy, anonymity vs. disclosure, deception vs. sincerity...in one line of text, an individual can transmit confessional self-disclosure while remaining anonymous” (Lieblum, 1997; p. 2). In offline relationships, identities or other attributes about a person can be exposed through physical appearance, non-verbal communication signals, or other aspects. Such aspects could lead to individuals being judged by the other person and have real consequences for the duration or development of the relationship. Internet users have the ability to manage how they are portrayed physically in most online social networking sites and dating sites. CMC enables users to engage in “selective self-presentation” this increased control over self-presentation can however result in misrepresentation and deception (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). For example, by selecting what picture goes on the public profile for everyone to see. This control allows individuals to choose what first impressions others will have of them by opting for what information to portray publically, allowing them to choose what aspects of themselves to keep anonymous. Most social networking and dating sites also allow individuals to control what demographics are observed by others (such as ethnicity, gender and age) by their privacy settings, individuals may choose to keep this

information a secret until they feel comfortable that these aspects will not hinder the development of the relationship. With this lack of accountability and distance from others in the virtual environments individuals are free to do or say whatever they want with little fear of the consequences (Antheunis, 2009). Although self-disclosure is highly variable online, many individuals report feeling freer to make themselves known within the safety of the anonymity (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

Accessibility refers to the many locations for Internet access – from homes, workplaces, Internet cafes, to personal handheld devices (PDAs), and cellphones. The accessibility of these modes of Internet access provides individuals with the ability to sustain their relationship by corresponding throughout the day (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Individuals are constantly connected and can ‘check in’ on the other person at any moment. Individuals can access synchronous groups anytime for immediate interaction and can e-mail others whenever desired without being concerned about intruding since they can retrieve messages at their convenience (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997).

Affordability refers to how inexpensive it is to access the Internet and connect to others. There is very little cost to surfing the Internet and while some dating sites require a membership fee there are others that are free of charge.

2.5.2. Online relationship development-How do individuals form relationships online? CMC has certain characteristics that resemble the more traditional process of dating, such as interpersonal attraction, whereby individuals are attracted to their potential partner (Antheunis, 2009). Online this could be interpersonal attraction because of similar interests (for instance meeting on a newsgroup with the same theme) or could be formed by viewing the potential partners online pictures or profile. Offline

interpersonal attraction is the initial attraction formed in the first stage of meeting someone new, this has a very strong physical component. Cooper and Sportolati (1997) explain there are many types of online forums that involve different interpersonal experiences such as online chatrooms, virtual gaming or asynchronous and synchronous communication. Many of the relationships formed online, in fact, progress to offline relationships where they continue to develop and function similarly to other traditional romantic relationships (Klein, 2013).

A study conducted by Underwood and Findlay (2004) on the formation of romantic relationships on the Internet found that most individuals reported a variety of means of contacting their online partners and most had spoken with them by telephone and knew what they looked like. The respondents also reported more satisfaction with their online partners than with their face to face partners. This study, conducted in Australia primarily aimed at identifying whether individuals engaged in online infidelity. The current study aims to explore online relationship development in a South African context.

The primary sources used to form and maintain online relationships are considered to be email or instant messaging in real time (such as cellphone applications similar to Whatsapp, which is an application that allows individuals to send real time messages for free) (Klein, 2013). The formation of accessible and easy to use sites that allow individuals to meet individuals has created a new environment for relationships to develop. Social dynamics such as proximity, familiarity, and social cues have an influence on relationship formation online, but there is no conclusive evidence that explains the actual process of online relationship development (McKenna et al., 2002;

Ruppel, 2014; Whitty, 2003). There are numerous theories regarding the stages of development through which traditional offline relationships proceed through (see Knapp, 1994; Levinger, 1980). Conversely, it is not well understood how online relationships evolve from beginning to end and it is an aim of the present study to be able to explore whether participants perceive online relationships as progressing through any concrete stages or not.

Finkel et al., (2012) proposed a nine step relationship model based on individuals who engaged in online dating sites. (1) Individual seek out information about online dating sites, (2) they then proceed to step two which consists of registering with an online dating site. (3) Individuals create their online profile, (4) they then simultaneously browse other potential partners profiles and (5) initiate contact with prospective partners while (6) receiving contact from potential partners. (7) The individuals then engage in mutual mediated communication, (8) meet face to face, and (9) engage in an offline relationship. While this provides a basic understanding as to the process that occurs online, very little information is provided regarding the psychological and emotional dynamics that occur during these stages and whether the relationship that occurs during stage seven, where individuals are engaging in mediated communication, has unique dynamics that need to be explored. It must be noted that each relationship online as well as offline is unique and cannot be categorised wholly. Whatever stages identified are not fixed and sequential, but rather highlight themes predominant at certain points in the development of relationships and cycled with various intensities throughout the life of the relationship.

While online dating has become a popular way of meeting individuals in modern society (Ruppel, 2014), individuals still want to meet in person in order to examine

tangible cues, as part of the process of moving an online relationship to the next stage. This may be attributed to the fact that traditionally, individuals have developed conventional social mechanisms (such as, initial attraction, proximity, familiarity, and similarity) to gauge whether they are attracted to their potential partner or not.

2.5.2.1 Moving from the online realm to the offline world. Relationships that begin online can and do move offline. Individuals can and do achieve happiness, stability, and longevity as a couple after meeting online. The greater bandwidth and pleasure of physical proximity at some point becomes important if a relationship is going to sustain its participants. Transition offline is aided by an honest and detailed exchange of information, thoughts, and feelings. The deep foundation built through online communication methods can remain with the couple when they meet face to face (Cooper and Sportolati, 1997).

In a study by Whitty (2007), participants explained that relationships were not developed online but rather offline. Over half of the participants (57.4%) stated that they met their date within a week or two after initial contact on the site. Another 10.3% stated that they met their date within a month. Hence, individuals use online dating sites as a means to identify a potential date and that cyberspace is not only utilised as a medium to get to know the person. Participants in the above study were adamant about the importance of the first meeting, with 67.6% of the participants stating that the first meeting determined if the relationship would progress. They also stated that any emailing or telephone calls that were made prior to the first date were more to organise the date and verify information about a person, rather than disclosing any further information about themselves. These online daters were most concerned with what their date looked

like and how they behaved in their first face-to-face meeting. In fact, 67.6% claimed that the first face-to-face meeting was a screening out process that determined if there was a possibility for a relationship to develop.

Unlike other CMC contexts such as chat rooms or online role-playing games, in which anonymity is acceptable or expected, there is an expectation of future face-to-face interaction in online dating, therefore, online misrepresentation has real consequences for online dating participants, who are often searching for a long-term romantic partner (Gibbs et al., 2006). Compared with the traditional social model for meeting potential romantic partners online dating is less socially constraining and has immense advantages, however, it is not without drawbacks (Ling Huang & Ching Yang, 2013).

2.5.3. Potential risks of online relationship formation. While the Internet has tremendous potential for allowing positive relationships to develop, it can be misused (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997; Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015). The anonymity that the Internet provides allows individuals the freedom to say what they want, freeing them from the restraints of the societal norms to which they usually conform. The Internet can also create a sense of ambiguity not only with regard to how to communicate but also in what constitutes acceptable behaviour on the Internet (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997).

There are social risks associated with online dating as site subscriptions involve posting information or graphics to an unknown audience (Close & Zinkhan, 2004). It is important to consider that it is psychologically unhealthy for individuals to stray too far into the fantasy side of the online world as this could lead to relationships that might never live up to expectations if taken into the offline world or alternatively, might lead to cyber infidelities (Whitty, 2008). There is an emotional risk when dating online,

individuals are often aware of the risk of becoming emotionally attached to a potential partner while chatting to them online only to be disappointed when meeting them face to face (Couch, Liamputtong & Pitts, 2012).

There is furthermore the risk of rejection. Rejection and its emotional pain are ultimately a part of Internet dating as much as of dating that is entirely face to face from the start (Lawson & Leck, 2006; Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015). While Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts (2012) report rejection at first contact is not as personal as that of face to face interaction, it becomes easier to cope with because it has less of an impact due to the anonymity factor of online dating. Social distance seems to play a role by providing a buffering effect, especially when it comes to dealing with rejection online (McKenna et al., 2002; Whitty, 2003).

Intimacy is considered an important part of romantic relationships, online intimacy consists of interesting dynamics that function to form online relationships. Well known theories on relationships indicate that traditional relationships contain elements such as love, intimacy, passion, commitment, and trust. These broad concepts have a subjective meaning to each individual and are very difficult to conceptualise and define. These ideals are influenced by the individual's race, gender, religion, and previous experiences and are often heavily influenced by the context that they are experienced in. This study aims to explore whether the elements of intimacy, commitment, and passion are experienced online.

2.6. Cyber Intimacy

Intimacy results from sharing information about oneself and having that feeling returned which is known as self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is discussed in depth later in this chapter and in Chapter four. The development of rapport, mutual self-disclosure, and the empathic understanding of the other are involved in a deepening of the connection, which moves the relationship to a more intimate stage (Brehm, 1992).

An interesting dynamic of the Internet is that it provides a model for intimate yet separate relating. It allows for great self-disclosure while maintaining distance and personal space (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). The concepts of dishonesty and anonymity linked with online interaction has a variety of implications in terms of intimacy and identity. The problem that arises is that it is questionable whether relationships that are formed and maintained in online environments can exhibit enough intimacy to be meaningful. The lack of both physical contact and proximate presence, and the ease of deception accompanying online interaction has often been highlighted by researchers (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Whitty & Gavin, 2001; Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). What is interesting to note about intimate relationships online is that individuals online show a greater awareness of the internal aspects of themselves, such as feelings, attitudes, and values and they are less bound by interactional pressures (Finkel, et al., 2012; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Whitty, 2007).

For individuals who may normally stay clear of intimate relationships due to concerns about personal control, online relating makes it easier to feel in control and therefore to get involved (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Ruppel, 2014). It also allows intimacy without the worry of social norms and pressure which is an aspect of online

dating that many find attractive. The concept of intimacy and how it is experienced online will be discussed in Chapter three. A key component of intimacy is self-disclosure and the understanding of intimacy often overlaps with the definition of self-disclosure within a relationship. It is therefore important to understand the concept of self-disclosure online.

2.7. Language of Online Love: Disclosure Online

Self-disclosure as defined by Taylor et al., (2006) is the process of revealing intimate information about oneself to another. Individuals who do not partake in this intimate communication tend to have dysfunctional relationships (Franzoi, 1996; Robson & Robson, 1998). Mutual self-disclosure is a key ingredient in developing intimacy between two individuals. Partners who self-disclose more to each other report greater emotional involvement in dating relationships and greater satisfaction in marriage (Brehm, 1992). Intimate disclosure traditionally occurs once trust and a certain bond has been established between individuals in a relationship (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002).

Online anonymity is considered a major factor in self-disclosure online as it allows individuals to disclose information without the fear of rejection or ridicule because they feel hidden behind a screen (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Ruppel, 2014). Research on online dating has found that individuals initially make use of withholding information until trust has been developed within their relationship (Whitty, 2007) and this is no different to individuals disclosing information in offline relationships. Physical proximity, face-to-face interaction, information about physical appearance, cues about group membership, information about the broader social context, and nonverbal

communication are considered traditional prerequisites for relationship development and many of these factors are absent from online interaction, which questions whether relationships can be formed online (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006; Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). As mentioned earlier online relationships are vulnerable to a 'boom and bust' phenomenon, where individuals reveal more about themselves earlier than they would in face to face interactions, relationships can get quite intense quite quickly but cannot be sustained.

There is ample evidence to support the view that individuals do make friends and develop intimate romantic relationships in cyberspace and often these relationships progress offline (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Ruppel, 2014; Whitty, 2008; Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). In Whitty's (2004) survey of over 5000 chatroom users (62% female, 38% male), 74% of respondents said they had at some stage formed a romantic relationship with someone they met online. These were primarily online romances which did not actually generally progress to 'real life' offline relationships. Only 35% of Whitty's survey respondents reported that they had physically met with someone they met on the Internet. This research highlights that even without meeting face to face, meaningful and lasting relationships are formed online. It is psychologically unhealthy for individuals to drift too far into the fantasy side of the online world as this could lead to relationships that might never live up to expectations if taken into the offline world or alternatively, might lead to cyber infidelities (Whitty, 2008). While self-disclosure occurs more openly due to the anonymity that is provided in the online setting, this however also creates an avenue for greater deception within an online relationship.

2.7.1. Deception online. One limitation of online interaction that is widely recognised within research is that deception is possible, to a greater extent, and with greater ease online than in face to face situations (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001; Ruppel, 2014). Cyber-space offers more opportunities for exaggeration or outright deception in self- presentation (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001; Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015). Some researchers maintain that the anonymity allows individuals too much freedom to hide aspects of themselves that they consider undesirable. This can have a big impact on the development of trust in the online environment.

There are multiple reasons for the use of deception, including many instances where it is simply safer to keep many of one's details a secret in order to avoid cyber-stalking or the stealing of personal information (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). The issue of deception raises many concerns about online interaction and the implications for the development of trust and intimate relationships. Van Staden (2010) found one reason that individuals may use deception online is to limit or delay intimacy that can develop at a rapid speed online. Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts (2012) found for most of the participants in their study that the worst aspect about online dating was the lies and number of individuals using fake profiles and/or misleading pictures. The issue of deception online and its effect on online relationships is further explored in Chapter Four.

2.7.2. Self-presentation online. Initial impressions online are based on how someone describes and expresses him/herself. Online, one's physical presence, attractiveness, age, race, ethnicity, gender, and mannerisms are not evident except through what is conveyed by a name, unless users choose to textually describe these aspects of themselves in a biography or in their profile. In face to face interaction,

individuals make quick initial judgments based on physical attributes. Good-looking individuals have a distinct social advantage in face to face relating. In a culture that emphasises physical appearance, the Internet affords a different way of developing initial attraction (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997; Ruppel, 2014). The way individuals meet in cyberspace creates a different dynamic of affiliation. In traditional communities, individuals are accustomed to meeting individuals then forming a relationship and disclosing personal information. In virtual communities individuals disclose information, create relationships, and then choose to meet in person.

The subjective experience of knowing and liking someone can profoundly influence how attractive they seem, perceived beauty correlates more strongly than objective beauty to interest in dating. By the time individuals meet each other in person, an intimate bond could already have been formed (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997). McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) used structural equation modelling to explore whether individuals who can better disclose their 'true' or 'real' self on the Internet rather than in face-to-face settings are more likely to form close relationships online and bring these relationships into their 'real' lives. In a group of randomly selected newsgroup posters ($n = 576$), McKenna and colleagues confirmed their hypothesis. Individuals who felt they could better express their 'real self' on the Internet were more likely to form strong online relationships. A study by Cooper and Sportolati (1997) showed that individuals who are more concerned with presenting themselves favourably and making a good impression on others through online dating engage in more positive self-disclosure and are less inclined to reveal negative aspects of themselves. They also showed that these

individuals tend to be less honest and show more control of their self-disclosure in an attempt to carefully craft online persona's that are attractive and desirable.

Van Staden (2010) found that participants reported adopting false personas and experimenting with these identities in online social settings. Research has found that individuals on online dating sites generally try to find a balance between being their true selves and trying to appear more attractive and interesting. This may occur to such an extent that deliberate deception is used in order to create façades that are contrary to one's self-perception (Suler, 2005; Whitty, 2007). Online environments essentially present individuals with unique opportunities to reveal private details that they would typically feel uncomfortable with revealing in everyday face-to-face interactions (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). In a study by Whitty (2008) participants indicated that descriptions of favourite interests and activities, one's personality, occupation, and hopes and dreams were also deemed important while others tried to make their profile stand out by adding humour or finding a way to make themselves appear unique even if this included telling 'little lies'.

2.8. Online Relating and Dating

As individuals are using the Internet to form relationships a new sub-culture is being formed with its own rules and social norms. Despite the popularity of online dating services, it has been noted that online relationships are possibly the least understood and studied relationship types (Pauly & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). Research suggests that the development of online relationships is multifaceted and complex and like all other social phenomena is bound by social contexts and cues (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

2.8.1. Using social networking sites to meet potential partners online. Boyd and Ellison (2008) described social networking sites as Internet services with the ability for a user to: (1) create a public or semipublic profile; (2) identify and connect with other users; and (3) trace these first-degree connections to identify members farther out in the collective network. A key aspect of this is that in contrast to previous forms of online interaction these sites are anonymous and predominantly used to connect with and organise one's existing off-line networks (Ruppel, 2014).

In a study conducted by Ruppel (2014) it was found that social media sites were rarely cited as a place to search through profiles to initiate relationships with potential partners; typically, participants did not view these social media sites such as Facebook, as an online dating site. Participants in this study reported that their relationships were initiated off-line and then whether or not an initial two-way interaction occurred, turned to Facebook to continue communication or to seek more information about the target if the profile was accessible. Social networking sites have many other uses such as online gaming or connecting to other applications, whereas online dating sites are orientated to dating and the only goal of subscribing to an online dating site would be to connect to a potential partner (Finkel et al., 2012). Facebook is the world's largest Social networking platform with over one billion registered members globally, with more than 6,1 million South Africans on Facebook and over 100 000 new members registering each month (Meier, 2013).

With regard to online dating and the formation of personal relationships research suggests that email or instant messaging in real time chat rooms are the primary sources used to form and maintain online relationships (Antheunis, 2009; Schouten, Valkenburg

& Peter, 2007). More recently, social network sites belong to the latest generation of CMC environments (Antheunis, 2009). Lampen (2010) highlighted in his study that Facebook is the most popular social media site. Photo sharing, instant messaging, blogging, message boards, and online activities are available on these social networking sites such as Facebook (Van Staden, 2010).

There is a viewpoint that the Internet has caused a widespread flourishing of new relationships that are disembodied, existing only in the realm of an immersive online world (Finkel et al., 2012). Many of the relationships that are initiated online and exist for a longer duration tend to migrate offline (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008; Hitsch, Hortaçsu & Ariely, 2006). Once the friendship is established, there is a common desire to meet in person, implying that individuals want a broader range of interactions than online communication can supply (Hitsch, Hortaçsu & Ariely, 2006). Evidence for this has been found in two studies of relationships formed through online newsgroups showing that the desire to meet Internet friends in person is common among those who make new friends online (Parks & Floyd, 1996).

Participants in a study done by Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) indicated that whilst words online are powerful and that meaningful relationships can be initiated and found online, many participants acknowledged that online exchanges are not enough to sustain long-term relationships. These participants reported the need to meet in-person in order to experience the physical side of intimacy (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). This is not to deny that an online forum might be important to making new friends without the goal of meeting face to face, especially

when physical or psychological barriers make face to face meetings difficult (McKenna et al., 2002).

Social networking sites have a multitude of uses and individuals who subscribe to a social networking site may not have a goal of meeting a potential partner although this is possible. It is important to note that there are many other avenues for meeting individuals online including online gaming, chatrooms, web blogs, online newsrooms and many other avenues. However, this study will focus on romantic relationship formation via online dating sites and social networking sites.

2.8.2. Using dating sites to meet potential partners online. What can be understood from the debate of whether online dating is different to offline dating is that a unique process occurs online particularly when individuals make use of dating sites. It must be noted that the present study does not differentiate between participants who use a dating site or who met via other means online, however, the unique characteristics of online dating needs to be defined.

The term ‘dating sites’ will refer to those web sites that primarily focus on offering the individual prospects to form a new romantic relationship that has the potential to become a long-term committed relationship (Finkel et al., 2012). These sites have allowed individuals a unique way of meeting and finding new potential partners. Individuals create profiles that are orientated towards finding a potential partner, and then actively seek out other profiles that match their ideals and desired characteristics in a partner. The sites also allow for a quick classification of potential partners by asking initial questions and then categorising the answers to provide users with a catalogue of

potential partners that meet their requirements (Finkel et al., 2012; Hitsch, Hortaçsu & Ariely, 2006; Whitty & Carr, 2006).

Finkel et al., (2012) explain that online dating sites provide three broad classes of services: access, communication, and matching. Access refers to users' exposure to and opportunity to evaluate potential romantic partners whom they are otherwise unlikely to encounter. Specifically, dating sites typically accumulate profiles which can be summarised as web pages that provide information about potential partners or themselves that users can browse. Depending on the dating site this allows individuals access to potential partners to whom they would not usually have access to, for example, individuals from other parts of the world, who practice different religions or who would not normally frequent the places that the user would. The user has the opportunity, in principle, to interact with any of these potential partners but in practice, not all of these individuals may reply to the user. The dating site does not necessarily guarantee access to a relationship partner rather it alerts users to the existence of available partners.

The second component that Finkel et al., (2012) refer to is communication, that is the users' opportunity to use various forms of CMC to interact with specific potential partners on the dating site before, or if ever, they meet face-to-face. The mechanism of communication varies considerably across the online dating landscape. Asynchronous forms of communication quickly and concisely convey some form of interest which are used frequently, users may also choose real-time, synchronous forms of communication, such as live instant-message (text- based) chat and live interaction via webcams that allows users to see and hear each other.

The third component that Finkel et al., (2012) refer to is matching. This refers to a site's use of a mathematical algorithm to identify potential partners, called 'matches', for their users. These matches are presented to the user as potential partners with whom the user will be particularly likely to experience positive romantic outcomes. A key assumption underlying matching algorithms is that some pairs of potential partners will ultimately experience better romantic outcomes, in the short term or the long term (or both), than other pairs of potential partners because the individuals are more romantically compatible from the start (Finkel et al., 2012)

2.8.2.1. The process of using an online dating site. The course of finding a potential online process via an online dating site is distinctive and usually begins with actively seeking out information about one or more online dating sites. Similar to newspaper personals (but with much more information), individuals create a profile, where the users indicate various demographic, socioeconomic, and physical characteristics, such as age, gender, education level, height, weight, eye and hair colour, and income. The users also answer a question on why they joined the service, for example, to ascertain a partner for a long- term relationship, or, alternatively, a partner for a 'casual' relationship. In addition, the users provide information that relates to their personality, life style, or views (Heino, Ellison & Gibbs, 2010; Hitsch, Hortaçsu & Ariely, 2006).

Users typically have to pay to use an online dating service. After registering their own profile and paying, the users can browse, search and interact with the other members of the dating service. Typically, users start their search by indicating an age range and geographic location for their partners in a database query form. This returns a list of

‘short profiles’ indicating the user name, age, a brief description and, if available, a thumbnail version of the photo of a potential mate. By clicking on one of the short profiles, the searcher can view the full user profile, which contains socioeconomic and demographic information, a larger version of the profile photo (and possibly additional photos) and answers to several essay questions. In order to initiate a contact by e-mail, a user has to become a paying member of the dating service (Ruppel, 2014; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Once the subscription fee is paid, there is no limit on the number of e-mails a user can send. All users can reply to an e-mail that they receive, regardless of whether they are paying members or not. Once the user has filtered through the options, they identify a person whose profile they like, decide whether to send an e-mail (a first contact) to the potential partner, and from there individuals typically organise to meet face-to-face. (Hitsch, Hortaçsu & Ariely, 2006; Whitty & Carr, 2006).

The present author notes that the most interesting concept in this method of online relationship development is the process of ‘cataloging’ whereby individuals have the opportunity to filter out any unwanted individuals just by scrolling through their profiles. Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts (2012) noted in their study that online dating allowed the user to check out and screen potential candidates without having to commence dialogue. Heino, Ellison and Gibbs (2010) explain this phenomena as ‘Relationshopping’ and found in their study that participants compared online dating to an economic transaction, referring to their list of potential partners as a sales pipeline or describing the site as like a supermarket or catalog. When talking about online dating, participants used the marketplace metaphorical framework to explain both negative and positive experiences (Heino, Ellison & Gibbs, 2010). This process is very different to offline dating where individuals

have to engage with a potential partner before deciding if they are interested or not. Online individuals can browse through profiles and pictures and choose a potential partner without the hassle of engaging with them first. There is an availability of information that is required if individuals want to use the dating site and potential partners can then in their own time sift through the information to make their choice. Online dating sites offer increased information about a wider pool of potential partners than usually available in face-to-face encounters (Heino, Ellison & Gibbs, 2010). This element of the dating site also adds to the need to manage their self-presentation and only disclose information about themselves that projects a positive image. Arvidsson (2006) describes this phenomena as 'commodification of affect' as individuals use a self-selling process while constructing their online profiles to attract others.

The dynamic of 'cataloguing' is also particularly interesting in the formation of relationships. Participants in a study conducted by Whitty (2007) explained the importance of writing a profile that successfully attracted others. Some described this as a process of 'selling themselves'. Individuals in this study admitted to misrepresenting themselves on their profiles, however, it was not for malicious reasons, but rather as a way to attract others. Mostly they perceived their misrepresentations as exaggerations rather than blatant lies.

There are stages that emerge from meeting someone on an online dating site after making initial contact via the dating site. The majority of participants commenced their interaction via email and online chat, progressing to phone calls or personalised text messages, and then ultimately ending with a face to face meeting (Couch, Liamputtong & Pitts, 2012). In this study participants agreed that the process of meeting individuals

involved interacting with a number of individuals at any one time, assessing them, and deciding whether they were interested in pursuing a relationship as well as at what stage the individuals interaction with others would cease.

2.8.2.2. *Motivation for using an online dating site.* According to a study conducted by Hitsch, Hortaçsu and Ariely (2006), the majority of all the participants they interviewed using dating sites are hoping to establish a long term relationship (36% of men and 39% of women), or are intrigued by the aspect of dating online (26% of men and 27% of women). Findings of this study also indicated that an explicitly stated goal of finding a partner from an online dating site was for casual sex. This goal of finding a partner was more prevalent among men (14%) than among women (4%) and individuals looking for casual sex were more likely to be married.

2.8.2.3. *Prevalence of online dating.* Recently there has been an increase in the dating sites available to South Africans which now include specialised sites that cater for a specific geographic of the population such as over40s.com which is for individuals who are over the age of 40, or gochristaindating.co.za which is focused on individuals of the Christian faith. There has been very little in terms of statistics released regarding the exact amount of users in South Africa. Datingbuzz.com claims to be South Africa's most popular online dating site according to Statista (2014), while Match.com is the most used online dating website in the U.S. with 35 million users (Statista, 2014). The information shared in these contexts is vitally important in considering the holistic view of an intimate online relationship.

2.8.3. The hidden meeting place: The stigma of online dating perceived by the individual's social system. A study by Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) indicated that most relationships that were formed online were not supported by the individual's offline social networks. The principle of social influence states when individuals make highly salient judgments (for example, evaluating the quality of a romantic relationship), they are likely to rely heavily on input from individuals whose opinions they value and trust (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Disapproval from family and friends toward online romantic relationships may play a significant role in how online participants assess their relationship's possibility (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007).

Donn and Sherman (2002) explored young adults' attitudes and practices regarding Internet use to facilitate romantic relationships in a sample of 300 university students. They found that most students knew of someone who began, or developed a relationship with a person they met online. More postgraduate than undergraduate students had taken steps to meet a friend or romantic partner on the Internet, and more postgraduates reported meeting someone in person whom they had first met online. In a study by Hardie and Buzwell (2006) of 104 Australian adults who used the Internet to form online social relationships, 79% said they used the Internet to make new friends, while 21% said they used the Internet for online romantic relationships. It is family, friends, and society that are likely to be skeptical of online romances.

Previous interpersonal relationship research has demonstrated that romantic dyads and social networks are intricately connected, with significant others, such as parents, friends, and coworkers, playing a powerful role in the success and quality of romantic relationships (Brehm, 1992). While individuals might be open to finding love

online, sharing their experiences with others still produces anxiety and hesitancy, as individuals are unsure of whether their social support system will be accepting or not of their choices to use the Internet to find online romance. In order to understand the process that occurs in relationship formation online it is important to consider the contexts within which these relationships are being formed.

2.8.4. Controlling everything with a click of a button: Sense of control online, managing impressions and the addictiveness of online dating. Exploring self-presentation online is a complex task, there are many dynamics to consider including deception, managing impressions, and self-disclosure. Research suggests that self-presentation is more malleable and more under one's control online, individuals can make decisions about when and how to disclose negative information about themselves (Whitty, 2007). Individuals control the disclosure of personal information for a number of reasons, including to maintain a desired level of intimacy and privacy, and to maintain social harmony. To establish close relationships within the constraints of the Internet, individuals use creative methods to identify themselves as 'cool' and trustworthy (Lawson & Leck, 2006). A study conducted by McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) indicated that initially participants had a great sense of control of their online interactions but exchanged this control for greater intimacy and physical interaction. Participants moved from asynchronous messaging which allowed for the greatest sense of control over the amount of personal information that is disclosed (talking on a chat room), to asynchronous communication, which afforded a little less control of information shared (chatting on the telephone), to finally meeting face to face, which allowed for greater intimacy and physical reality but little control of what information was shared.

The safety and space available for interpersonal interactions on the Internet allows individuals a chance to experiment with putting normally inhibited parts of themselves forward (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997). Certain qualities distinctive to writing and unavailable in spoken interactions can heighten the experience of being intimately understood when communicating online (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997; Finkel et al., 2012). Individuals who are, for example, shy have an opportunity to relate online, developing social skills and increasing their confidence (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997). In a study conducted by Van Staden (2010), which explored the self-concepts and social identities of South African Internet users, participants reported that while developing intimate relationships online, they started by disclosing only essential information, withholding other information, especially that which could lead to negative evaluation and true vulnerability.

The Internet allows individuals to engage and disengage at will and to modulate the intensity of their interactions, creating a greater sense of control (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997). Walther (1996) states that intimate social interaction online occurs because of the increased control afforded by synchronous, visually anonymous CMC. For instance, individuals can control what information they choose to disclose, in what manner, and how they disclose it. If privacy and self-disclosure are viewed as dynamic processes, then the removal of control affects the ability of individuals to effectively regulate their social interactions. Because words can be saved, they can be reread by the receiver which results in their importance not being lost in a quickly spoken phrase or in an anxious moment. Information can be changed and clarified before being sent to others, and individuals can rely on their writing ability to create an intended impression. The

Internet reveals what can be termed as a ‘confessional quality’ as individuals reveal parts of themselves and become more vulnerable and exposed to others online (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997). Van Staden (2010) found that individuals within his study experienced more control within their online relationships by being selective about what they included and how the messages are phrased.

Online dating furthermore has a quality that makes it addictive. Henry-Waring and Barraket (2008) suggest that this is because individuals feel as if online dating always has a potentiality. Individuals do not know when or who or where they might meet a new interest, and this creates a feeling of anticipation and probability which can be addictive. This combined with the accessibility of Internet dating and the instant gratification of being able to speak to anyone at any time, which is congruent with a postmodern lifestyle, allows individuals to become easily consumed with meeting the next partner online (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008).

2.9. Conclusion

The Internet has evolved dramatically over the past decade bringing with it new avenues for individuals to establish relationships and meet affiliation needs. The Internet provides its users with a unique array of contexts within which to socialise via CMC. The anonymity, availability, and affordability of the Internet are underlying elements that influence all aspects of relationship development, particularly intimacy, and self-disclosure which are elements that form a primary focus in the current research.

There is a debate amongst researchers on the advantages of individuals meeting online as opposed to face to face. An argument between researchers is that online

relationship formation may be considered detrimental due to the anonymity, lack of social cues, and the rapid development of intimacy. Contemporary research indicates that the lack of social cues provided by the Internet make for more durable relationships. The lack of physical restriction allows individuals to connect to others from any place around the world, at any time, which provides for a greater source of social connection by allowing individuals an opportunity not previously available. Changes to the wider social context means individuals have less time, space, and access to conventional forms of dating, however, they have greater access to computers and the Internet (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). The environment and the path that online relationships take are essentially different to traditional face to face relationships, and in turn have different characteristics and elements that are considered important.

A central and important feature of using online dating services is drafting a personal profile. It is individuals personal 'shop window'. Online dating allows users to construct profiles of themselves and view profiles of other users allowing them to quickly sift through possible matches and then initiate contact. Online photos are a key and popular feature, and individuals can restrict access to viewing their photo on most sites, this serves as some protection and control, it also allows individuals to control how they are perceived online (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). The majority of individuals using online dating sites did so with the intention of finding a long term romantic partner. There is a sense of addiction and instant gratification that occurs online which reflects the nature of the medium and is congruent with the instantaneous consumption characteristic of the late postmodern period.

The Internet is providing a platform for individuals to engage with others without any physical barriers such as distance and it is providing an easy, efficient way to meet potential partners and create meaningful and intimate relationships. Chapter three forms a continuation of the literature review and will focus specifically on the theoretical components of romantic relationships and explore these components in an online context.

Chapter Three

Cyberlove- A Theoretical Understanding Using Sternberg's Model of Love.

3.1. Introduction

This chapter will explore Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Model of Love, unpacking the different elements of commitment, intimacy, and passion. The influence of these components on individuals who are using the Internet are explored. The types of love as defined by Sternberg (1986) and whether these types of love can be experienced online will also be discussed.

The definition of love has been greatly debated among researchers for decades. It is difficult to define, difficult to measure and has various subjective associations. It has, however, been ascertained that the idea of commitment and love are cross culturally accepted as important drives in an individual's life (Fehr, 1988). Theorists as early as Freud (as cited in Fehr, 1988, p.4) explained that the need for sexual joining together is at the core of an individual's personality. Rubin (1970) has highlighted that love is an attitude and thus is a conscious decision to act, feel and think in a certain way toward a particular person. The attachment theorists (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) describe love as an attachment process and suggest it is directly linked to the individual's attachment to a parental figure in childhood. Some scholars have argued that the experience of romantic love is universal even though specific principles of this type of love is affected by one's culture (Anderson, 2005).

For the purposes of this study, love will be defined as a combination of emotions, cognitions and behaviours that often play a role in intimate relationships (Baron, Byrne &

Branscombe, 2006). To explain love to the participants of the study in a finite tangible way, five of the seven characteristics that Hatfield, Schmitz, Cornelius and Rapson (1979) delineated was used to explain that difference between non-intimate and intimate relationships. The first characteristic is intensity of feelings which refers to how much the individual cares for the other and perceives they are being cared for. The second characteristic is the depth and breadth of information exchange, which refers to the disclosure that occurs between the individuals. Thirdly, the characteristic of the value of resources exchanged was identified. This is the amount of reward versus the amount of retribution received in the relationship. The fourth characteristic is the variety of resources exchanged. This includes more than simple resources and highlights the emotional, cognitive and social resources shared between partners. Fifth is the unit of analysis of 'you' to 'me' to 'we', which refers to the perception of the person as not an individual but as part of a unit which shares the emotional and cognitive aspects of a relationship, this component can be likened to Sternbergs (1986) component of commitment.

Love can be seen as a complex phenomenon that arises in part from genetically transmitted instincts and in part from socially learned role modelling. Certain feelings, drives, thoughts, and behaviours are socially defined and understood as characteristic of love (Sternberg, 1986). In the present study love will be defined by the three components that form Sternberg's (1986) model of love. Each component has its own multifaceted definition which in turn contributes toward the definition of love.

3.2. Love is a Triangle not a Heart: The Triangular Theory of Love

The triangular theory of love suggests that love can be understood in terms of three components namely intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg 1986; Sternberg, 1997; Sternberg & Weis, 2006). Together these three components form a triangle that can be applied to a multiplicity of relationships. Figure 1 illustrates how the three components interact to form the different types of love.

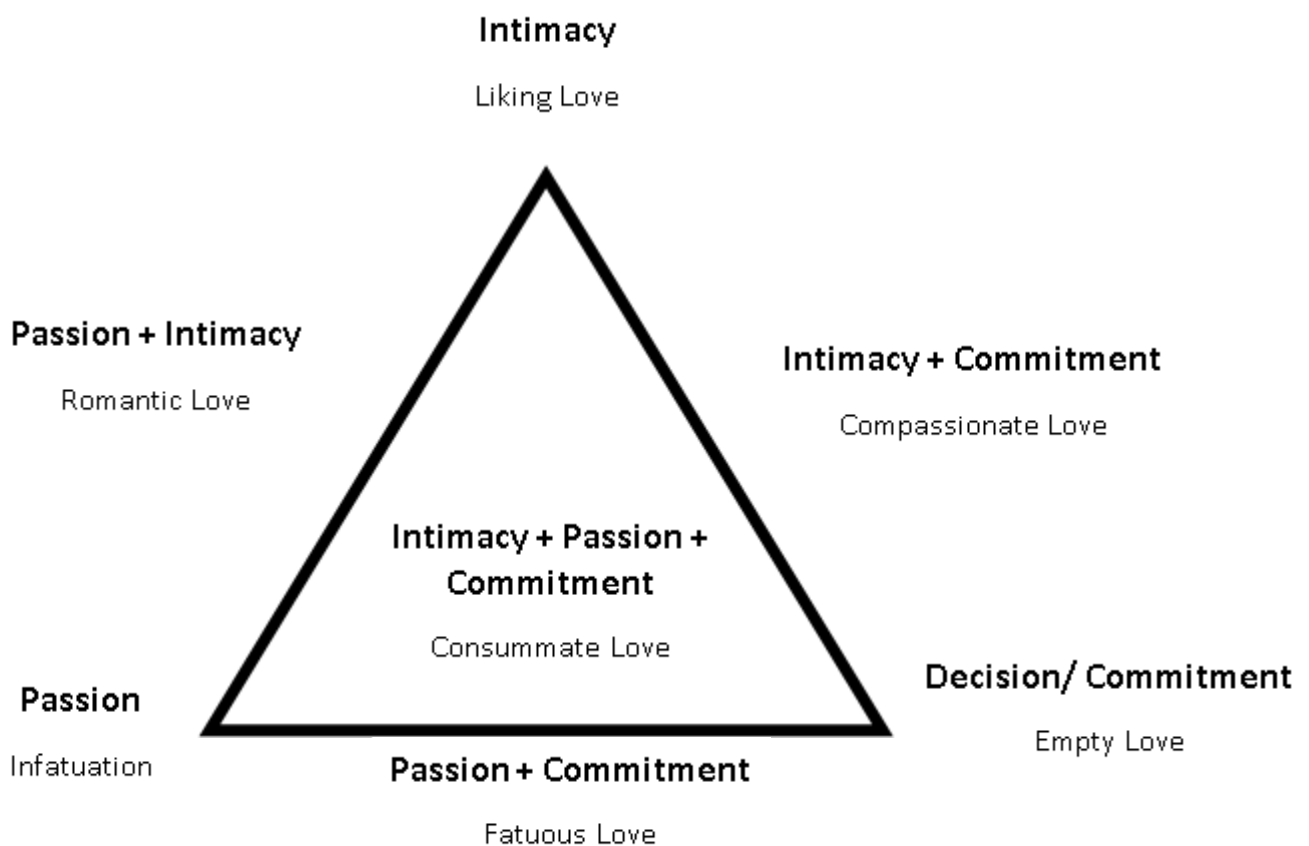


Figure 1: Sternberg's Triangular model of Love. This figure demonstrates how the elements of intimacy, passion, and commitment interact to form different types of love . Adapted from “A triangular theory of love” by Sternberg, R.J., 1986, Psychological Review , 93 (2), 126.

The importance of each of the three components of love differs when considering if a loving relationship is short-term or long-term. In short-term relationships, and especially romantic ones, the passion component is prominent while the intimacy component is moderate and the decision/commitment component is in most cases not applicable. In contrast, the intimacy component and the decision/commitment component typically are significant factors in a long-term close relationship, while the passion facet changes (usually declines) over time (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg, 1997). Figure 2 illustrates the components of love explained over time. These elements as well as the types of love identified will now be explained in detail.

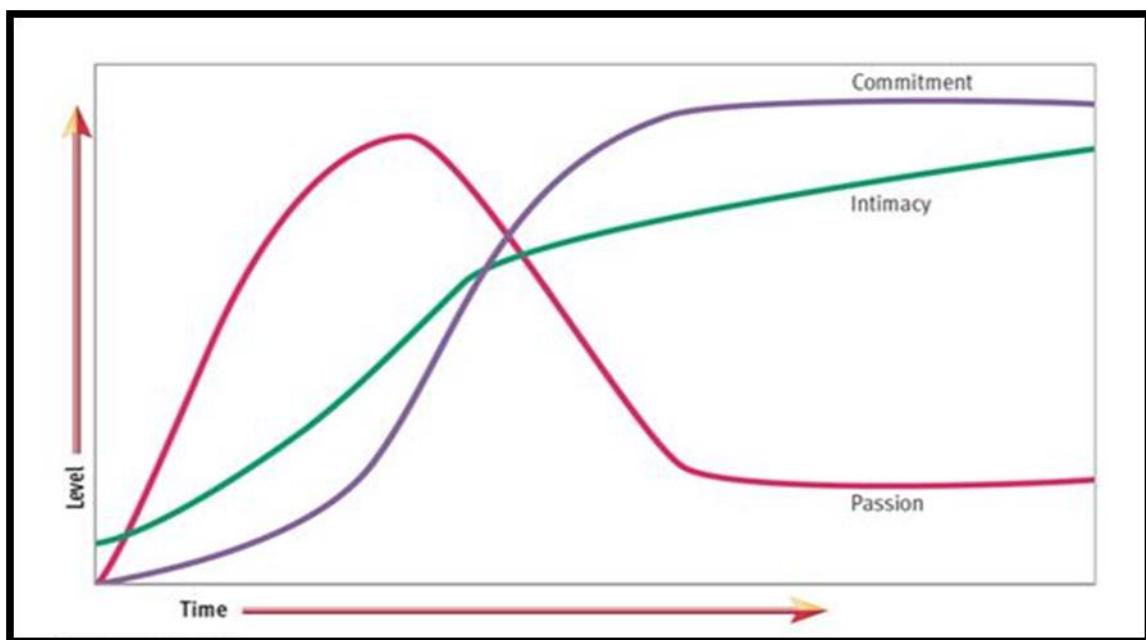


Figure 2: Components of Love over Time. This figure demonstrates how the components of intimacy, commitment and passion evolve over the duration of a relationship. Adapted from “A triangular theory of love” by Sternberg, R.J., 1986, *Psychological Review* , 93 (2), 126.

There is an extensive overlap between the constructs of love and intimacy. Intimacy is considered a component of the relationship that when combined with other components such as commitment and passion could lead to feelings of love. Love is considered an element when combined with passion and commitment in the formation of intimacy or an intimate relationship. It must, therefore, be noted that love and intimacy are constructs that are difficult to define and conceptualise (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg, 1997).

Sternberg (1986) offers a model which is easy to understand and includes intimacy and self-disclosure which can be used to explore the experiences of individuals in the context of online dating. The researcher notes that this model of describing love appears in other theories of love and is congruent with the public idea of love and romantic relationships.

3.3. Intimacy

“Intimacy includes feelings of closeness, connectedness and bonding in a loving relationship.” (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119). Taylor, Peplau and Sears (2006) explain that intimacy in a romantic relationship is created when an individual perceives they are being cared for, understood, and validated as well as if their significant other is being responsive and supportive.

Intimacy results from sharing information about oneself and having that feeling replicated; this is known as self-disclosure. Self-disclosure as defined by Taylor et al., (2006) is the process of revealing intimate information about oneself to another.

Individuals who do not partake in this intimate communication tend to have dysfunctional

relationships (Franzoi, 1996; Robson & Robson, 1998). Self-disclosure alone cannot create intimacy; however, intimacy can be defined as the ability to disclose core aspects of the self to someone else (Taylor et al., 2006). Disclosure will be defined and explained in greater detail in chapter 4. Intimacy is the disclosure of emotions and actions which the individual is unlikely to hold up to a wider public gaze. This type of intimate disclosure only occurs after liking and trust have been established (Kang & Hoffman, 2011). In general, the intimacy component might be viewed as principally originating from emotional investment in the relationship (Sternberg, 1986 ; Sternberg, 1997; Sternberg & Grajeck, 1984; Van Staden, 2010). The intimacy component appears to be at the core of many loving relationships despite the type of relationship in which an individual is involved in (parent - child relationship, friend relationship or intimate partner relationship) (Stenberg, 1986).

Intimacy in the context of the triangle includes but is not limited to feelings of:

- (1) Desire to promote the welfare of the loved one.
- (2) Experiencing happiness with the loved one.
- (3) High regard for the loved one.
- (4) Being able to count on the loved one in times of need.
- (5) Mutual understanding with the loved one.
- (6) Sharing of one's self and one's possessions with the loved one.
- (7) Receiving emotional support from the loved one.
- (8) Giving of emotional support to the loved one

(9) Intimate communication with the loved one

(Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001).

Individuals experience the intimacy component of love when they experience a sufficient number of these feelings; this would differ from one person to another (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg & Grajek, 1984).

The intimacy component of love may be relatively stable from one loving relationship to another (Sternberg, 1986). However, the amount of love one feels toward various individuals may differ considerably and may change over time. Love is considered more predictable within the family context than in any other context. The passion and commitment components differentiate close friendships from romantic or familial relationships. In close long term relationships, intimacy is seen as the most stable and important component (Sternberg, 1986). Describing intimacy as having two elements, namely descriptive intimacy and evaluative intimacy, is pertinent to the study of intimacy online as different types of disclosure occur between individuals online at different stages of the relationship. Descriptive intimacy refers to the disclosure of unknown factual material, for example, an individual discloses they have two brothers and a sister. Evaluative intimacy refers to the disclosure of personal feelings or judgements, for example, an individual is feeling very disappointed after a personal failure. Evaluative intimacy, or emotional expressiveness as it is sometimes known is an integral aspect of an intimate relationship (Robson & Robson, 1998; Taylor et al., 2006). One person strategically releasing more personal information can lead to the other person responding with equally increased levels of intimacy (Duck, 1988 in Robson & Robson, 1998).

3.3.1. Online intimacy. The Internet has brought a new dimension to intimacy by enabling intimate contact over a distance and allows for intimate discussion that is free from most of the social cues that appear in face to face interactions. The anonymity that the Internet provides leads to greater perception of intimacy because it is free of fear of disapproval and sanction (Kang & Hoffman, 2011). Multiple research studies indicate that intimacy shared on the Internet occurs more swiftly due to the absence of necessary social cues and the founding of relationships on a more substantial basis such as shared interests as opposed to physical attractiveness (Klein, 2013; Ross, 2005; Sprecher, 2009; Whitty, 2003). The development of intimacy, mutual self-disclosure and an empathic understanding of others are involved in a deepening of the connection as individuals disclose more personal information online (Finkel et al., 2012).

Studies also indicate that interactions carried out via computer were judged as more positive than face-to face interaction on several dimensions of intimacy and interpersonal interaction and that in some circumstances participants in on-line communication could actually become more intimate than in face-to-face communication (Graff, 1997; Hertlein & Sendak, 2007; Ross, 2005). E-mail can appear less intimate, but this does appear to be a matter of personal perception. Where there is communication via the Internet, issues of intimacy may be sidestepped or avoided by ignoring questions or issues which might be more difficult to do in face to face interaction (Ross, 2005).

For individuals who may normally avoid intimate relationships due to concerns such as feeling burdened or losing themselves in some way, online dating makes it easier to feel in control of oneself and of the situation, and therefore promotes greater involvement in intimate relationships (Ross, 2005). Individuals are freer to engage and

disengage when the need arises and are able to revise the intensity of their interactions at any moment, therefore, remaining in control of what they say and how it is perceived by their online partner. The Internet allows individuals to respond in their own time without the social pressure that accompanies having a face to face conversation. There is also a sense of safety and space that arises from interpersonal interaction on the Internet which allows individuals an opportunity to experiment with disclosing normally inhibited parts of themselves (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997).

Individuals involved in online relationships have reported feeling that the distance actually assisted in increased levels of intimacy because there was a feeling of less inhibition and increased liberation (Anderson, 2005). In general, when communicating online, individuals are less aware of potentially inhibiting factors such as shyness, self-consciousness and social anxiety, that can often be stressful for some when trying to form offline interpersonal relationships (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Because they feel less inhibited, individuals may feel more comfortable using the Internet to disclose personal information about themselves (Whitty & Carr, 2006). Cyberspace, in this sense, is conducive to the development of intimate relationships, especially for those who may have difficulty forming relationships in person due to a lack of social skills (Kang & Hoffman, 2011).

A criticism that can be made of intimacy over the Internet is that many would not consider it possible to gain a deep sense of understanding and caring in such an impersonal medium (Van Staden, 2010). Online relationships are also vulnerable to what has been described as a 'boom and bust' phenomenon: when individuals reveal more about themselves earlier than they would in face to face interactions, that is, relationships

develop can rapidly and intensely. Tremendous disappointment and bitterness may result, as well as the possibility of significant danger such as cyber stalking (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997).

3.4. Passion

Sternberg (1986) suggests that passion, commitment, and love also form part of intimacy and the passion component of love will almost always be highly and equally interactive with intimacy. Passion may be considered to be the initial attraction toward an individual, and from passion intimacy is developed thereafter. Conversely, intimacy may spawn passion, where only after feeling close and connected with another individual will the passion component emerge (Sternberg, 1986). Passion refers to the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction and sexual consummation in loving relationships. The passion component essentially includes the sources of motivational and other forms of arousal that lead to the experience of a rush of endorphins and a feeling of 'craze' in a loving relationship (Sternberg, 1986). Singelis, Choo and Hatfield (1995), refer to passion as "a state of intense longing for union with the other" (p. 9). Sexual needs may dominate this experience in a romantic relationship. Passion fulfils an initiation role, motivating sexual interest, proximity seeking, and initial contact which allows commitment and intimacy to grow (Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos & Altemus, 2006). Passion tends to peak early in a relationship and needs concerted effort to be maintained (Sternberg, 1986). Individuals in a romantic relationships will feel lasting yet shifting levels of romantic love and sexual desire toward one another over the course of their relationship (Gonzaga et al., 2006).

3.4.1. Online passion. There is very little research available on the perception of passion in online relationships. Young and Long (1998) state that passion involves erotic interest in another and involves physical attraction and sexual feelings. Passion is considered to have a very big physical component which is not possible online as there is no physical proximity. However, individuals do report feeling sexually aroused by engaging in cybersex and the sharing of sexual information (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997). Psychological intimacy has the potential to provoke an eroticization of the person with whom the information is shared with and there is a desire to physically express this intimate connection (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997). Crystal (2001) suggested that the nature of the Internet has two advantages: it tends to keep actual behaviour at a distance, and individuals can engage in it without censure, online individuals can share their erotic fantasies and sexual desires without censure, and without worrying about social rejection. Online relating has some features that may promote and heighten such an erotic connection in positive ways. By minimising an initial attraction based on physical attributes and facilitating intimate, less inhibited sharing, the Internet allows erotic interests to develop out of emotional involvement rather than lustful attraction (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997; Gonyea, 2010). On the Internet, an individual can experiment with a sexual behaviour by engaging in it online and with another person without actually physically 'doing' it (Ross, 2005; Gonyea, 2010). Other research suggests that true sexual connection cannot be made online as individuals cannot experience sexual desire with someone they have never met and therefore, online relationships would seem to go against romantic beliefs (Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015). A part of romance is passion and as sexual desire is considered an important factor in romantic relationships,

its absence can negatively impact the affective state of a relationship (Anderson, 2005; Klein, 2013). Ross (2005) explains that on the Internet, intimacy is one of the possible outcomes of sexual use of the Internet because the discussion of sexuality would include the disclosure of intimate details.

3.5. Commitment

The final component of love, according to Sternberg is commitment. This is explained as the decision to be with a partner, to deny all other partners and to maintain the relationship above all else (Young & Long, 1998). This is considered the cognitive component of love and is often overlooked as it does not have the ‘heat’ or ‘excitement’ of passion and intimacy. The commitment component of love consists of two aspects, a short-term one, which is a decision that an individual makes to love another, and a long-term one, which is the commitment to maintain that love (Sternberg, 1986). The decision to love does not necessarily automatically mean that the person will maintain that love and the cognitive decision is often what controls the other aspects of a relationship. The decision/commitment component of love interacts with both the intimacy and the passion components and is often the core of a long term relationship as the relationship requires individuals to be present and supportive during the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ (Sternberg, 1986).

3.5.1. Online commitment. Very little research has been conducted into commitment online. There has been abundant research on infidelity online (Whitty & Carr, 2005; Whitty & Quigley, 2008) but very little in terms of whether individuals who engage in online intimate relationships are committed to each other.

A study conducted by Cornwell and Lundgren (2001) gave some insight into commitment online by indicating a difference between cyberspace and real space respondents with respect to the seriousness with which they approached their relationships and their degree of commitment to these relationships. They indicated that throughout the interview process there were several instances when respondents indicated that cyberspace relationships are 'just for fun' or 'unrealistic' and therefore are not taken seriously (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001). Matsuba (2006) also found that off line relationships were more developed than online relationships in terms of interdependence and commitment.

There are similarities between online dating and traditional dating. Online daters seemed to want to get to know their partners better before committing (Klein, 2013; Lawson & Leck, 2006). Commitment seems to be more readily accepted by individuals once they have met their online romantic partner face to face, and while engaging in online relationships there is a fairly low level of commitment. Cornwell and Lundgren (2001) concurred stating that respondents indicated that the relationships experienced online were fun, interesting, gratifying in their own right, and, despite a lesser level of seriousness or long-term commitment, these more transient relationships were experienced as offering opportunities for further development (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001)

3.6. Types of Love

A relationship can consist of any combination of the components of the Triangle namely passion, intimacy and commitment. There are seven distinct kinds of love identified by Sternberg (1986).

3.6.1. Non love. Non-love is considered to be the absence of all three of the components of the triangle. It is what makes up the majority of daily interaction, where individuals do not connect with individuals on a deeper level but merely have superficial interactions with them (Sternberg, 1986)

3.6.2. Liking/ Friendship. The first type of love is liking or friendship which only contains intimacy and has no passion or commitment. It consists of feelings of closeness, warmth and bonding with another person without the sexual feelings related to passion or the need to commit to the person long term (Sternberg, 1997; Sternberg, 1986). Liking is characterised by intimacy alone and is the primary type of love that exists between true friends (Aron & Westbay, 1996). This type of relationship can be determined by observing the reaction of the individual when the friend leaves. In liking, the friend is missed, but the individual does not persistently think about the loss. If the relationship is more than just liking, the loss will have more impact and their absence will have a substantial long-term effect (Sternberg, 1986).

3.6.3. Infatuated love. Love that contains only the passion portion of the triangle would be considered infatuated love. This is usually described as ‘love at first sight’ and is associated with physical attraction and feelings of a sexual nature. There is also a large number of physiological responses stemming from this type of love including increased heartbeat, increased hormonal secretions and genital arousal (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg 1997). This love only entails physical attraction and sexual arousal but no feelings of closeness or intimacy, and no intention to commit oneself to the other individual.

3.6.4. Empty love. Empty love has a cognitive component that sees the partners make a conscious decision to be committed to this type of love even when there are no

other facets of the triangle (namely passion and intimacy) present. This love is said to be characteristic of stagnant relationships where the partners are deeply emotionally committed to each other but do not experience passion and intimacy. Unless the commitment to the love is very strong, this love can be perceived as nonexistent because commitment can be so vulnerable to a conscious modification (Sternberg, 1986).

3.6.5. Romantic love. Passion and intimacy together produce romantic love, liking with an added element, namely, the arousal brought about by physical attraction and affiliated feelings. Individuals experiencing this type of love have the deep connection of intimacy and the physical attraction of passion (Sternberg, 1986). The experience of romantic love is universal and often portrayed in media and literature, though specific ideals of this type of love are heavily affected by one's culture (Anderson, 2005; Hertlein & Sendak, 2007).

3.6.6. Companionate love. Intimacy and commitment produce companionate love, which has a far less intense emotional constituent. It is essentially a long-term, committed friendship that commonly occurs in marriages in which the physical attraction (a major source of passion) has either been absent from the start or disappeared over time (Sternberg, 1986). "Companionate love is less intense but is a warm feeling of affection and tenderness that individuals feel for those with whom their lives are deeply connected" (Hatfield & Kim, 2004, p. 175). Companionate love involves mild but comfortable emotional states between partners, the characteristics of this type of love is often observed in partners who have been together and are comfortable around each other.

3.6.7. Fatuous love. This love has both the commitment and passion component but is missing the intimacy element. It is described as the characteristics seen in whirlwind romances and is often associated with an impulsive decision by the partner to be committed after a short period of time (Sternberg, 1986). The passion and commitment combined is associated with fulfilment and ecstasy but unrequited fatuous love is associated with emptiness, anxiety, or despair. This type of love is considered to have a strong emotional state in which individuals experience continuous interplay between elation and despair, thrills and terror (Hatfield et al., 1996; Hatfield & Kim, 2004)

3.6.8. Consummate love. Finally, intimacy, passion, and commitment together result in consummate love which is considered the healthiest type of love for long term romantic relationships. The attainment of consummate love does not necessarily mean that it will last and requires constant attention and effort. The love between a parent and child is the easiest description of this type of love where all three components are present and this results in a close bond (Sternberg, 1986).

3.7. Version 2.0- The Online Version of Love

What can be concluded from the above research is that despite many similarities, intimacy, passion, and commitment function online in a different way to which they function offline, and therefore the different types of love may also function in unique ways. The rich descriptive information shared in online-relationships is vital to the understanding of the nature of online romances (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Online intimate relationship qualities are influenced by both the quality and the quantity

of communication between partners online (Jin & Pena, 2010) and this will be further explored in the next chapter on self-disclosure

In a study conducted by Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) participants indicated that although their words online are powerful, many acknowledged that online exchanges are not enough to sustain long-term relationships. It was very common for participants in this study to increase the type of information available to them about their partners by incorporating a secondary medium (such as telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings). The participants reported the need to meet in-person and experience the physical side of intimacy. This suggests that as online romances intensified, individuals wanted to maximise additional ways to develop the experience. Without a physical component, online romantic participants are only able to access a portion of their relationship partners and humans may need a complete tactile physical presence in order to make a lasting bond (Klein, 2013; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). The purpose then of a great deal of online dating is ultimately to meet face to face. Before this interaction actually occurs, the Internet offers many possibilities for romantic and erotic interactions. This was highlighted in a study conducted by Couch and Liamputtong (2008). Participants in this study indicated that ultimately their goal was to meet their online partner face to face. While study aims to explore the perceptions of individuals who engage in online dating and the objective of the study is to gain a wide-ranging understanding of the process of dating online through the description of the subjective meaning the participants attribute to online relationships. The question for future research could be whether intimacy, commitment and passion are experienced online, albeit in a different way to traditional dating and what type of love is experienced online? What

combination of these elements of love are experienced and to what degree are they experienced?

3.8. Conclusion

The three components of Sternberg's triangle have been found to exist online to some extent (Van Staden, 2010). Although some studies have found that intimacy and passion can be limited online (Gonyea, 2004), other studies have highlighted the unique ways in which the Internet can make up for these deficits (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Ross, 2005; Sprecher, 2009; Whitty, 2003). The components of the triangle interact in a unique way online and while it has been established that relationships can be formed online, the question of whether they can be maintained online and how they are perceived online is still unclear. The primary aim of this study is not to measure the perceptions of individuals regarding their online relationship, rather it aims to provide insight into the dynamics of online relationships, what they entail, and to explore the perceptions of participants regarding what type of love according to Sternberg (1986) they experience online.

The focus of the study is on intimate relationships and a large component of intimacy revolves around disclosure. The next chapter discusses the theory on disclosure and its implications for online relationships.

Chapter Four

The Language of Cyber Love: Self-Disclosure Online

4.1 Introduction

Self-disclosure is considered an important aspect of communication in interpersonal relationships, including dating and marital relationships. It is considered a major contributor to a sense of intimacy, which is a fundamental component in relationship success (Sternberg, 1986). Verderber and Verderber (2008) agree and suggest that a healthy relationship contains an appropriate balance of self-disclosure and feedback. Self-disclosure can be defined as any communication about the self that an individual communicates to another. Feedback is described as the response, conscious or unconscious, the individual receives about that message within the relationship (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006). Altman and Taylor (1973) describe self-disclosure as particularly significant in relationships but state that it may be differentially important at different times of relationship development. Self-disclosure is not simply the outcome of a communication, rather, it is both a product and process of interaction, as well as a way of regulating interaction dynamically (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006).

Self-disclosure is also communicated non-verbally, for instance, in nonverbal communication and paralinguistics. The relative positioning of the individuals involved and body language all contribute to revealing the feelings of one individual to another. Unlike verbal self-disclosure, non-verbal self-disclosure cannot be effectively withheld, and much of it is unconscious (Duck, 1983).

Historically, research on self-disclosure has focused on face-to-face interactions. Currently, however, technology is playing a pivotal role in relationship building, which ultimately affects the process and understanding of self-disclosure (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011). In online relationships individuals are restricted from experiencing physical presence, proximity and nonverbal communication (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). The disclosure that occurs online via CMC between romantic partners is the crux of the relationship. It is then important that the process of self-disclosure in an online context is understood and defined. What information is disclosed online, as well as how this information is disclosed online is particularly important in understanding online relationships.

The current chapter considers the definition of self-disclosure in traditional face to face relationships, it explores how self-disclosure contributes to intimacy and the role that trust has in self-disclosure. The chapter proceeds to explore self-disclosure in an online setting exploring the components of anonymity the Internet provides, and how it contributes to self-disclosure and the influence of self-disclosure in online intimacy. The chapter then describes the disinhibitive component of self-disclosure on the Internet, explores the influence of shyness online, and online gating features in self-disclosure online. The Chapter concludes by exploring how self-disclosure is explained using the Johari window (Luft & Ingham, 1955).

4.2. Self-Disclosure Defined

Self-disclosure, like intimacy, is difficult to define. It is a complex phenomenon that has many components. Essentially, self-disclosure is the telling of previously unknown information so that it becomes shared knowledge, the ‘process of making the

self known to others'. Conceptualisations of self-disclosure regularly include several categories of personal exposure, such as personal information (facts) and experiences, personal thoughts, and personal feelings (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007).

Self-disclosure can also be considered from a relational perspective. This perspective includes the aspect of reciprocity in disclosure and how this impacts relationships, it considers the role that self-disclosure plays in relationship maintenance, and the idea that self-disclosure increases intimacy within a relationship (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Altman and Taylor (1973) describe self-disclosure as progressing in a relatively systematic fashion, beginning with breadth of disclosure and moving toward greater depth of disclosure. It must be noted that self-disclosure is not viewed as a static characteristic of relationships but rather as a process that changes as individuals and relationships change (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Altman and Taylor (1973) suggest that disclosure can be categorised into either peripheral, intermediate, or core layers. The peripheral layer is concerned with biographic data (e.g. age), the intermediate layer with attitudes, values, and opinions, and the core layer with personal beliefs, needs, fears, and values. The information shared in disclosure can further be divided into 'descriptive disclosure', which includes factual information and which is readily shared by most individuals. 'Evaluative disclosure' occurs when personal feelings and judgments are shared, and is an important element in intimacy (Taylor et al., 2006).

Altman and Taylor (1973) describe disclosure as having multiple dimensions. The first dimension described is the transactional dimension which indicates that it is a complex process that may unfold over a number of occasions. This refers to the

participants being both the sender and receiver in disclosure, and that feedback is an important element of self-disclosure. It indicates that self-disclosure also involves multiple (behavioural, emotional and cognitive) responses. One person reciprocates the other person's disclosures (and likewise can influence the growth or decline of the relationship) and, self-disclosure changes and expands as the relationship grows (Duck, 1983). The second dimension is known as the reward value which is the amount of negative or positive feedback an individual receives from an interaction, and this will ultimately effect future interactions, Duck (1983) explains that individuals self-disclose if they want to be liked and approved which increase the reward for the individual and allows the individual to modulate the amount and kind of disclosure they engage in. The third dimension is the 'informativeness component'. This characteristic refers to the different types of disclosure (evaluative and descriptive disclosure) and relates to what and how much information is shared during these interactions. The fourth dimension is accessibility, which refers to the ease or difficulty with which the information is disclosed between individuals. The fifth dimension is truthfulness which considers whether the information the individual is providing is about their 'real self' or their 'real truths'. The amount of self-disclosure is important in intimate relationships, initial self-disclosure is based on levels of trust (Duck, 1983). The sixth dimension includes social norms and refers to the rate and type of information that is expected to be revealed by society. The final and seventh dimension is effectiveness, which refers to the individual's ability to accomplish relationship goals with disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Self-disclosure is matched to the intimacy level of the relationship (which could be changing, therefore, self-disclosure can be used to escalate or de-escalate

relationships) (Duck, 1983). Two important elements of self-disclosure which need to be defined in the context of the current study, particularly relating to online relationships, is how disclosure is an element of intimacy, and how important trust is in intimate self-disclosure.

4.2.1. Self-Disclosure as an element of intimacy. The amount of self-disclosure in a relationship is frequently used as a measure of intimacy (Duck, 1983). A number of studies have shown that one person strategically releasing more personal information can lead to the other person responding with equally increased levels of intimacy (Duck, 1983). Intimacy is the disclosure of emotions and actions which the individual is unlikely to hold up to a wider public gaze, however, this type of intimate disclosure only occurs after liking and trust have been established (Kang & Hoffman, 2011). Self-disclosure itself does not create intimacy, it is a component of intimacy and a catalyst for individuals to feel validated, understood and cared for (Taylor et al., 2006).

4.2.2. Trust as an important factor in disclosure. Trust can be defined as the belief that an individual will not intentionally harm another or their interests (du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw, 2008). In the context of self-disclosure, Altman and Taylor (1973) describe a 'self-boundary', this is explained as the boundary around the person that is created and modified by self-disclosure. This is known as a dyadic boundary. The dyadic boundary ensures the discloser's safety from leakage of information to uninvited third parties and may be open or closed depending on such interpersonal factors as the level of trust in a disclosure target (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Investigators have explored a process known as the 'dyadic effect', which explains how individuals disclose intimate information to some but not to others. This concept refers to the process of mutual

exposure by communicating partners in which a disclosure by one partner is followed by a disclosure by the other (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). Trust is a critical issue in the disclosure of personal information because by disclosing information, individuals allow themselves to become vulnerable (Rubin 1970).

The understanding of self-disclosure in an offline context can be used to study self-disclosure in an online context. Both face-to-face and online self-disclosure is associated with a variety of beneficial outcomes in relationships, including closeness.

4.3. Dating in the Dark: Self-Disclosure Online

Online self-disclosure has been studied predominantly by linguistic and communication scholars with a focus on the content and linguistic process of online disclosure (Baker & Hasting, 2013). There has been little research on the behavioural, emotional, and psychological implications of intimate self-disclosure online. Wallace (1999) explains that: “The tendency to disclose more to a computer is an important ingredient of what seems to be happening on the Internet” (p.151). New technology and in particular the Internet are changing the demands on individuals to disclose personal information, as well as the possible repercussions of this different disclosure that occurs online. For instance, disclosing personal information to another person online might not involve the increased vulnerability that usually follows self-disclosure of personal information offline. Strangers communicating via CMC such as instant messaging tend to disclose with greater frequency (Antheunis, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002), and intimacy (Jiang, Bazarova & Hancock, 2013; Tidwell & Walther, 2002) than do those communicating face to face. This could be attributed to the

fact that the CMC environment offers fewer cues (e.g., verbal, vocal, or visual information) (Ruppel, 2014).

An element that is prominent in online self-disclosure is the anonymity that the Internet offers. This is an underlying theme that links to other concepts such as intimacy and deception.

4.3.1. Strangers on a train: Online self-disclosure and anonymity. As explored in Chapter 2, explanations for high levels of self-disclosure online is linked to the anonymity the Internet provides which facilitates a level of intimacy that is different from face to face interactions (Joinson, 2001). Internet users come to personally know one another more rapidly and intimately than in face-to-face relationships because individuals in face-to-face relationships do not typically have the anonymity of being behind a computer screen or the psychological comfort that such anonymity affords. Self-disclosure online is richer and progresses faster since the Internet affords a level of anonymity that can reduce feelings of discomfort one may experience in face-to-face relating (Orr, Sisic, Ross, Simmering, Arseneault & Orr, 2009).

A parallel can be drawn to a study done by Gergen, Gergen and Barton (1973). This study found that when individuals interacted in a darkened room where they could not see each other, they engaged in greater self-disclosure and left the experience liking each other more than those who interacted in a brightly lit room. This study can be likened to the current study. Being in a darkened room aptly explains the phenomena of why individuals tend to disclose more online, online they are anonymous and can't be physically seen, hence they feel more open to disclosing information that would usually be undisclosed in a traditional face to face situation.

Essentially, self-disclosure online has the same notion of Rubins (1970) the 'strangers on a train' phenomena where individuals tend to share more personal, intimate information with their seatmates on a train who are strangers. Individuals online share intimate information because the online partner does not have access to the individuals' social circle, thus the dyadic boundary cannot be broken and the individual cannot be judged socially (Bargh, Mc Kenna & Fitzsimons, 2002). Unlike the anonymous strangers however, the individual has repeated contact with their partners online. Consequently this early *self-disclosure* lays the foundation for a close intimate relationship.

In a study done Joinson (2001), individuals communicating online had higher levels of self-disclosure of intimate details in shorter time frames. This was explained as the result of the decrease in public self-focus (how an individual portrays the self in public in relation to the societal norms and standards) due to the anonymity that the Internet offers. A second possibility that Joinson (2001) offered is that the environment in which individuals engage in computer-mediated communication might encourage private self-focus. Most CMC occurs in a quiet room alone, which may encourage the development of an introspective state of mind thus leading to greater disclosure. Furthermore, the need to express emotions normally done face to face, for example to smile, with a text-based alternative, for example :-), may lead to heightened private self-awareness through the act of having to focus on one's inner feelings and emotions to put them down in writing (Joinson, 2001).

4.3.1.1. The hyperpersonal model of online communication. Anonymity is also crucial to understanding the 'hyperpersonal' model of communication online (Walther, 1996). According to the hyperpersonal communication theory, two structural attributes of

CMC facilitate more intimate exchanges in CMC settings than in face-to-face settings (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996). The first attribute is CMC's reduced nonverbal cues. CMC is typically characterised by reduced visual, auditory, and contextual cues, such as social status prompts. The second structural attribute is the controllability of CMC. The controllability of CMC allows users the time to review and edit their messages and to consider responses (Walther & Parks, 2002). Although controllability seems more important in asynchronous CMC, such as e-mail, it also applies to synchronous CMC, such as instant messages (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). In instant messaging, messages are only sent upon pressing 'Enter' and responses do not necessarily have to be immediate. Walther (1996) hypothesizes that, because of CMC's reduced nonverbal cues and controllability, individuals get absorbed in the communication. Reduced nonverbal cues and controllability reduce inhibitions when interacting through CMC. This disinhibitive effect of CMC may in turn result in increased online self-disclosure (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996).

Online dating has clear advantages according to the hyperpersonal perspective. Edited self-presentation is possible in both visual appearance (photograph) and elements of an individual's personality (messages sent about the individual can be carefully thought out). Therefore the first impressions formed through CMC may actually be more positive than if meeting face to face, ultimately encouraging the relationship to progress possibly more quickly and successfully. According to Walther (1996), visual anonymity allows CMC users to construct a predominately positive impression, which leads to idealised impressions of the communication partner. CMC allows individuals to use 'hyperpersonal' communication and individuals find it easier to express themselves in

mediated contexts than in face-to-face situations (Baker & Hastings, 2013; Ruppel, 2014). CMC offers individuals the freedom to express themselves in positive or negative ways and individuals are driven to engage in social relationships, therefore they will use individual, cognitive, knowledge-generating strategies to test their assumptions of others and become acquainted (Ruppel, 2014).

The hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication provides a framework that helps explain dynamic changes of communication online and individual's construction of their personality through online interactions. The model explains how CMC users are able to present themselves selectively, and how these controlled self-presentations become the method by which online partners come to know one another (Baker & Hastings, 2013). Hyperspersonal interaction that occurs online may lead to exaggerated levels of affect and intimacy compared to those that typically occur in face to face interactions.

4.3.2. Self-disclosure and intimacy in an online context. Some theorists maintain that intimacy is very reliant on the level of truthful self-disclosure that occurs between individuals (Sternberg, 1986). Relationships move to greater levels of intimacy over time and greater intimacy is achieved through depth and breadth of self-disclosure. Breadth of self-disclosure refers to discussing a range of topics such as information about one's family, career, and so forth. Depth refers to the more central core of one's personality which would be considered the more unique aspects of one's self. The timing of how much one self-discloses is crucial to determining whether a relationship will continue to proceed (Sternberg, 1997). Rushing self-disclosure in the early stages of a

relationship can seem unnatural and desperate and can lead to an abrupt end (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

In an online context, the pacing and content of the communication as well as the length of time individuals communicate via text based online mediums can influence the nature and depth of the bonding between individuals. However, in an online context, information is disclosed rapidly and early in the relationship, and this disclosure of personal information is what leads to greater intimacy online (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Trust is a critical issue in both face to face and online disclosure of personal information. By disclosing information, individuals make themselves vulnerable, this applies equally to disclosure in online mediums (Joinson, Paine, Buchanan & Reips, 2008). It must be noted that individuals tend to reveal less information about themselves online until trust has been developed (Merkle & Richardson, 1999; Ruppel, 2014)

4.3.3. Self-disclosure in relation to trust and deception in an online context.

Some researchers maintain that the anonymity the Internet provides allows individuals too much freedom to hide aspects of themselves that they consider undesirable. This can have a significant impact on the development of trust in the online environment. Berger and Luckmann (1967) believed individuals decide to trust based on intuitive impressions referred to as ‘trust indicators’. These trust indicators are strategies that serve to minimise harm. These trust indicators are based on traditional relationships, online individuals have to modify these indicators in order to adapt to the context.

If the definition of trust as discussed in the beginning of this chapter is considered in an online context, the development of trust in an online dating relationship requires not only the assurance that the other means no physical harm but also that the other will treat

the online person with respect and care. Lawson and Leck (2006) explain that individuals take physical and emotional risks to gain trust and are willing to continue seeking online relationships even after others had lied to them. This risk taking may be explained by the 'strangers on a train' phenomena discussed earlier where individuals feel that they can trust individuals online as they are anonymous and their online partner does not have access to their real world social circle. Donn and Sherman (2002) explained that online individuals employ a lack of concern for self-presentation to open up to others and share more about themselves than they would in face to face interactions.

Numerous researchers have indicated that in an online context individuals appear to be primarily concerned with how others are untruthful about themselves and provide inaccurate self-presentation (Donn & Sherman, 2002; Gibbs, Ellison & Heino, 2006; Whitty, 2008; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Donn and Sherman (2002) found in their study that individuals were greatly concerned with the intentional distorted self-presentation and deception in online dating, warranting the inability to trust other online daters. Gibbs, Ellison and Heino (2006) also found that respondents were concerned that others misrepresent themselves online by intentionally neglecting to reveal negative information about themselves. Whitty (2008) explained that individuals experience anger when they find that when they met face-to-face that their online partner had misrepresented themselves in their profile or in their description of themselves during communication (Kang & Hoffman, 2011). Individuals who use online dating sites may be attracted to the ability to better control information online, whereas those who are more trusting of others may lack this need for control and therefore are less likely to use online dating sites (Kang & Hoffman, 2011).

4.3.4. The disinhibitive effect of online communication and the perception of control online. Reduced nonverbal cues, as explained in the hyperpersonal theory, and controllability may be central in explaining enhanced online self-disclosure (Schouten, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Reduced nonverbal cues and controllability reduce individuals's inhibitions when interacting through CMC. This disinhibitive effect of CMC may in turn result in increased online self-disclosure (Schouten, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Ruppel, 2014). Interpersonal outcomes of online communication, including online self-disclosure, are usually attributed to online disinhibition (Walther, Liang, DeAndrea, Tong, Carr, Spottswood & Amichai-Hamburger, 2011). Disinhibition refers to the loss of constraints that a person experiences when behaviour is no longer controlled by concerns about self-presentation or judgments by others (Joinson, 2001; Joinson et al., 2008). In CMC research, disinhibition is often considered a precursor to online self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Walther et al., 2011) Because individuals feel less inhibited, they may feel more comfortable using the Internet to disclose personal information about themselves (Whitty & Carr, 2006).

Controllability may allow individuals greater control over their self-presentation (Bargh, Mc Kenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; Walther, 1996). Walther et al., (2011) believe that while individuals do tend to be strategic in their presentation of themselves offline, in CMC, impression management is more controllable and flowing. As discussed in chapter two, self-presentation online forms an important part of online dating and relationship formation. The element of controllability allows individuals to respond to messages in their own time. They can read and reread messages, think about how to respond or disconnect from the conversation at any moment (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Online

interaction essentially allows individuals to take their time deciding what information they wish to self-disclose which creates a sense of control (Bargh, Mc Kenna & Fitzsimons, 2002). The importance of how the anonymity and control effects individuals who are shy or socially anxious must also be noted.

4.3.5. Shyness and disclosure online. Shyness is characterised by anxiety reactions (tension, discomfort, aversion of gaze) and an inhibition of normal social behaviours when in the presence of others (Taylor et al., 2006). Due to the anonymity present online and given their discomfort in social situations, shy individuals might be more willing to engage in online interactions than offline interactions (Orr et al., 2009). In general, when communicating online, individuals are less aware of potentially inhibiting factors such as shyness, self-consciousness, and social anxiety that can often be stressful for some when trying to form offline interpersonal relationships (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Socially anxious individuals are inhibited in social interactions, they tend to self-disclose less than those who are lower in social anxiety. The reduced nonverbal cues in online contexts may reduce these limitations as socially anxious individuals may feel less judged by others during online communication (Schouten, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

The need to find gratifying social relationships for shy individuals may result in a greater reliance on online communication avenues. Shyness is not a barrier to online interaction and may facilitate the use of online mediums to pursue relationships (Orr et al., 2009). A study done by Ward and Tracey (2004) found that while shy individuals tended to form more online relationships, these relationships were still perceived as difficult by the participants due to their shyness. This study indicated that while the

Internet provides more platforms for shy and socially anxious individuals to connect with others, the social mechanisms of forming relationships are still considered to be difficult albeit easier than face to face communication. In general, the Internet can be liberating for those who have social anxiety in forming interpersonal relationships offline as it provides individuals with a space to explore their social awkwardness without any real social consequences, individuals can test the boundaries of their relationship skills safely from behind a computer screen (Kang & Hoffman, 2011).

Bargh, Mc Kenna and Fitzsimons (2002) found that participants in their study who were more socially anxious and lonely were somewhat more likely to believe they could express their true selves with others online than they could with individuals they knew offline. This could be linked to the anonymity the Internet offers as well as the lack of social cues individuals present online. Anonymity, a lack of gating features and the lack of social cues and controllability are prominent in understanding why self-disclosure occurs more rapidly and deeply online.

4.3.6. Self-disclosure online linked to a lack of gating features. An additional reason for increased self-disclosure online according to Bargh, Mc Kenna and Fitzsimons (2002) is the lack of ‘gating features’ that online relationships lack, such as physical appearance, visible shyness, social anxiety, or a social stigma such as stuttering. These gating features often prevent individuals from developing relationships to a stage where intimate self-disclosure would begin in offline relationships. According to a study done by McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) with New York University undergraduate psychology students, when individuals interact online and not in person the quality of interaction, especially the intimacy and closeness attained, determined liking between

individuals. In face to face interactions the quality of interaction did not matter, indicating that superficial gating features dominate liking and overwhelm other interpersonal factors. Furthermore this study, that included a temporal study of the stability of Internet relationships, concluded that by forming relationships based initially on mutual self-disclosure and common interests rather than superficial features, such as physical attractiveness, provided a more stable and durable basis for a relationship. The ‘gates’ do come into operation when the individuals meet in person (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002).

4.4. Through the Looking Glass: Self-Disclosure and the Johari Window

The Johari window (Luft & Ingham, 1955) provides a theoretical lens in which to explore self-disclosure in an online context. The Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008) is a model containing four panes that are used to explain the roles of self-awareness and self-disclosure in relationships (du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw, 2008). The window has four panes as illustrated in Figure 3. These panes are not static and change according to the amount of information disclosed and the amount of feedback received. While the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008) is limited in its ability to capture the complexity of disclosure processes, it is a helpful way to establish a general conceptualisation of conscious and unconscious dynamics related to disclosure (du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw, 2008).

The first quadrant includes information which is known to both the individual and others (Open/Public Self). It includes information which the individual has disclosed, and observations of themselves that have been provided to them from feedback. An example

of this would be an individual's vocation or hobbies, or that they are married with children.

	Known to self	Not known to self
Known to others	Public	Blind
Not known to others	Hidden	Unknown

Figure 3. The Johari Window. This figure shows the elements within the Johari window. Note: From *Communicate!* (p. 130) by R.F. Verderber & K.S. Verderber, 2008. California, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

The size of the Open/Public area is a developmental outcome of relationships. Individuals with established relationships will have larger Open areas and those who have just started a relationship will have smaller Open areas. The Open area is usually expanded by encroaching into the Blind and Hidden areas. The Open area may be enlarged in one of two ways. The first is exposing useful data to others (in an honest and open fashion) that was previously unknown to a partner. This will also reduce the size of the Hidden area. Alternatively, actively taking the initiative to obtain the reactions and feelings of others (feedback) will shrink what was previously unknown to oneself, thereby decreasing the Blind area. Both processes generally require active effort on the

part of one or both individuals. This means that the enlargement of the Open quadrant comes from sharing hidden aspects of the individual and asking about information that is blind. This often occurs through the natural process of developing relationship experiences, but can also be accelerated by actively engaging in personal feedback processes. Having a large Open quadrant comes with risk as it requires individuals to be vulnerable and open (Verderber & Verderber, 2008).

The second quadrant includes information which is not known to others but is known to oneself (Hidden area). Examples of this type of information could be a serious illness or a facet of personality an individual feels embarrassed by. This information can be made known to another individual through self-disclosure. As a relationship progresses and more information is disclosed due to trust being established, this quadrant becomes smaller as the individual discloses information and the Open pane enlarges. Reasons for keeping information hidden include being personally sensitive resulting in the individual not wanting to share openly, and information that an individual would like to share but does not feel there is adequate trust or safety to do so (Verderber & Verderber, 2008).

The third quadrant includes information which is not known to oneself but is known to others (Blind Self). Examples of this could include habits that the individual is unaware of. Information moves from the blind quadrant to the open quadrant when individuals receive feedback from partners. As information is received about the individual the blind pane becomes smaller and the open pane becomes larger. There is a strong link between the size of the blind area and self-deception (Verderber & Verderber, 2008).

The fourth quadrant includes information which is not known to oneself or others (Unknown area). This information is periodically discovered as new situations are experienced and individual learns more about themselves. Individuals are complex and there is much under the surface in the unconscious mind. (Verderber & Verderber, 2008)

4.4.1 The image of the window in a healthy relationship. The Ideal Window as seen in Figure 4 reflects a high degree of trust in the relationship of the individual. There is a large Open quadrant and individuals receive and give appropriate feedback resulting in positive exchanges within the relationship. A healthy relationship has appropriate levels of disclosure and feedback between both partners. The large Public area suggests that the majority of the individual's behaviour is open to their partner and because of this openness, there is very little interpretation (or misinterpretation) or projection of more personal meanings. There is an understanding of actions and words, and it is known that the individual is open to soliciting and providing feedback (Verderber & Verderber, 2008). There is also very little information in the Blind area in that due to appropriate feedback strategies the individual has become aware of previously unknown information.

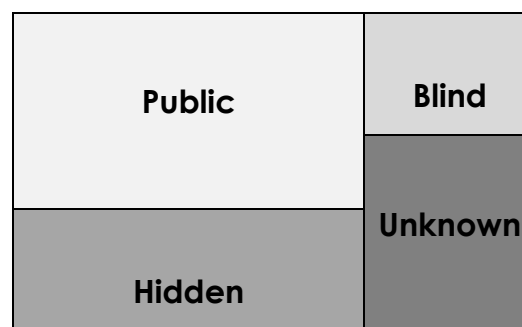


Figure 4. The Ideal Window. This window shows that in a relationship with adequate feedback and disclosure the Public pane is the largest.

4.4.2. The emerging relationship window. The beginning stages of a relationship has very distinct disclosure patterns. It is also interesting to note whether these patterns are prevalent in online relationships. The emerging relationship has little disclosure and little feedback as seen in Figure 5. This is typical of new relationships or one in which there is very little trust. When a relationship is in the initial stages, individuals tend to disclose information that is superficial and mostly positive. As trust increases the individual will disclose more intimate information about themselves. This strategy serves to protect the individual as well as ensure the partner is not overwhelmed by information that may be initially destructive to the relationship (du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw, 2008; Verderber & Verderber, 2008).

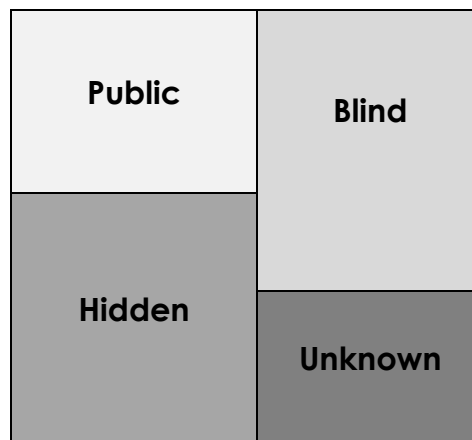


Figure 5. The Emerging Relationship Window. This window shows how the Hidden quadrant in a new relationship is large while the Public window is small. Note: Adapted from: du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw, 2008.

4.5. The Johari Window and Self-Disclosure Online

There is no current research that links disclosure in an online context to the research on the Johari window (Luft & Ingham, 1955). Research has focused on communication patterns and information that is disclosed online by individuals, as well as

deception and the levels of trust that occurs in online relationships. Research on online disclosure has focused on Rogers' (1951) and Higgins' (1987) work on personality to identify two aspects of 'the self' that they believe are important to consider when focusing on the disclosure of information online, namely the 'true' self and the 'actual' self (Bargh, Mc Kenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; Whitty, 2007). Higgins' (1987) defined the actual self as traits or characteristics that individuals own and express to others in social settings. Rogers (1951) explained the 'true self' as the individual's inner core, essentially who they really are but would not necessarily hold up to the public gaze. The concepts of the 'true self' and the 'actual self' can be linked to the different panes of the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008) and how individuals disclose information online. Being able to express the individuals true self over the Internet creates empathetic bonds and facilitates the establishment of intimacy (Bargh, Mc Kenna & Fitzsimons, 2002).

Online individuals have a greater ability to structure themselves and control what they allow others to view. Whitty (2007) conducted a study pertaining to online dating which revealed that individuals were more attracted to others who expressed their 'actual' self. In this particular study the participants were reported to be trying to create a balance between keeping their profiles real (actual self) as well as selling themselves (or describing how they would like to be). McKenna et al., (2002) found that when individuals convey their 'true' self online they develop strong Internet relationships and bring these relationships into their 'real' lives. Individuals who are more likely to express their true self online will consider the relationships they form online to be more meaningful compared to those individuals who are more likely to express their true selves in non-Internet relationships (Finkel et al., 2012; Whitty, 2007).

As explained by Higgins (1987) and what can be deduced from the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008) is that as an individual develops trust and intimacy with a partner they are more likely to disclose aspects of themselves that are not widely known to others. In a study by McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) it was found that individuals who believe they are better able to express their true selves over the Internet were more likely to form close relationships with others online. Turkle (1995) explained that the Internet presents a unique opportunity for self-expression. Individuals tend to express aspects of themselves that are true to their perception of their own identity, and inexplicably real that are not often or easily expressed to others. Although self-disclosure is highly variable online, many individuals report feeling freer to make themselves known within the safety of the anonymity afforded to them in an online context (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). The Internet is perceived by individuals as a safe space to identify their 'true' self or play around with presentations of themselves (Whitty, 2003).

Schouten, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) highlight public self-consciousness which is the awareness of how one appears in the eyes of others. This could be linked to the secret pane on the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008), where individuals online are very aware of what information they share in order to be attractive to potential partners online. This information constructed in online profiles is presented to ensure the individual is perceived positively and uniquely and is what the individual considers most important aspects of themselves (Bargh, Mc Kenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Finkel et al., 2012). Whitty (2007) describes the construction of these profiles of the 'self' as a dynamic process that is constantly changing as the individual transforms. This is congruent with the description of the Johari window (Verderber &

Verderber, 2008) and how feedback effects the formation of panes in the window. As an individual receives feedback regarding their profile or their 'online self' they adapt and remodel themselves online, which is easy to achieve especially when compared to offline. Online profiles are set up in such a way to reveal information about individuals that is attractive and true but also made to highlight the positive qualities of the individual, to attract potential partners. For instance, within the profiles, individuals typically have to provide information about surface level aspects of themselves, such as eye colour, drinking and smoking habits, relationship status, number, and types of pets, and occupation. In addition, they are given space to write more in-depth information about themselves, where they are asked to describe aspects such as their personality, interests (what they read, music they listen to, and so forth), their ideal date, and their political persuasion. They are encouraged on these dating sites to open up about all aspects of themselves online in order to attract the most appropriate mate (Whitty, 2007).

Controllability enables individuals more time and opportunity to optimise their self-presentation allowing them to control what part of themselves is portrayed online (Schouten, Valkenburg and Peter, 2007).

Due to the intimate self-disclosure that occurs online and aspects such as anonymity that increases the expression of the true self online, the Hidden quadrant of the window appears to be small in online relationships. The individual in an online relationship is open to expressing all aspects of themselves as illustrated in the above research (Schouten, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Whitty, 2003; Whitty, 2007). There is a tendency as seen from the research above for individuals to maintain information that portrays them in a negative light hidden, however, it can also be argued that due to the

anonymity, individuals would express their hidden information more readily and more rapidly in online relationships than in offline relationships.

4.6. Conclusion

Disclosure is an integral part of intimacy within relationships and is considered vital by individuals within the context of an ongoing interaction and wider context regardless of whether that interaction is face to face or online.

Self-disclosure can then be considered to have the following characteristics: Firstly, it is on a continuum and most individuals have the ability to distinguish what is appropriate and what is not at any particular moment. Secondly, it involves risk and vulnerability on the part of the individual sharing the information and powerful authentic sharing occurs when one person discloses themselves in a way that allows the other to feel free to do the same. Thirdly, self-disclosure also brings with it a sense of shared humanity and vulnerability in individuals. Lastly, self-disclosure is not simply the outcome of a communication, rather, it is both a product and process of interaction, as well as a way of regulating interaction dynamically (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006).

Online self-disclosure appears to be richer and to progress faster since the Internet affords a context that can reduce feelings of discomfort one may experience in face to face relating. Factors such as anonymity, lack of gating features, and the ability to control the environment effect the level and pace of disclosure online. Trust and deception are linked online to the construction to the individuals 'self' online and individuals who disclose truthful information tend to have relationships that are lasting and can be brought to the real world.

The next chapter describes the methodology used to collect, analyse and explore the data in the current study.

Chapter Five

Research Methodology

5.1 Introduction

The current study utilised a phenomenological approach, a qualitative research method that is both descriptive and analytical in nature. A conceptualisation of qualitative research and transcendental science is used to illustrate the social phenomena of online relationships. In order to describe this specific approach, the chapter explores four major processes in phenomenological research, namely (1) epoche, (2) phenomenological reduction, (3) imaginative variation, and (4) synthesis. How these processes were assimilated into the present research study is discussed in this chapter.

The chapter further describes the methodology, expanding on the data collection methods and provides an outline of the research procedure followed. An account of the setting in which the research occurred and the sampling procedures implemented throughout the study are then described. The chapter thereafter provides a review of the data processing and analysis with specific reference to Tesch's (1990) content analysis as well as Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model of trustworthiness. The primary ethical considerations conclude the chapter.

5.2 Objective of the Study

The literature review from the present study highlights a vast number of elements that encompass intimacy and relationships in an online world. Online dating has been gaining popularity in research but is still poorly understood and conceptualised. Concepts such as intimacy, love, self-expression, and identity may not necessarily have the same

meaning and value to individuals in these online contexts as they would to those in an offline context and further research is needed to fully understand these components. The objective of the present study was to gain a wide-ranging understanding of the process of online intimate relationships through the description of the subjective meaning the participants attribute to these relationships.

The study specifically aimed to explore and describe:

1. The lived experiences of individuals who engage in online dating, including the elements that comprise the online relationship, the subjective meaning attached to the relationships, and the processes these relationships encompass.

2. The progression of the online relationship.

Offline relationships have been studied for centuries and there have been numerous theories regarding how these relationships evolve. Online relationships lack this theoretical base and there is a need to establish the processes through which these relationships progress through and how they compare to offline relationships.

5.3 Research Design

5.3.1. Qualitative research design. The study made use of a qualitative research design. The qualitative approach encompasses characteristics such as collecting data in the field where participants experience the phenomena under study. The focus of qualitative research is to learn the gist of what the participants hold true about a particular phenomena, not the meaning the research or literature brings to the investigation. This aspect of qualitative research is particularly relevant in the phenomenological approach (Schurink, 1998). Qualitative research is considered a form of inquiry, researchers

interpret what they see, hear and understand and this cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, or suppositions (de Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2011). Qualitative research deals specifically with the participants' subjective worldview as well as the meanings that they attach to the phenomena being studied. Rather than uncovering universal truths, it helps the researcher to interpret those meanings and intentions that underlie everyday human behaviour (Schurink, 1998).

It is also imperative that the qualitative researcher attempt to develop a holistic view of social phenomena (de Vos et al., 2011). The paradigm of qualitative research in its broadest sense refers to that which extracts participants explanations of meaning, experience or perceptions. It identifies the participant's beliefs and values that underlie a phenomena and produces descriptive data in the participants own words. It is then assumed that the qualitative researcher is concerned with describing and understanding rather than explaining or predicting human behaviour (de Vos et al., 2011).

The study is qualitative in the sense that it involves varieties of social and psychological inquiry to rely on data primarily extracted in the form of words in order to investigate a phenomena. Concepts such as intimacy, love, self-disclosure, and deception may not necessarily have the same meaning and value to the individuals in online communities as they would to individuals in an offline context. A qualitative approach that is aimed at exploring the online collective environment through the eyes of those that interact socially within it, was deemed most suitable by the present researcher

5.3.1.1 Exploratory Research. This type of research is conducted to gain insight into a phenomena. Exploratory research is undertaken in order to satisfy the researcher's curiosity, to test the feasibility of further studies in the area, and to develop the methods

to be used in such studies (deVos et al., 2011). Online relationships have only recently started receiving academic attention and research within the area of online relationships has been primarily studied by linguistic and communication scholars. The present study's objective was to explore this relatively new field in order to establish a foundation for future studies, particularly within a South African context. The primary aim of exploratory research is to formulate more precise questions that future research can answer (deVos et al., 2011). The exploratory nature of this study means that no direct causal links were established. However, the strength of this kind of research is that it studies the topic broadly and generally enough to yield insights into the observed behaviour and elicit information prevalent for future research questions.

5.3.1.2 Descriptive Research. Exploratory and descriptive research have some similarities and usually blend in practice (de Vos et al., 2011). In a qualitative paradigm this type of research is likely to refer to a more intensive examination of phenomena and their deeper meaning, thus leading to a thicker description. Essentially, descriptive research in this context presents a picture of the specific details of a phenomenon (de Vos et al., 2011; Moustakas, 1996).

5.3.2 Phenomenological Research. The idea of transcendental science enriches the researcher's capacity to hear without judging and to maintain a stance of openness to phenomena, thereby attempting to eliminate everything that represents prejudgements or presumptions (Moustakas, 1994). Evidence from phenomenological research is derived from first person reports of life experiences. In accordance with phenomenological principles, scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge and information sought

after is derived through descriptions that make it possible to gain an understanding of the meanings and essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

As phenomenology is concerned with the study of an experience from the perspective of the individual, the phenomenological researcher therefore essentially seeks to describe rather than explain a phenomenon from a perspective, free from hypothesis or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). Phenomenology assumes that reality exists but access to it is never direct (Shaw, 2010). The present study aimed to describe and answer questions about the complex nature of the phenomenon of online relationships, with the purpose of describing and understanding the occurrence from the participant's point of view.

Phenomenology according to Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) is especially useful when a researcher is concerned with complexity, process, or novelty. The study aimed to understand online intimate relationships and the meaning individuals attach to these relationships. The study produced descriptive data in the participants own spoken words and identified the participants' beliefs and values that underlie the phenomena of online dating and relationships.

5.3.3 Major processes in phenomenological research. Phenomenology does not reduce phenomenon into identifiable variables that are understood in a controlled environment but rather seeks to accurately capture the phenomenon within the context that it occurs (Smith, 2003). The data provides a careful description of the conscious everyday experiences of subjects and does not attempt to produce an objective statement of the phenomena. It is considered a dynamic process with an active role for the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental phenomenological research emphasises the present inner world of the individual, which includes experience and perception. Emphasis is placed on subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience. It therefore provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for the derivation of knowledge. It is phenomenological as it utilises only the data available to consciousness – the appearance of objects. It is transcendental in that it adheres to what can be discovered through reflection on subjective acts and their objective associations (Moustakas, 1994). In the present study four major processes were used in transforming the raw data into the findings that are presented in the next chapter. Following a theoretical description, attention will be given to how these processes were used for the purpose of this study.

5.3.3.1. *Epoche process.* During this process any prejudgments, partialities, and preconceptions from any previous knowledge are set aside. No position is taken; every quality is seen as equal. This process inclines toward receptiveness and allows the researcher to encounter a situation without imposing her own thinking habits and values onto it. The challenge in achieving epoche is the sustained concentration and effort that is required of the researcher. Although epoche is rarely perfectly achieved, the energy, attention, and work involved in the reflection and self-dialogue; the intention that underlies the process, the attitude, and frame of reference significantly reduce the influence of preconceived thoughts, judgements and preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994). As a researcher of phenomenological based investigation, it is necessary to suspend personal opinion, discard stereotypical views, and rely on the primacy of the data gathered in the study. Therefore, epoche serves to guide and support the researcher's

behaviour, thoughts, and feelings to facilitate the disclosure of the nature and essence of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher made every attempt at ensuring that her ideals, preconceived notions, and values were set aside during the research process. Before every interview the researcher would identify her expectations by writing them in a reflective journal, included as Appendix F, and then set these aside ensuring that the data collection was seen from a fresh, inexperienced perspective. The researcher also limited interaction with any online dating sites or online contexts relating to online dating ensuring that she was naive to the processes that occurred with regard to online relationship formation.

5.3.3.2. *Phenomenological reduction.* Phenomenological reduction involves a narrowing of attention to what is essential in the presented topic. By narrowing the attention, a researcher is able to focus on what is essential. With anticipation, this enables the researcher to discover the rational principles necessary for an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, the focus of phenomenological reduction is the quality of the experiences which are used to achieve completion of the nature and meaning of the experience.

This process includes ensuring the qualities of the experience become the focus with the aim of drawing the essential nature of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This process includes firstly, ‘bracketing’ where the focus of the research is placed in brackets and everything else ignored so as to ensure the research process is rooted solely on the topic and question. The second step is ‘horizontalising’ where statements that are irrelevant, repetitive or overlapping are deleted. The concept of horizons emphasises that each statement is initially of equal value. Once the researcher has identified as many

statements as possible, they are reviewed so that repetitive and overlapping statements are deleted. In essence, this leaves only true horizons. These horizons are then grouped into themes which are later organised to provide clear textural descriptions of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). The process of phenomenological reduction was particularly used in the data analysis process. Keeping the idea present during data collection also ensured that data collected truly reflected the phenomena in question and ensured the researcher received data that was rich in subjective meaning instead of facts and irrelevant information.

5.3.3.3. *Imaginative variation.* The task of imaginative variation is to seek possible variations through the utilisation of the imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, roles or functions (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of imaginative variation is to uncover possible meanings from the themes by using imagination. This process includes a reflective phase in which many possibilities are examined and explicated reflectively. The objective of this process is to facilitate a structural description of the phenomenon, which provides insight into the fundamental factors that account for that which is being experienced (Moustakas, 1994). This process deviates from traditional perspectives that encourage the development of facts or the use of measurement, by moving towards the meaning and essence of the phenomena. In the present study, the unstructured conversation format allowed for the identification of the structural themes by which participants could describe the meaning that they attached to their experiences of online relationships.

5.3.3.4. *Synthesis of meaning and essence.* This final step in the phenomenological research process includes the intuitive combination of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into an integrated statement of ‘essences’ of the experience of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1996). Essences, as described by Husserl (1931) is that which is universal, the condition or quality without which, a phenomenon would not be what it is. The essences of any experience are never totally exhausted. The fundamental textural– structural synthesis represents the core at a particular time and place from the vantage point of the individual researcher following an imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1996).

The phenomenological method contains four primary or essential steps. The researcher reads the entire description that each participant has given of the phenomenon. This produces a general sense of the whole statement given. Once the sense of the whole has been grasped, the researcher returns to the beginning and reads through the text once more, with the specific aim of discriminating meaning units from the perspective of the phenomenon being researched. At this point, bracketing occurs. Bracketing occurs when the focus of the research is placed in brackets, everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is embedded solely on the topic and question. Initially, every statement is treated as having equal value (Shaw, 2010). Later, statements irrelevant to the topic, as well as those that overlap or are repetitive, are deleted. When natural meaning units have been defined, the researcher then explores all of the meaning units and expresses psychological insight into them. The meaning unit discrimination occurs whenever the researcher becomes aware of a change of meaning of the phenomena that appears to be psychologically sensitive. Thereafter, the researcher synthesises all of the

transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the participant's experience. In the process of explicating the phenomenon, qualities are recognised and described, therefore granting every perception equal value. Non-repetitive components of the experience are linked thematically and then a full description is derived (Giorgi, 1985).

5.4. Sampling Procedure

5.4.1. Non probability, purposive sampling. In non probability sampling the odds of selecting a particular individual are not known because the researcher does not know the population size (de Vos et al., 2011). Purposive sampling is based entirely on the judgement of the researcher and is composed of elements that contain the most representative attributes that best serves the purpose of the study (de Vos et al., 2011). Non probability purposive sampling was utilised for the study due to the in-depth and descriptive nature of the research method. The aim of the research is to explore the phenomena as opposed to create any definitive standards. Neuman (2003) describes the primary purpose of non probability sampling to collect specific cases that can clarify and extend understanding.

5.4.1.1 Snowball sampling. Snow ball sampling was utilised in order to identify individuals that proved difficult to gain access to and individuals with specific characteristics (de Vos et al., 2011).

Initially an individual who has actively been involved in online intimate relationships was identified via an article published in the local newspaper, whose readers represented the demographics of a South African population, requesting possible

participants to initiate contact with the researcher (see Appendix A). The article included the title of the study, a description of the investigation as well as the need for a sample. The researcher had no prior contact with the participant. This individual proceeded to provide details of three other individuals who are actively involved in online intimate relationships. The three individuals were contacted and requested to partake in the study. This sampling method continued until the data saturation point was reached. Theoretical saturation is achieved when no new themes or information within the identified main categories emerged from the data obtained from the participants (de Vos et al., 2005). Theoretical saturation was reached at four participants. It is important to note that due to the qualitative nature of the study the sample was based on saturation and is not representative or statistically determined (de Vos et al., 2011). The sample did, however, provide data that aims to expand the knowledge of online dating and intimate online relationships, allowing for clarification of a relatively unknown topic.

5.4.2. Selection Criteria. Participants of any gender, race and sexual orientation were included in the study. Only participants eighteen years or older were allowed to participate due to ethical reasons regarding the sensitive nature of the proposed study. This was monitored via a biographical questionnaire (Appendix D) presented to the participants before the data collection commenced. The sample contained three females and one male, aged between 30-43 years, with the average age being 37. Three of the four participants were divorced, all resided in Port Elizabeth, all were heterosexual, and participants spent an average of 14.5 hours online a week. All participants had been in one or more online relationships.

Prerequisites of the proposed study included the participants having actively engaged in one or more online intimate relationship which could have been initiated in any form of online communication method (for example, Facebook, an online dating site, a dating chatroom) to allow individuals a point of reference when answering questions in the interview. Participants needed to be comfortable communicating in English, which includes reading, writing (for email correspondence) and speaking as the study was conducted in English and the individual needed to be able to reason and reflect on their personal lives and their intimate online relationships. As this study aimed to explore online relationships in the South African context, participants were required to possess a South African passport or valid ID document. Finally, participants needed to have completed high school due to the complex nature of viewing and analysing online relationships and their subjective experience.

5.5. Data Collection

5.5.1. Setting. In the present study, four individuals participated in the research process. All of the research participants were initially contacted telephonically in order to obtain their consent for participating in the study and to schedule a suitable venue and time for the interview. All resided in Port Elizabeth and surrounds, and were selected on account of their relevance to the phenomenon under study as well as their willingness to participate. Open-ended conversations were conducted in a venue that suited the participant and that was amenable to recording conditions. Each interview took place in a private, casual setting that was conducive to the interview process. Three of the four interviews took place in the participants work office and one took place in the researchers' office space.

The use of recording devices ensured that data obtained through the interviews was accurately captured, such devices have no vested interest in the study and thus cannot distort the information obtained from the participants. The presence of a recording device can impact on the interview as participants may become shy or inhibited by the device (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To overcome this disadvantage, the recording device was only activated once the researcher was certain that the participants had reached an adequate level of comfort. The conversations were characterised by common intellectual curiosity and mutual respect. The duration of the conversations varied between 60 and 80 minutes. All four conversations spanned a total of 268 minutes (4 hours 46 minutes), with an average interview time of 67 minutes. Once the interviews were completed, the data was transcribed verbatim into text that was later used in the data analysis process.

5.5.2. Research procedure. Once the participant agreed to an interview the researcher ensured that the interview location was confidential and relaxed. Before the interview commenced, the researcher established rapport by engaging in casual conversation about common interests such as the news, weather or the latest sport results. Once rapport was established the researcher reiterated the purpose of the interview in light of the goals of the study as well as the role of the participant and researcher. The participant was provided with the biographical questionnaire (Appendix D), a consent form (Appendix B) as well as a letter detailing the study (Appendix C). Opportunity was then provided to each of the participants to ask any questions and to verify their role in the study. The researcher then proceeded to conduct a conversation with the participant. Once the interview was completed the researcher summarised the purpose of the study and provided the participants an opportunity to ask any questions.

Following a preliminary analysis of the data obtained through the interviews, each participant was contacted telephonically to verify the content of the interview. This telephonic discussion also provided the participants with an opportunity to make adaptations and additions to the information that they provided in the interview. Following data verification, the information obtained through the interviews were simultaneously analysed by the researcher as well as an independent research psychologist with expertise in qualitative research methods. The verification of the data by an independent research psychologist ensured the integrity of the results obtained from the researcher's analysis.

On completion of the analysis, the participants were provided with written feedback on the study's findings. The feedback also provided an opportunity for each research participant to be contacted by the researcher during which they could reflect on their involvement in the study. In addition to this, the feedback provided the researcher with an opportunity to provide relevant referrals for psychological services to the participants had they deemed it to be necessary, which it was not.

5.5.3. Biographical questionnaire. A short biographical questionnaire (included in Appendix D) developed by the researcher, was included in the study for all participants to complete. The questionnaire included several items to enrich the findings of the study by enabling a more detailed description of the participants. These included the participants' gender, age, nationality, and ethnic group. Some items were included in order to more fully explore the participant's online relationship status and history. These included questions pertaining to the duration of the online relationships, the number of hours per week spent in contact with their online partners, as well as the nature of the

online relationships. All the questions in the biographical questionnaire were closed questions, making them suitable for generating some statistical data regarding the participants of the study. No data was analysed for the purposes of drawing conclusions relating to the research aims.

5.5.4. Semi structured interviews. The semi structured interview involves an informal interactive process that allows the researcher to gain a detailed picture of a participant's beliefs, perceptions or accounts of particular phenomena (de Vos et al., 2011; Moustakas, 1994). As the phenomenological approach requires the researcher to thoroughly acquire detailed information, the optimal manner to collect data is through a semi structured interview.

Interviews are particularly suitable for researching romantic online relationships since they can equally address past events and future expectations, and can also include those contacts that remain hidden to observation. In interviews, direct dialogue is established between the researcher and the respondent. Semi structured interviews can be conducted in a variety of contexts, including, face-to-face, telephonic, online in a chatroom, or via email. The researcher developed a set of predetermined questions aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the participant's experiences which were then explored or modified in the light of the participant's response. The interview guide for the present study is included as Appendix E and was developed according to pertinent areas identified through a review of the literature.

Through the use of semi structured interviews the researcher was able to probe responses from individuals' initial answers and hereby gain a heightened sense of the individual's experiences (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). The semi structured

interviews utilised in the study allowed the researcher the flexibility to gain insight into the phenomena of online dating while still ensuring that the essence of the aim of the study was not lost. The effectiveness of a semi-structured interview is dependent on the rapport that the researcher establishes with the participant. This rapport was established by conducting the interviews in a neutral and comfortable environment, aided by the researcher's expertise, as a Registered Counsellor, to effectively create an environment where the participants felt at ease as well as to fully engage with the participant using intuition to gain a sense of the participants comfort level. This rapport was further maintained during the interview by ensuring that the role of the researcher did not become prominent during the conversation (de Vos et al., 2011), the researcher instead maintained a casual, easy conversation that flowed and allowed the participant to fully express their narrative.

5.6. Data Analysis Procedure

Due to the qualitative nature of the present study, data analysis was a non-numerical examination and analysis of collected data with the intention of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationship (de Vos et al., 2011). As a phenomenological approach does not include a series of techniques, the understanding of phenomenological processes was incorporated into the study and provided guidance in terms of research design. The understanding of this phenomenological approach was also used to ensure the integrity of the phenomenon being investigated. The researcher maintained a reflective diary containing initial thoughts regarding the themes and links of the data defining the research question. The researcher's own personal thoughts and ideas regarding the data were also noted in the diary (an example is included as Appendix F)

throughout the research process and was later used during the data analysis. This ensured transparency and trustworthiness. The ultimate goal was to accurately express the intended meaning of the individual's experience in articulate psychological statements.

Tesch's model of content analysis, a systematic eight-step approach to data analysis (Tesch, 1990), was used during data analysis. First the transcripts were read through as a whole so that the researcher could become familiar with the sense of what the participant was experiencing (Poggenpoel, 1998). Some major themes and interesting links to the chosen theories started to emerge and were noted in the researcher's reflective diary. Next, the underlying meaning of the participants' responses was determined by examining the questionnaires individually. Thoughts were noted as the researcher read through the questionnaires in no particular order (Tesch, 1990).

The themes that emerged during this process were eventually listed and sorted into main themes, unique themes and remaining themes. Codes were developed for each theme and noted next to relevant segments in the data. These subthemes were then sorted into a smaller number of main themes and then into descriptive categories so that data could be relevantly grouped together. Categories were abbreviated and the codes that belonged to each category were numbered (Tesch, 1990). This process of generating subthemes, themes and categories requires a great deal of creativity and analytical thinking (Poggenpoel, 1998), and the researcher relied heavily on theoretical knowledge during this step.

Next a preliminary analysis was done on each individual category by assembling all the data relevant to that category in one place. The researcher was prepared to recode the existing data if it became necessary (Tesch, 1990). By considering alternative

explanations for the findings the researcher refutes her initial thoughts and may end up reworking the categories (Poggenpoel, 1998). The categories were chosen based on their relevance in terms of romantic relationships and their dynamics in the online context. The relevance of these categories to the scope of the study was decided by referring to the theory discussed earlier in this study. The danger with relying on established theory in qualitative, exploratory research is that the researcher may become partial in favour of the theory (Poggenpoel, 1998). The researcher ensured that the research was analysed unbiasedly by maintaining the principles of phenomenology throughout the research process.

5.7. Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four principles to ensure the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility refers to the findings being true for the aims of the study and the population being studied. Instead of a focus on internal validity, the focus is on the accurate communication of the multiple subjective realities presented by participants. For a study to be credible the findings must be true to the participants (Guba, 1981). This principle is closely linked to the nature of transcendental phenomenological research in which the aim of the study is to accurately describe the phenomenon within the parameters and theoretical frameworks that it occurs (de Vos et al., 2005). The principle of credibility was achieved in the current study by providing an accurate and detailed description of the lived experience of online relationships that was later verified by the research participants. In addition to this, the researcher used the information obtained

from the participants to account for the dynamic complexities and variables pertaining to relationships in an online context.

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be transferred onto other contexts or groups. Many theorists argue that generalisability is an illusion in qualitative research due to the small sample size and the highly specific nature of each study's sample and context (de Vos et al., 2011). Guba (1981) does, however, refer to the applicability or transferability of a study. The degree of similarity and the goodness of fit found in other contexts and with other populations are important when deciding whether a qualitative study is transferable. The current study provided a rich and detailed description of the findings that could be used in comparisons for future studies maintaining the transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, data obtained from the participants was triangulated with theoretical frameworks that were previously identified.

Dependability refers to the extent to which similar studies would reach similar findings for the same population. This is similar to the concept of reliability in quantitative research, and may not be as applicable to qualitative research. This is due to the notion that multiple subjective realities exist and this may limit the stability or sameness of findings between settings (Guba, 1981). This principle is associated with the phenomenological understanding that all experiences occur as part of the individual's social construction of reality thus allowing the possibility of multiple realities. As a result of this perspective, the principle of dependability is integrated into qualitative studies to acknowledge changes in the social world that may make replication of the study difficult (Denscombe, 2003). In the present study, the researcher made use of supervision with

two experienced research supervisors throughout the research procedure and a secondary coder in the data analysis phase of the research. According to Silverman (2005), high reliability is reached if two researchers sort data into categories in the same way. The researcher also remained open to the constant evolving nature of research regarding online relationships as well as the new methods of online dating that are constantly being discovered. The researcher attended various lectures and workshops with the subject of online interaction and engaged with professionals in these contexts to ensure the research was prevalent.

Conformability refers to the scientific and objective nature of the findings. This freedom from bias means that the researcher does not allow personal opinions, preconceptions, or assumptions to influence the analysis of the participants' responses. In this way the data obtained and findings reached were a reflection only of the participants' views within the context of the research conditions (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The established theory on the research topic may cause the researcher to view the data through the lens of that theory, but at the same time challenges the assumptions held by the researcher before collecting data. The research supervisors were relied on to challenge the researcher's conclusions. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), impartiality is achieved when credibility and transferability are established.

5.8. Ethical Considerations

Research ethics provide the researcher with guidelines to establish a balance between values, the pursuit of knowledge and the rights of those involved in the research study. Research should be based on mutual trust, acceptance, cooperation, promises, and well accepted conventions and expectations between all parties involved (de Vos et al.,

2011). The present researcher referred to the American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines for the use and treatment of human research participants in research (2002). During the study the researcher ensured the following ethical constituents: Institutional approval; informed consent through which deception is avoided; avoidance of harm to participants; maintaining confidentiality; anonymity and privacy of participants; accurate dissemination of findings; and maintaining competence within the researcher's professional role.

5.8.1. Institutional approval. A proposal of the present study was presented to the Psychology Department of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). Once departmental approval was gained, approval for the study was obtained from the Faculty of Research, Innovation and Technology Committee (FRTI).

5.8.2. Informed Consent. Participants were required to sign a consent form before partaking in the study. The information outlined in the consent form was in accordance with guidelines for conducting ethical qualitative research and highlighted the following: (1) the purpose of the research and details of the researcher; (2) the research procedures; (3) potential risk from participation in the study, (4) confidentiality and limits to confidentiality; (5) access to the study and dissemination of findings; and (6) confirmation regarding voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study (de Vos, et.al, 2011). This consent form was kept separate from the data in the study to ensure confidentiality. The consent form was presented in a language that was understood by all the participants and consent was voluntary. The consent form is included as Appendix B.

5.8.3 Avoidance of deception. Deception refers to misleading participants, deliberately misrepresenting facts or withholding information to participants (de Vos et al., 2011). Thus, deception involves misleading the participants in such a way that they are unaware of the nature of the study, the financial sponsoring of the study, or how the findings will be used. Accordingly, the researcher provided the participants with sufficient information regarding the study to allow them to make an informed decision.

5.8.4. Avoidance of harm. When investigating sensitive issues in a qualitative study, the researcher must be aware of the potential impact of the questions on the research participants (de Vos et al., 2011). No potential psychological risks were identified by the researcher prior to conducting the interviews. During the interviews the researcher ensured that the discussion did not cause psychological discomfort or distress to the research participants. This was accomplished by observing the non-verbal cues of the research participants. When any distress or discomfort was identified by the researcher, the conversation was guided in a manner that ensured the reduction of discomfort or distress of the participant.

5.8.5. Privacy and confidentiality. A primary consideration in the protection of a participant's interests and wellbeing is the protection of their identity (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Privacy can be maintained by ensuring the anonymity of the research participants through the use of pseudonyms and confidentiality of information provided by the research participants (de Vos et al., 2011). Identifiable personal information was only known to the researcher. The research participant's privacy was ensured through the use of pseudonyms that were standardised for all research participants, thus excluding all personal references. The storage of the research data containing identifiable information

was securely maintained by the researcher in a secured filing cabinet for the duration of the study, as well as for six years subsequently and access was restricted to the researcher.

5.8.6. Accurate dissemination of findings. The findings of a study must be introduced to the reading public in written form; otherwise even a highly scientific investigation may mean very little and may not be viewed as research (de Vos et al., 2011). The final research study will be submitted in the form of a dissertation in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Magister Artium (Research Psychology). The dissertation will be submitted to the South Campus library of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) and an article will be published on the findings of the present study. The findings of the study will be made available via email to participants after the dissertation has been completed.

5.8.7. Competence of the researcher. Researchers are ethically obliged to ensure that they are competent and adequately skilled to undertake the proposed research study (de Vos, et.al, 2011). The researcher worked according to the research proposal under the guidance and supervision of two experienced research supervisors. Furthermore, the researcher maintained integrity throughout the research process and followed the necessary steps to prevent ethical misconduct. The researcher remained faithful to the study through a personal commitment to honestly investigate all information obtained from the study and by dedication to the accurate investigation of the phenomenon. The researcher is a Registered Counsellor in private practice and is bound by a code of ethics enforced by the Health Professions Council of South Africa which was transferred and applied in the study. She furthermore applied her experience of establishing relationships

and trust in a therapeutic setting to the interview process. This allowed the researcher to gain the trust of the participants and to elicit in depth information. This experience also allowed the researcher to determine whether participants were comfortable with both the questions and their answers as well as whether they needed additional debriefing.

5.8.8. Debriefing. Overall, the intent of debriefing is to reduce or minimise harmful effects (de Vos et al., 2011). Debriefing is an important part of the research process and was implemented in the present research after the conversations took place. Research participants were given the opportunity to rectify any misconceptions that might have arisen. At this point in time, research participants were asked to provide any information about the interview process that they felt was not interpreted correctly or the meaning assigned was not accurate. The researcher ensured that all participants exited the interview with their questions answered and the underlying meaning of the information conveyed and accurately communicated.

5.9. Conclusion

This chapter explored the methodology underlying the present study. A qualitative framework was incorporated using phenomenology as the researcher's theoretical structure. The ideals of phenomenology were incorporated into the researcher's entire process providing a methodical and disciplined manner for the source of knowledge, with an emphasis on the discovery of the essences of the participants experience of online relationships.

The data collection method of semi-structured interviews was guided by the phenomenological principle ensuring that the researcher gained an in-depth idea of the

lived experiences of the participants regarding their intimate online relationships. The chapter also provided insight into the ethical considerations that the study took into consideration. The review of the data processing and analysis procedures emphasised the insight into the relevant models that were incorporated into the research methodology. Implementing this methodology ensured that the findings that are discussed in the next chapter were obtained through methods that enhanced the trustworthiness of the research.

Chapter 6

Findings and Discussion

6.1. Introduction

A phenomenological study aims to describe the meaning of the lived experiences of an individual about a phenomenon. Through the use of a transcendental phenomenological approach the phenomena was observed, understood and reflected upon to create a representation of online relationships. Through the application of the four phenomenological processes discussed in the previous chapter, (1) epoche, (2) phenomenological reduction, (3) imaginative variation, and (4) synthesis of meanings, an image of the lived experience of online relationships was depicted. The present researcher also set aside prejudgments, bracketing her experiences and relied on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain an in-depth idea of the respondent's online relationships. In this chapter, the findings of the study as well as a discussion of these findings are provided.

6.2. Operationalisation of the Study

The participants of the present study were selected according to predetermined criteria through the use of a biographical questionnaire. All participants resided in Port Elizabeth and were selected based on their relevance to the phenomenon being studied and their willingness to partake. Following selection, each individual participated in a one-to-one semi-structured interview. Open ended conversations that were unstructured allowed for the participants personal perception and freedom to express their story, as opposed to attempting to produce an objective record of the phenomenon. Each interview

took place in a private, casual setting that was conducive to the interview process. The conversations were characterised by common intellectual curiosity and mutual respect. All four interviews were conducted in English, all four conversations spanned a total of 268 minutes (4 hours 46 minutes), with an average interview time of 67 minutes. An interview schedule (Appendix E) consisted of seven questions that were used to initiate exploration into the core aspects of online dating. These questions provided guidance to the researcher but were not prescriptive as each participant was allowed to influence the flow of the dialogue. Furthermore, adherence to the principle of *epoché* allowed for flexibility within the interviews and provided the opportunity for new themes to emerge (Moustakas, 1994). Each interview was recorded with the participants consent and following the completion of each interview, the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. The transcription process allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data.

The researcher proceeded to use Tesch's (1990) eight steps to actualise the process of phenomenological reduction during data analysis. First the researcher read through each transcription a few times to develop a sense of the entire phenomena being studied via the interviews. The researcher then selected one transcription and while reading through it noted significant categories or meanings that emerged. This step was repeated with the remaining three transcripts. Through the review of main categories that emerged during the reading, the researcher developed a list of main themes that emerged from the data. The data was then reviewed and sub-themes were organised under the main themes previously identified. Through a review of the main themes and sub-themes, the researcher identified the most descriptive title for each theme. These sub themes were reviewed in an attempt to reduce the number into fewer descriptive main themes. Once

the final descriptive themes were established, the researcher grouped all data pertaining to each theme into a structured category. To ensure the accuracy of this procedure, the transcribed interviews were simultaneously analysed by an independent research psychologist with experience and expertise in qualitative research methodology. The findings of each analysis was then compared to ensure consistency between the main themes that emerged from each researcher's analysis. Following a comparison and agreement of themes emerging from the data, the researcher contacted each participant telephonically to verify the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Through the process of imaginative variation the themes were assembled into four central categories that emerged from the data analysis. These included (1) online dating and relating, (2) dynamics of online dating, (3) cyberlove, and, (4) online disclosure. The data was then reviewed and through imaginative variation organised into sub-themes to provide structural and textural contextualisation. A biographical description of the participants provided further contextualisation of the world of online relationships.

6.3. Biographical Description of the Participants

Smith (2003) is of the opinion that a description of research participants is a fundamental part of the findings of a qualitative study. Table 1 provides a description of the participants in terms of demographic variables. The table aims to contextualise the present study. Knowledge of each participant's biographical information expands the potential insight and understanding of the meanings that could potentially be attached to individuals who engage in online relationships. This information was gained from the biographical questionnaire.

The four participants were White South Africans. It is important to note this as the beliefs and values of a cultural group could influence the perception of individuals regarding online relationships. All participants had actively engaged in one or more online intimate relationships. All participants' relationships were initiated through online dating sites. The participants spent an average of 24 hours a week online. Three participants were female, all of whom were divorced. One participant was male and single. All participants were heterosexual, with their age ranging from 30-43 years. All participants had met their online partner face to face at some point.

Table 1: Demographic variables of participants

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Marital Status	Sexual Orientation	Average Hours Spent Online Per Week
1	Female	White	42	Divorced	Heterosexual	21
2	Female	White	43	Divorced- (Married online partner)	Heterosexual	28
3	Female	White	40	Divorced	Heterosexual	28
4	Male	White	30	Single	Heterosexual	21

The table illustrates variables such as gender, age, race, sexual orientation and criteria that are prevalent to online dating. The questionnaire aimed to enrich the findings of the study by enabling a more detailed description of the participants.

To provide textural and structural understanding of the lived experience of online relationships, the findings of the data analysis will be presented through the use of tables for each main category. Within these tables, the main themes and sub-themes of each category will be highlighted. The phenomena of online dating will be explored through a psychological perspective in which common factors are highlighted to create an in depth understanding.

6.4. Findings and Discussion

The data analysis produced four main categories in the lived experience of online relationships. These included, (1) dynamics of online dating, (2) online dating and relating, (3) cyberlove, and, (4) language of love: Online self- disclosure. Within these four categories, the main themes that emerged provided a structural understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Further analysis produced sub-themes that created a textural understanding of this phenomena. The findings of the present study will be discussed according to the themes and sub themes that emerged within each main category as illustrated in table 2.

6.4.1. Dynamics of online dating .The first main category focuses on the participant's perception of the dynamics that occur while engaging in online relationships. This category provides a detailed view of the various elements that transpired during the participant's time in the online world. Within this main category seven themes emerged that highlighted the detailed aspects of which online dating comprises of.

Table 2: The four main categories of online relationships

Category	Main Theme
Dynamics of online dating	Motivation for using a dating site Triple A of online dating Unnatural world of online relationships Addictiveness of online dating Sense of control Stigma of online dating Online rejection
Online dating and relating	Online relationship development Self-presentation online Online match making Duration of online relationships Online dating rules Online persona vs real world individual Moving from online to offline Meeting Face to Face
Cyberlove	Intimacy Passion Commitment Online love vs offline love
Language of love- Online self-disclosure	Intimate Disclosure Constant Connection Deception/Dishonesty

These included (1) The motivation for using a dating site, (2) triple A of online dating, (3) the unnatural world of online dating, (4) the addictiveness of online dating, (5) the sense of control online dating provides, (6) the perceived stigma of online dating, (7) online rejection. These themes and the subthemes are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Category one: The dynamics of online dating

Theme	Subtheme	Participant
1. Motivation for using a dating site	Affiliation need	1,2,3,4
	Age	1,2,3
	Marital Status	1,2,3
	Location	1,2,3,4
	Increased Dating Pool	2,3,4
	Time Constraints	1,2,3,4
	Self Esteem	1,2,3,4
2. Triple A of online dating	Affordability	1,2,3,4
	Anonymity	1,2,3,4
	Accessibility	1,2,3,4
	Safety	2,3,4
3. Unnatural world of online relationships		1,2,4
4. Addictiveness of online dating	Egotism	1,2,3,4
	Feelings of excitement	1,2,4
5. Sense of control online dating provides	Control of self presentation	1,2,3,4
	Construct, reconstruct and delete communication	1,2,3,4
	Choice with whom to engage	1,2,3,4
6. Stigma of online dating		2,3,4
7. Online rejection		1,2,3,4

6.4.1.1. Motivation for using a dating site. All the participants conveyed a need to form lasting intimate relationships indicating that this is a primary motivation for joining an online dating site. The participant's descriptions conveyed seven subthemes as motivations for using a dating site, the primary motivation being the need for affiliation

which was influenced by other factors including; their age, location, marital status, the time constraints experienced, as well the need to increase the dating pool. All four participants also mentioned that low self-esteem was a reason many felt that online dating was more suited for them. An individual who engages in online dating is looking to enter into a relationship, when an individual registers for an online dating site, it indicates that they are ready to meet a partner on the Internet and engage in a relationship (Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015).

The need to affiliate or feel a sense of belonging is a powerful, fundamental, and pervasive motivation (Taylor et al., 2006). Individuals are increasingly turning to the Internet to meet important social and psychological needs, including affiliation and intimacy needs. The occurrence of fulfilling intimate relationships in an individual's life is one of the strongest predictors of happiness and emotional well-being and this is particularly relevant to online environments where large numbers of individuals can conveniently meet and interact in a variety of online social settings (McKenna & Bargh, 1999).

Participants all agreed that this need was the major motivation for them seeking out partners online. A need to connect and form intimate relationships was a key factor as to why the participants were motivated to try online dating as a new avenue to meet individuals. The need to belong to a group with similar interests and goals, as well as self-esteem needs or a sense of self-worth, are more widely met via the Internet due to the vast number of channels available to connect with individuals from around the globe (McKenna & Bargh, 1999).

P2: *I decided I didn't want to be on my own...I was quite adamant that I wanted to try find someone else.*

P3: *...it's what motivated me to start chatting to people online. I was just really bored and I wanted to meet new people and ja, see what was out there.*

Three of the four participants reported that a combination of their age and marital status played a major role in their decision to pursue online dating. These three participants were above 40 and all divorced. Traditionally in face to face situations most individuals meet their potential partners in social circles, such as their school, office or friendship circles (Rosenfield & Thomas, 2012). The three divorced participants reported that due to them being divorced their social circle comprised of married couples or other divorced friends none of which were appropriate mate choices. All the participants noted that their age influenced the choice of places and individuals they were exposed to.

P3: *I have been divorced for a long time, and you know I'm 40 this year, so you know at our age it's incredibly difficult to meet new people, and that's what stimulated the whole thing and why I went online*

P2: *I got divorced and I am very shy.*

Many factors predict whether individuals are likely to seek information about dating sites, some of which are similar to those that predict whether individuals are likely to seek information about ways to meet potential partners offline. The two strongest predictors of engaging in online dating are being an Internet user and being single (Finkel, et al., 2012).

The motivation to use Internet dating was also influenced by the geographical location of the participants. All of the participants felt that their geographical location

inhibited them from meeting new individuals and the Internet allowed them to connect with individuals from other parts of Port Elizabeth. Participants reported that even in a small city like Port Elizabeth they were only exposed to parts of it and had been meeting the same individuals within their circles. Internet dating allowed them to meet individuals who they usually would not engage with.

P4: Well I live in a small town outside of PE and there is really no options.

P3: ..so great because it opens up other spheres of social circles in PE that maybe you have never had any interactions with. Generally speaking it's good to meet new people outside of your circle because it's very difficult to do that especially here.

P1: well when was the last time you were single in PE? There is just no one there and I mean where do you go? Where do you meet people. I mean I am not young I can't meet people in a bar.

Participants indicated that the culmination of the previously mentioned aspects (age, marital status, and geographical location), didn't allow them to meet and engage with potential dating partners. The Internet and specifically online dating provided participants with a new context in which to meet potential partners. Online dating increased the participants dating pool by overcoming potentially inhibiting factors such as shyness, social awkwardness and proximity issues and allowed them to meet new partners. Changes to the wider social context means individuals have less time, space, and access to conventional forms of dating, however, they do have greater access to computers and the Internet which allows individuals the opportunity to connect (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). Individuals who experience difficulty in finding romantic partners especially utilise the Internet for finding potential partners, particularly if they

lack established social networks or if their social encounters are largely saturated with individuals who are not suitable romantic partners (Finkel et al., 2012).

P1: *Going online you have kind of more choice, I mean people my age tend not to go out and stay with their friends on weekends.*

P2: *I am not a party animal either so I don't want to go out jolling and going to bars I hate that whole scene*

P4: *... you need a place to access people and that's what the Internet does.*

P3: *... I think it's just having a lack of facility to meet people*

All four participants indicated that due to time constraints they struggled to meet new partners face to face. Engaging in online dating allows individuals who report time constraints an opportunity for romance (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006). The current participants indicated that time restraints included work and family commitments and agreed that the Internet allowed them instant access to potential partners and the ability to communicate when it suited them.

P4: *I rarely have time to spend outside my office and mountain biking to meet new people. So online was the easiest way to meet new people.*

P1: *.....And for me, it's easier too, I have a busy schedule*

The lack of physical restriction the Internet provides allows individuals to connect to others from any place around the world, at any time, which provides for a greater source of social connection by allowing individuals an increased opportunity to connect (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006; Ling Huang & Ching Yang, 2013; McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). The Internet can provide connection and community, and may facilitate romance, especially for individuals with limited options such as the elderly,

individuals with disabilities, or those isolated by distance or time limitations (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006).

The participants noted that online they were less aware of their shyness, self-consciousness, and social anxiety, and this motivated them to explore online dating. This theme was linked to the anonymity that online dating affords. The Internet can be liberating for those who have social anxiety in forming interpersonal relationships offline as it provides individuals with a space to explore their social awkwardness without any real social consequences, individuals can test the boundaries of their relationship skills safely from behind a computer screen (Kang & Hoffman, 2011).

P4: *Because I am damn shy I would I would never be able to just walk up to someone and just start chatting*

P2: *I was full of confidence online but in reality I was confident about myself at all.*

Shy individuals might be more willing to engage in online interactions than offline interactions, given their discomfort in social situations (Orr et al., 2009). In general, when communicating online, individuals are less aware of potentially inhibiting factors such as shyness, self-consciousness, and social anxiety that can often be stressful for some when trying to form offline interpersonal relationships (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Whitty & Carr, 2006).

Each participant in the current study agreed that limited social options due to shyness was a major problem when searching for a potential partner offline. By going online to search for a potential partner they were afforded the opportunity of finding partners who they wouldn't normally have been exposed to and this motivated them to

join a dating site. Finkel et al., (2012) found that online dating is especially prevalent among individuals who have a minority sexual orientation, who have recently moved to a new area or experienced a breakup, who are middle-aged rather than young-adult, who are divorced rather than never-married, who have limited time to meet potential partners because of factors such as working long hours, or being a single parent, or who have lost interest in the bar scene and lack insight into or options for where they can meet singles they find attractive in their age range.

6.4.1.2. The triple A of online dating. The triple A factors namely affordability, anonymity and accessibility (Leiblum, 1997) emerged in all of the participants accounts of online dating. All of the participants initiated online relationships through paid dating sites, the affordability component was only mentioned briefly.

Anonymity was a major factor in all of the participant's accounts of online dating. "In one line of text, an individual can transmit confessional self-disclosure while remaining anonymous" (Lieblum, 1997; p. 2). All participants reported that the capability to construct and control their self-presentation online was important and contributed to their overall experience online. The ability to control self-presentation online influences all aspects (including intimacy and disclosure) of an individual's dating experience (Heino, Ellison & Gibbs, 2010). Participants felt freer to engage in communication that was less filtered because they were as one participant stated (P4): "Behind a screen." Participants mentioned they felt freer to express aspects of themselves they would usually keep hidden and were more confident to share information they wouldn't normally share face to face. Self-disclosure is highly variable online, many individuals report feeling freer to make themselves known within the safety of the anonymity (Zaczek & Bonn,

2006). There is considerable overlap between the ability to remain anonymous and the association of intimate self-disclosure. The idea that individuals have less to lose online allows them to share intimate and often risky information. If this disclosure is reciprocated, it results in intimacy.

P1:*because you using your online profile and your alias and then it became quite easy*

P2:*because people are hiding behind a persona they don't mind really what they say or they are willing to share their experiences*

P4: *You can say whatever you want to say because you behind a screen, you hidden.*

P3:*because you behind that facade you're not answerable to anybody.*

Online anonymity is considered a major factor in self-disclosure online as it allows individuals to disclose information without the fear of rejection or ridicule because they feel hidden behind a screen (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Ruppel, 2014). In a study by Zaczek and Bonn (2006) participants reported feeling freer to make themselves known within the safety of the anonymity. Van Staden (2010) found that anonymity protected individuals from being known and granted them freedom without consequences while socialising online. Anonymity was also seen to increase individuals' ability to deceive. Participants in the current study indicated that while anonymity allowed them to be hidden it also meant their partner was hidden, which raised concerns about deception and whether the person was who they are portraying themselves to be. Individuals express concern that they may develop a relationship with a partner that they do not truthfully know due to the anonymity the Internet provides (Van Staden 2010).

The accessible and easy to use dating sites allowed participants in the current study to meet a wide range of individuals and allowed an avenue for romantic relationships to develop. All four participants reported that the accessibility of being able to use laptops and cell phones made it easy for them to communicate with their partners, the participants explained that it required very little effort, it had high controllability and was quicker than communicating in a face to face relationship. Participants also reported that they could communicate with their partners at any time without being concerned about interrupting their partner, since messages can be read and replied to when it is convenient. The accessibility of current modes of Internet access provides individuals with the ability to sustain their relationship by corresponding throughout the day (Cooper et. al, 2000).

P3: It's harder in real life for an older women to meet people but online it's so easy.

P2: We would talk to each other, text each other 50, 60 times a day ...it's so easy you just pull out a phone and type a message

Participants reported that they perceived online relationship formation safer than offline relationship formation. They reported less danger to dating online as they had more control of who to engage with.

P4: Well it's safer than going to a bar or club.

P2: ...also for a woman to go into a bar alone is ... where you can sit in front of a computer alone and see fifty guys without it being dangerous.

Couch (2007) found that online daters have varying techniques for perceiving, understanding, and managing risks associated with online dating. All participants' risk managed' their online dating experiences. Participants did not leave their experiences to

chance, luck or fate. Using computer-mediated communication such as synchronous chat can offer users a high level of control in their online interactions. For many users of computer-mediated communication, control is a key issue concerning why and how they use computer-mediated communication (Couch, 2007).

6.4.1.3. The unnatural world of online relationships. Individuals do not consider it possible to gain a deep sense of understanding and caring online due to the feeling of the context not being real (Van Staden, 2010). Without a physical context, individuals online are only able to access a portion of their relationship partners and humans need a complete tactile physical presence in order to make a lasting bond (Klein, 2013; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Three of the participants reported feeling as if dating online was not ‘real’, they reported that the idea that they did not know what the other individual looked like physically hampered them from perceiving the relationship as real and the majority of them only considered the relationship concrete after meeting face to face.

P4: *I mean online you have met the person but only like 10% of them. It's almost like you can't consider it real because you don't know if this person even exists.*

P2: *...we talked for a long time and it was weird. It's not a natural sort of environment because you developing a relationship with a person that you don't even know what he looks like*

P1: *I want to go to physical dating as quickly as possible. It seems more real then.*

Participants also reported sentiments as ‘abnormal’ and ‘unnatural’ when describing the intimacy and self-disclosure aspects of relationships. Due to the fact the relationship progressed so quickly, participants felt that this rapid and instant connection

to another person was considered an unrealistic aspect of the relationship. One participant (P4) described how it was impossible to feel intimacy or commitment because he couldn't perceive the person as real.

P4: you can't trust someone you haven't met, so I feel like you can't be intimate with someone that is online, how the hell can you be intimate with someone if you haven't met someone.

Another described her online relationships as unrealistic. It is interesting to note that throughout the interviews the participants spoke about their online relationships as tangible. When probed to explain in more detail about their world of online dating as a whole they often responded by reflecting on how they felt until they met their partner face to face. Once the participants had met the partner face to face the online relationship felt validated. The sense that online dating is somehow not real is bound up with notions of the cyberspace as being somehow separate, and disembodied from 'real life, however, the time and emotional investment individuals invest in online dating strongly suggests they want to feel embodied and want their interactions to be treated with honesty and respect, as the consequences are real and deeply personal (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008).

There was only one participant (P1) who described how she had one partner she never met face to face but considered herself to be in a relationship with him for over 6 months. After her discussion about her perception of love and relationships, she proceeded to describe the situation as "weird" and commented 'how stupid was I'. She repeatedly stated that 'you cannot be in a relationship with someone who is not real.'

P2: *I think the downside is... in a weird sort of way it's not realistic because you like in an instant intimate relationship*

P3: *...the Internet made you like instant friends.*

In a study by Van Staden (2010) participants reported experiencing the Internet as an environment that is separate and distinct from the offline environment, often referring to the offline environment as the 'real' world, with reference being made to the lack of face to face cues and limited access to 'real' world information. Participants in the current study also made reference to the fact that the relationships were 'instant' and this in turn made them perceive the relationship as unrealistic and unnatural. Henry-Waring and Barraket (2008) suggest that there is artificiality in Internet dating but concluded that this artificiality also occurs within conventional dating settings but that online dating is much more unfamiliar, untried and untested, which in turn could create the feeling of being unnatural.

6.4.1.4. The addictiveness of online dating. Three of the four participants reported a feeling of addictiveness when talking about their time on the online dating site. They reported a feeling of always having an impending message or a potential partner waiting and a feeling of ambiguity of not knowing when they might meet a new relationship interest. This created a feeling of anticipation and probability. Individuals feel as if online dating always has a potentiality, this combined with the accessibility of Internet dating and the instant gratification of being able to speak to anyone at any time, which is congruent with a postmodern lifestyle, emphasises the feeling of the next 'fix' (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008).

P2: *I went onto the Internet every day, first thing you do and there is a terrible saying but this is how I felt. I was looking for fresh meat.*

P3: *I went on often to see if anyone was interested*

P2: *And you become like obsessed with it and you need to find the next one to get that 'fix' you know*

Three of the participants also reported online dating addictiveness linked to their self-esteem. They enjoyed the attention and flirty comments because it made them feel good about themselves. This egotism made participants want to keep dating online and looking for new potential partners who would feed them praise and compliments.

P2: *...they say you are so beautiful and it was probably all nonsense but I didn't care because I was like I need this I need more. I need more....And you feed off it, you feed off it, and people get needy because they want you*

P4: *Obviously it's very exciting when someone contacts you and you have liked them or you have looked at their profile and now they looking at you and then they make contact kind of thing.*

P2 and P4 used the terms 'looking for fresh meat' and 'bait' to describe the feeling of looking for potential partners online and how addictive it became. There were always words such as 'exciting' and 'giddy' used by both participant P3 and P4 to describe the feeling when contacting a potential partner or being contacted by a potential partner.

P2: *I was looking for fresh meat. That's exactly how I felt, I needed to see who had the new profiles, oh I'm sick of you, I needed more*

P3: *It's exciting, you feel like ... oh, something might happen and that's a nice feeling.*

P4: *It's like fishing. So you throw your bait in and something nibbles and you get all excited and try and reel it in and see if you can catch it!*

6.4.1.5. Sense of control in online dating. All of the participants reported they could control their communication and presentation online with ease. Walther (1996) states that intimate social interaction online occurs because of the increased control afforded by synchronous, visually anonymous CMC. Participants in the current study reported that they could make decisions about when and how to disclose information about themselves as well as how to respond to messages in their own time, they also reported that they could decide how to disclose negative information and could construct messages and then reread them before sending them. Participants indicated that they regularly self-regulated the messages and liked the ability to save messages and to disconnect from conversations at any time they wanted. The controllability of CMC allows users the time to review and edit their messages and to consider responses (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997; Walther & Parks, 2002). Although controllability seems more important in asynchronous CMC, such as e-mail, it also applies to synchronous CMC, such as instant messages (Tidwell & Walther, 2002)

P4: *it was much easier online. It was awkward face to face and I had to think about what to say next and watch her to see if she liked what I was saying, I couldn't pause or say be right back and leave and get out of the conversation*

P2: *...you decide when to send the message and how to send it, face to face you say it and sometimes you can't think about what you saying or how you acting*

P4: *I mean I can reply whenever I want, I can say I'll be right back and go think about what to say back and you can delete a message and retype it in a different way...*

you can't do that with words once it's out its out. It's also very easy to just switch off and get of the situation, sort of just leave that conversation

Research has illustrated the deliberate level of control that individuals are able to exert in their self-presentation while engaging in online dating (Whitty, 2007). When online, individuals have the ability to edit and re-write their comments and conversations before actually pressing the enter key, thus giving users the feeling that they have control over their presentation of self as well as control over the other's perceptions of the self (Couch, 2007).

Control can also be extended outward as an individual can easily block interaction and conversations if they decide they do not want to continue, or they can leave the website, log off, or merely shut down their computer (Couch, 2007). All participants reported control over which potential partner they responded to online. They reported feeling comfortable and at ease with 'blocking' individuals or ignoring messages that didn't appeal to them. This ensured that they used their time online to pursue relationships that had potential as well as to filter out any individuals that didn't ascribe to their personal morals or beliefs.

P4: *...it's easy to just switch off and not reply to a person. It would be harder if I was at a bar and a girl walked up to me I wouldn't be able to say no but online its different*

P3: *Eventually she just took him off her profile and blocked him completely*

P1: *... in the end I just stopped communicating with him.*

6.4.1.5. The stigma of online dating. A study by Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) showed that most relationships that were formed online were not supported by the individual's offline social networks. This was true for participants of this study. All of the

participants were apprehensive of using an online dating site at first due to the negative perception of online dating by society. Two participants described being business women and were hesitant to put a profile picture on their profile for fear of the consequences of it influencing their businesses.

P3: *I was quite nervous about it because I am a business person and people would see me*

P4: *...and I kind of got to the point of I didn't really care if anyone knew if I was doing it or not. Initially there was such a thing around online dating, and I mean I first started online dating about 8 years ago, so, it was still really new and people were very wary of it. So initially I was very nervous of it and I was very careful about what I put on there.*

Participants were open to finding love online, however sharing their experiences with their family and friends produced anxiety and hesitancy. Disapproval from family and friends toward online romantic relationships may play a significant role in how online participants assess their relationship's possibility (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Initially participants were hesitant to divulge intimate information to the researcher, but as rapport and trust was established between the participants and the researcher, they became more open. The participants reported that they rarely told other individuals they were dating online for fear of social rejection and ridicule.

P2: *...they would think I'm insane.*

P4: *...She's still shy to say we met online I am not, I don't really care I mean now days everyone is either on a dating site, or Facebook stalking people*

Three participants reported that once their social system saw the effect of online dating in their lives they became more understanding and interested. Participants reported that some of their friends and family were motivated to try online dating and explore the

online relationship context. Individuals are frequently inspired to date online if they learn about friends or family members having positive experiences with online dating (Finkel et al., 2012)

P2: *They almost started living through me.*

P3: *...they see how happy I am that they are amaze*

6.4.1.6. Online rejection. All four participants reported that they still experienced rejection online, however, it was not the same as offline. The initial emotions experienced were humiliation and decreased self-confidence, but found that it was easier to recover from the ‘blow’ of rejection due to the fact that the individuals were anonymous.

Rejection online elicits the same emotions as offline rejection, namely embarrassment and lowered self-esteem, however, it is easier to manage and recover when compared to face to face situations. Rejection at first contact is not as personal as that of face to face interaction and it becomes easier to cope with because it has less of an impact due to the anonymity factor of online dating (Couch, Liamputtong & Pitts, 2012). Social distance plays a role by providing a buffering effect, especially when it comes to dealing with rejection online (McKenna et al., 2002; Whitty, 2003).

P2: *I mean I don't really deal well with rejection so online felt the same as if a girl did it face to face. I think it's a little less awkward because they don't have to see your reaction but it still feels the same...and when it happened to me it crushed me. Absolutely crushed me. I mean I had no self-confidence to start with.*

P3: *It was much easier to recover from the slump that came from rejection online because he actually didn't know who I was.*

Having discussed the dynamics of online dating, the theme of online dating and relating will be discussed next.

6.4.2. Online dating and relating. The second category focuses on the dynamics that occurred within the online relationships of the individuals. Within this category eight themes emerged that highlighted indepth aspects that online dating comprises of. These included (1) online relationship development, (2) self-presentation online, (3) online match making, (4) duration of online relationships, (5) online dating rules, (6) online persona versus the real world individual, (7) moving from online to offline, and, (8) meeting face to face. These themes and sub themes are depicted in Table 4.

Research suggests that the development of online relationships is multifaceted and complex and like all other social phenomena is bound by social contexts and cues (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). All of the participants in the current study agreed that dating online was a new approach to meeting individuals that took some time to comprehend and understand. One of the aims of the present study was to determine whether online relationships proceed through any concrete stages similar to offline relationships as proposed by Levinger (1980).

6.4.2.1. Online relationship development. From the stories of the participants a tangible process emerged that was mutual in all four interviews. Firstly Internet dating started with choosing a dating site and filling in forms online about oneself. The motivation for choosing a particular dating site varied from participant to participant, sites that required individuals to pay were common to all participants, with one participant (P3) citing that this helped keep the ‘riff raff’ away. Sites that were aimed at individuals within the Port Elizabeth area were also considered important by the participants. The replies in these initial forms would then filter potential partners on the site for them and these would appear on the participant’s profile.

Table 4: Category two: Online dating and relating

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Participants
1. Online relationship development	Relationship Stages	1,2,3,4
	Physical attraction	1,2,3,4
	Initial attraction	1,2,3,4
	Similarity	1,2,3,4
	Proximity	1,2,3,4
	Familiarity	2,3,4
2. Self presentation online	Extension of self/Positive version of self	1,2,3,4
	Selling yourself	2,3,4
3. Online match making	Filtering	1,2,3,4
	Cataloguing	2,3,4
	Secondary sources for investigating potential partners	1,2,3,4
	First message to potential partner	1,2,3,4
4. Duration of online relationships		1,2,3,4
5. Online dating rules	Unique rules exclusive to online dating	2,3,4
6. Online persona versus the real world Individual	Different potential partner when meeting face to face	1,2,3,4
	Easier to express self online	2,3,4
7. Moving from online to offline	Ultimate goal	1,2,3,4
	Move from dating site to texting then phone calls	1,2,3,4
	Person made tangible by meeting face to face	1,2,3,4
8. Meeting Face to Face	Physical chemistry	1,2,3,4
	Feelings of nervousness/social awkwardness	1,2,3,4
		1,2,3,4

The next step was to sift through potential partners' profiles, both the profile picture and the biography were deemed as important factors when choosing a potential partner.

Once the participant had chosen a potential partner from the 'catalogue', they would then initiate contact with them by sending them a message, which was premeditated and was the same message for every potential partner. During this stage a simultaneous 'background' check would occur, where the respondents would look for extra information via secondary sources to validate the potential partner. These sources included Facebook, mutual friends, and Internet searches. The participants would concurrently repeat this process with more than one individual. If the response from the potential partner proved negative, the participant would then revert to the 'cataloguing' phase and cycle through the process again. If the potential partner's response was positive the participant would then engage in email communication with the individual and go through a stage of introductions and disclosure. The duration of these conversations would last between 2 to 4 weeks.

Once the individual has established an online relationship and both intimacy and trust had occurred, the participant would then meet face to face. The participant's ultimate goal was to meet offline to see if the relationship could progress any further. Once the respondents met face to face and the outcome of this meeting proved positive, a mutual agreement to remove both parties' profiles from the site was made as a form of commitment to each other (discussed in detail later in the chapter). If the outcome was negative the individual would return to the cataloguing phase or pursue the other individuals with whom they had contact with. This is congruent with Finkel et al., (2012)

who proposed a nine step relationship model based on individuals who engaged in online dating sites. The focus of the present study however was aimed at determining whether any unique social dynamics occurred during this relationship development online.

Traditionally, individuals have developed conventional social mechanisms (Initial attraction, proximity and familiarity, and similarity) to deduce whether they are attracted to a potential partner (du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw, 2008). The present study found these aspects occur in a unique way online.

The present author notes that physical attractiveness and initial attraction were very interesting phenomena that was revealed in the participant's stories. All of the participants agreed that the profile photo was one of the most important aspects when looking for potential partners.

P4: ...that there definitely has to be a physical attraction before I meet with them um...

P1: ...when I'm scrolling through the pictures they need to stand out to me.

P3: So, it does actually have a lot to do with that physical thing to start with, I think that's the first port of call, I think everybody sort of gets, they see someone that's quite nice and that appeals to them and then they start chatting

The perception was that if the partner had a profile picture they were more 'real' and genuine and the participants felt they were talking to a real person instead of a computer screen. In addition, the assumption was made that if they had a relatively attractive profile photo the relationship would progress to the next stage. This is an interesting concept as it is linked with deception and self-presentation online. Participants admitted to personally putting their best profile photo on the site but didn't consider this unrealistic positive portrayal when looking for potential partners.

Individuals do not only rely on physical attributes but rather a combination of biographical information, autobiography, style of communication, and profile picture initially attracts them to an individual (Baker, 2008; Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts, 2012). In meeting online, the more important shared thoughts and emotions are, the less important looks or physical attraction become. More durable relationships may result from the focus upon nonphysical factors (Baker, 2008). In a culture that emphasises physical appearance, the Internet affords a different way of developing initial attraction (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997; Ruppel, 2014). One participant (P2) described how because the dating site asked certain questions with a limited range of answers she would look for individuals with certain answers. Another (P3) said that if someone contacted her and she did not like their picture she would talk to them first for a while to get a sense of who they were before deciding that she did not like them.

P1: ...I think their looks are important and a combination of their profile and how they match up to you and what you looking for

P3: but I ended up chatting to a lot of people that didn't appeal to me physically either. So just because their profiles were really nice and they sounded like really nice solid individuals, decent people.

P1: There wasn't anything much to look at and, he was nice in the way he spoke and he just seemed very nice.

This is contradictory to offline relationship development, where physical attraction is the primary source of appeal and very rarely will someone engage and explore another individual if there is no physical attraction (Finkel et al., 2012). The importance of physical attractiveness in CMC, as a relationship determinant, is minimised by the ability to know someone through intense mutual self-disclosure and

intimate sharing of personal information such as dreams, ideals, and future goals (Merkle & Richardson, 1999).

Social dynamics such as proximity, familiarity, and social cues have an influence on relationship formation online, but there is no conclusive evidence that explains the actual process of online relationship development (McKenna et al., 2002; Ruppel, 2014; Whitty, 2003).

Similarity online is an interesting concept as the participants in the current study noted that individuals who sign up for online dating sites already have a similar interest and goal. The more specific a meeting place is online the more common interests will be shared by the individuals (Baker, 2008). This creates an automatic acceptance of others. Similar interests, values, beliefs, ideals, and attitudes between potential partners is a very important feature in interpersonal attraction (du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw, 2008). With regard to online relationships, research points to attraction being highest when the partner is perceived as being both physically attractive and attitudinally similar to oneself (Brehm, 1992; Taylor et al., 2006).

The current study's participants reported that information about a person's beliefs, interests, religious views and biographical data was available in the profiles, consequently participants could decide whether they had a likeness with a potential partner before actually engaging with them. This is congruent with Heino, Ellison and Gibbs (2010) who state that online surface information is present for potential partners to see, this automatically increases the feeling of similarity. Despite the potential for online dating to open up new and different partners outside existing norms and conventions,

many still use online dating as a way of finding someone similar rather than different (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008).

P3: *...there is kind of an acceptance of a different way of communicating. Everybody who is on the site is open to it and you don't feel like a freak.*

P4: *I mean in my criteria I state I am only looking for Caucasian partners that wouldn't happen in real life.*

P1: *...well I suppose it's actually part of your profile. So you know up front what they want and what they want from the relationship, you know marriage or just pen pals. It takes a lot of work out of it.*

Proximity is considered a fundamental cornerstone of developing romantic relationships offline (Taylor et al., 2006). Interaction between potential partners once depended on their proximity to each other, the Internet now facilitates nearly instantaneous communication via multiple channels without partners having to be in the same location and even without partners' conscious awareness (e.g., by allowing others to view one's information online) (Finkel et al., 2012). All four participants made it clear that in order to be able to meet face to face and continue the relationship, the component of proximity was important online. The development of a face-to-face, romantic relationship moves from the first encounter which is based on spatial proximity and physical attractiveness to the discovery of similarities and to self-disclosure (Merkle & Richardson, 1999). Online the current participants reported that they looked for dating sites or individuals who were in close proximity to them. When communicating with individuals outside of their spatial proximity they perceived it as a friendship and explained that the relationship could not advance to a romantic stage albeit that intimacy, passion and intimate disclosure was present.

P1: ... *I think we would have had a relationship had he not lived in Joburg.*

P4: *And for me like their location would also be non-negotiable*

Familiarity as defined by Taylor et al., (2006) is described as repeated exposure to an individual increases liking for that individual. There is some evidence that mere frequency of exposure can create a degree of attraction between individuals (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Ruppel, 2014). All four participants explained that due to the accessibility that the online world provides it is easy to constantly be connected with a potential partner and increase familiarity through disclosure. They reported that because they were constantly talking to individuals they got to know them on a deeper level and this ultimately enhanced intimacy.

P4: *...then as soon as we got back home we were talking to each other again via messages.*

P2: *We would talk to each other, text each other 50, 60 times a day*

P4: *...if you meet someone traditionally you might go on a date and then you might go on a date a week later and there is very little interaction in between. Then maybe a week later, you have separate meetings where you share information and chat. Whereas online dating you can sit a and chat to someone every night for a week the level of sharing of information and learning of the persons characteristic and qualities, you get a lot of that from how they communication online, which would probably take you much longer if you were going about it the normal way*

6.4.2.2. Self-representation online. An important aspect highlighted by the participants was the construction of themselves online. All of the participants reported that their profiles were carefully constructed and information was deliberately added or withheld to ensure that a positive image of themselves was portrayed. Online profiles are

fabricated to ensure that the individual is perceived positively and uniquely and is what the individual considers the most important aspects of themselves (Ling Huang & Ching Yang, 2013; McKenna & Bargh, 1999). All of the current participants explained their profiles as an extension of themselves and a way to attract future partners. Whitty (2007) describes the construction of these profiles of the ‘self’ as a dynamic process that is constantly changing as the individual transforms. This is congruent with the description of the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008) and how feedback effects the formation of panes on the window. As an individual receives feedback regarding their profile or their ‘online self’ they adapt and remodel themselves online, which is easy to achieve especially when compared to offline (Ruppel, 2014). Schouten, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) also makes note of the public self-consciousness which is the awareness of how one appears in the eyes of others. This could be linked to the secret pane on the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008), where individuals online are very aware of what information they share in order to be attractive to potential partners online.

This information constructed in online profiles is presented to ensure the individual is perceived positively and uniquely and is what the individual considers most important characteristics of themselves (Bargh, Mc Kenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Individuals on online dating sites generally try to find a balance between being their true selves and trying to appear more attractive and interesting (Van Staden, 2010). Participants in the current study explained that by being able to control how they portray themselves online they could attract the most suitable partner.

P1: *..your profile is who you are online*

P2: *So you have to think of a name for yourself so my name is Sally because I loved the movie it came from...I felt like I evolved during this whole experience because how it worked out*

P3: *...because you now create this persona you putting yourself out there and what are people going to think? Are they going to see my photo and think ag shame she's such a loser*

Controllability allows individuals more time and opportunity to optimise their self-presentation allowing them to control what part of themselves is portrayed online (Schouten, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). McKenna et al., (2002) found that when individuals convey their 'true' self online they develop strong Internet relationships and bring these relationships into their 'real' lives. Participants in the current study reported they were honest in their description about themselves, however they tended to try be as attractive to suitable partners as possible but didn't lie or use deliberate dishonesty because they would eventually end up meeting face to face.

In a study by Whitty (2008) participants indicated that descriptions of favourite interests and activities, one's personality, occupation, and hopes and dreams were also deemed important while others tried to make their profile stand out by adding humour or finding a way to make themselves appear unique even if this included telling 'little lies'. To establish close relationships within the constraints of the Internet, individuals use creative methods to identify themselves as 'cool' and trustworthy (Lawson & Leck, 2006). Current participants used words like 'selling' or 'quirky' when describing how they construct their personal profiles, also indicating a positive view toward potential partners who did the same. The information users present in their profiles tends to be positively skewed. One reason for this tendency is that people generally lack perfectly

accurate self-perceptions (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Perhaps a more common reason, however, is that individuals engage in strategic self-presentation when constructing their profiles (Ellison et al., 2006; Whitty, 2008)

P4: Online you have to sell yourself, they can't see you they don't know you

P2: There is a section you fill in describing yourself, you try be a little quirky about what you put on there so that it attracts people

6.4.2.3. Online match making. All of the participants in the study used online dating sites. What emerged from the reports from the participants was a definitive theme of filtering that the online dating site executes for the individuals. Individuals reported completing a list of questions that then filtered out potential partners and provided the individuals with the most suitable candidates. This made the process of finding a potential partner more streamlined and easier. Participants agreed that they did not look at other profiles if they were not recommended by the site and would often go online to see if there were any new matches for them.

P1: Now the thing is that when you first access the site you put in what you are looking for in a potential partner.

P2: ...on the dating site they have these parameters that you set that allow you to only connect with people you want....And his answers for that I thought wow what a romantic type of guy but then I realised when I went through the same process that there is only so many answers you can give.

P3: The other thing I think is really important is the way the site allows you to filter. I think that important because you can spend a lot of time wasting time and if they giving you parameters to complete that immediately brings up people that are a match to your preferences it definitely does make the process alto easier and a lot more stream lined

While participants considered the filtering element important to finding a potential partner, three of the participants described negative feelings toward answering the questions. These feelings linked to how others would perceive them and the fear of social judgement. There are social risks associated with online dating as site subscriptions involve posting information or graphics to an unknown audience (Close & Zinkhan, 2004).

P4: I hate filling in stuff and I hate describing myself. My vocabulary sucks and I don't know what I am like so it was actually really tedious.

After the dating site provided a list of suitable possible partners the individuals would engage in cataloguing. The metaphor of shopping characterises how users select which potential partners are interesting enough to make it past the profile browsing or cataloguing stage (Finkel et al., 2012). Heino et al., (2010) conceptualised online dating as 'relationshopping'. This process could be likened to paging through a shopping catalogue. In the current study the process of cataloguing can be described as the process where participants browse through a list of profiles and pictures which the dating site has chosen for them, and choose a potential partner without the hassle of engaging with them first. Participants reported that they could in their own time sift through the information of potential partners to make their choice.

P4: It was like a menu at a restaurant, you can look and decide.

P2: ...there is a choice and you can have as many of the choices you want or you can pick just one.

Three of the four participants reported using secondary sources to do research on their potential partner before engaging with them. Secondary sources included Facebook,

Internet searches and asking mutual friends, family and connected individuals. This research authenticated the person as ‘real’ by validating their existence and the information provided on their online dating profile. Couch, Liamputtong and Pitts (2012) noted in their study that online dating allowed the user to check out and screen potential candidates without having to commence dialogue.

P4: Funny enough, she said that if she didn't know me, then she wouldn't have met me face to face. She had heard about me, the guy she was dating was the IT guy at our work and he spoke about a Kevin.

P3: ...once you know the person's name you can start doing some homework

P2: ...if you only dating in PE you're in a position to investigate about people, you can find out more about people

All four of the participants described how their first message to potential partners was usually premeditated and carefully thought out. Once constructed the same message was used for the duration of the time spent on the online dating site, with only minor changes occurring. After the participants had searched through the profiles and decided on a person they were interested in, the next step would be to send them an introductory message. There were no social rules when sending first messages, participants reported that they received and sent messages equally. The idea that emerged for the participant's descriptions was the more messages the participant could send to potential partners the more likely they would be to connect with someone who was interested. One participant (P2) described it as looking for ‘fresh meat’ and having an orchestrated rehearsed plan for when she found a new potential partner:

P2: *Then when there was a new person I was like ah yes, and it was like all rehearsed look at his profile, send him a message, do you want to talk to me... blah blah blah. The first time I ever went on it took me an hour to you know write one line but then it was like second nature*

The other three participants described having a premeditated message they would send to individuals in whom they were interested.

P4: *I usually try and keep it very plain and short, you know say like hi I'm Kevin and I live here and I like what I saw on your profile why don't you check out mine? I think for some them I even said check me out on Facebook I am Kevin Sampson (not real name) and see if you like it or not and then we can chat.*

6.4.2.4. Duration of online relationships. The interactive nature of CMC can foster intimacy and liking between strangers, especially if the CMC lasts for short durations (Finkel et al., 2012). Participants reported that relationships exclusively online lasted on average between 2 to 4 weeks and the goal of dating online was to meet face to face. Once the participants met face to face the relationship was then perceived as a traditional face to face relationship. Finkel et al., (2012) explain that CMC relationships encourage the development of intimacy and attraction better than conventional offline dating avenues, however, individuals benefit from making the transition to face-to-face interaction quickly, as any benefits of CMC seem to disappear when individuals rely on CMC for too long as a substitute for face-to-face interaction.

6.4.2.5. Online dating rules. Online interactions have an exclusive set of 'rules' that were only applicable to this context. The development of online relationships is multifaceted and complex and like all other social phenomena is bound by social contexts and cues (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). This could be aligned with 'dating rules' that are

applied to traditional face to face dating. Three of the four participants reported rules such as not giving personal information until trust is established, always meeting face to face, in a busy place. The following rules are best described by the participants:

P3: *Its like standard issue when dating online, you usually say oh I can only see you for an hour and then 'I have something else on', in case it really awful*

P1: *I have always met someone in a public place I would never meet someone in their home or anything because that is just really silly.*

P2: *And that's rule number one, that you don't do, you don't bring your kids to your date.*

P2: *...some guy sort of took me under his wing, taught me the rules.*

The Internet provides a unique context for social interaction, this new context changes the socially accepted rules and norms for interaction, such as social expectations, etiquette and the way greetings are handled (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

6.4.2.6. Online persona versus the real world individual. The dynamic of online personas was also explored. Participants reported their potential partners as being different individuals online compared to offline interactions. This had no link between actual deception or intentional dishonesty but more that the conversations online were remarkably different to those had offline with the same individuals. All four participants reported that online individuals had more positive personality traits and were perceived more confidently, and when these individuals met face to face the same qualities that were present in previous communication were absent. Internet dating is characterised by a seamless movement between reading descriptions, writing responses, and exchanging messages. This contrasts with the awkwardness, risks, and physical embarrassments often associated with offline dating (Hardy, 2004). As P2 aptly describes:

P2: *He was very nice but his persona in writing was very different to who he was, he was very articulate online but he was sort of childish and not that confident in person*

The concern voiced by this participant was found in other participants narratives. The relationship online was perceived as positive and when participants met face to face the potential partner did not live up to their expectations. This could be due to factors such as physical attractiveness, social cues, and anonymity on the Internet. Online environments essentially present individuals with unique opportunities to reveal private details that they would typically feel uncomfortable with revealing in everyday face-to-face interactions. A user could form an exaggeratedly positive or specific impression of a potential partner through CMC, perhaps because the potential partner engages in deception or because the user over interprets CMC-limited cues in a favourable or overly positive light and when they finally meet in a face to face situation the individual is left disappointed (Finkel et al., 2012).

When probed three of the four participants revealed that while they found online partners to have ‘two personalities’ these participants experienced themselves as different individuals online as well. This aspect of online dating is remarkably different to the conventional face to face process of dating. In conventional offline dating an individual cannot create a finely crafted synopsis of themselves that potential partners can access at any hour of the day (Finkel et al., 2012). The current participants reported finding it easier to communicate online and were more open to revealing intimate details about themselves. Certain qualities distinctive to writing and unavailable in spoken interactions can heighten the experience of being intimately understood when communicating online (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997).

P4: *I am two different people when I write and when I talk. And that is exactly what happened when I am texting or emailing. I feel like I can express myself better. I am much more open and clear and say things that wouldn't normally say if I spoke face to face*

P2: *I express myself beautifully on paper, I can really really put it beautifully but in a social situation I am bit more awkward and I can't really say those sort of things and with most of the people I met their writing was amazing and beautiful but in person they weren't as funny or fluent.*

While these participants admitted to communicating differently online they did not view it as deception or dishonesty. Because individuals can edit and revise text-based messages, they have more opportunities to present themselves in a strategic manner to convey a highly socially desirable image, such strategic self-presentation might entail contextualising negative information in a positive light, selectively revealing negative information over time, actively suppressing negative information, or presenting an impression that reflects one's ideal self or true self rather than one's actual self (Finkel et al., 2012). The current participants viewed it as allowing themselves to be completely honest and revealed aspects of themselves they would not normally in face to face situations. Information can be changed and clarified before being sent to others, and individuals can rely on their writing ability to create an intended impression (Finkel et al., 2012). The Internet reveals what can be termed as a 'confessional quality' as individuals reveal parts of themselves and become more vulnerable and exposed to others online (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997). CMC allows individuals to use 'hyperpersonal' communication, as defined by Walther (1996) and detailed in Chapter four, and individuals find it easier to express themselves in mediated contexts than in face-to-face situations (Baker & Hastings, 2013; Ruppel, 2014).

The current participants highlighted they did not have any social cues to inhibit their communication and weren't worried about the consequences of their communication because they were anonymous. However, when meeting their partner face to face, they had to filter the conversation, and disclosure was limited to revealing information that wouldn't put the participants in a bad light. Because words can be saved, they can be reread by the receiver which results in their importance not being lost in a quickly spoken phrase or in an anxious moment (Ruppel, 2014).

6.4.2.7. Moving from online to offline. While relationships are formed online, it is very rare to find that relationships are maintained online. Many of the relationships formed online, in fact, progress to offline relationships where they continue to develop and function similarly to other traditional romantic relationships (Klein, 2013). All the current participants reported meeting their partners face to face. They reported that they had already established a relationship with the person and felt the natural next step was meeting face to face. All the participants reported the relationship moving from initial meeting online to either texting or phone calls and then face to face.

P3:*generally speaking by the time I went for coffee with a guy I felt like I knew him and then I guess it was whether or not there was a personal connection when you met with them.*

The participants reported that the more honest disclosure occurred between the potential partners and themselves, the easier it was to find a connection when meeting face to face. The deep foundation built through online communication methods remained with the individual when they met face to face, unlike other CMC contexts such as chat rooms or online role-playing games, in which anonymity is acceptable or expected, in

online dating there is an expectation of future face-to-face interaction (Cooper and Sportolati, 1997). Therefore, online misrepresentation has real consequences for online dating participants, who are often searching for a long-term romantic partner (Gibbs et al., 2006). The participants reported feeling that online the person did not feel 'real' and by moving to another medium it validated the person's existence. The progression in all the cases was from dating site to mobile to face to face. The importance of meeting offline clearly shows how online dating is used by one participant as a precursor to the embodied experience of dating. The immediacy of the meeting indicates the desire to avoid devoting any unnecessary emotional energy to unsuitable partners. It also emphasises the desire to establish or confirm a connection that is possibly more tangible (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008).

P4: *...It seems more real then*

P3: *....so it went from online to mobile and that was the way we communicated until we met face to face.*

P1: *I never really saw it as a love relationship, well until we met.*

Online dating has become a popular way of meeting individuals in modern society (Ruppel, 2014), however, individuals still want to meet in person in order to examine tangible cues, as part of the process of moving an online relationship to the next stage. This may be attributed to the fact that traditionally, individuals have developed conventional social mechanisms (Initial attraction, proximity and familiarity, and similarity) to calculate whether they are attracted to their potential partner (Klein, 2013).

6.4.2.8. Meeting Face to Face. The participants all reported wanting to meet their potential partners face to face. Participants reported wanting to ensure that there was a ‘spark’ or ‘connection’ that could not be found online. This connection could only be validated when meeting face to face and was often determined within the first few minutes of meeting their potential partner. All of the participants agreed that they would not be able to be in a relationship without this element. The significance of a face-face meeting cannot be overstated, it tends to make or break the continuation of the relationship (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). Meeting someone face-face is also a highly subjective experience. Although CMC can provide greater depth and texture than online profiles can, CMC is unlikely to achieve the richness of face-to-face interaction. In a face-to-face interaction, individuals make gut-level evaluations momentary that derive from their own holistic integration (Finkel, et al., 2012)

P4: *..I want to go to physical dating as quickly as possible.*

P3: *Anyway I didn't feel like a really hit it off with him*

P2: *You meet someone and you go ok I can work with this or you go no he is a complete freak.*

P1: *I guess it was whether or not there was a personal connection when you met with them.*

P3: *...we realized at the first appointment that we didn't gel*

In a study done by Henry-Waring and Barraket (2008) participants reported that digital chemistry was not enough. Participants wanted to take things further by meeting potential partner's face-face to confirm if a viable and tangible connection was actually

present. Although the digital chemistry was often intense, instantaneous and intimate, it was not always enough or enduring.

All four participants also reported intense feelings of anxiety when meeting their potential partner face to face. Feelings of awkwardness and nervousness were very real and present. These emotions were absent during communication online with their partner. Participants reported worrying about whether the potential partner would like them in real life.

P2: ... *can't explain to you how scared I was sweating felt like I was walking to a shooting range and they were going to shoot me and each step was excruciating*

P4: ...*and I was blushing and I didn't know what to say*

P3: *And when you meet the person face to face its nerve wrecking.*

P1: *I would say quite awkward.*

Having just explored the theme of online dating and relating, cyberlove and the corresponding sub themes will now be discussed.

6.4.3. Cyberlove. The third category that was explored comprised of what the participants considered online love to be. Four themes emerged namely, (1) intimacy, (2) passion, (3) commitment and, (4) online love versus offline love. The stories of the participants suggest that meaningful relationships do exist, however, they are different when compared to the offline context. Table 5 illustrates the main themes and sub themes. As previously discussed love is a difficult concept to define and conceptualise. The current researcher used the Triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986) to explore the dynamics of online love

Table 5: Category three: Cyberlove

Main Theme	Sub Theme	Participants
1. Intimacy	Intimate disclosure Trust Rapid intimacy	1,2,3,4 1,3,4 1,2,3,4
2. Passion	Sexual expression Natural progression online	1,2,3,4
3. Commitment	Numerous partners online Mutual agreement removing dating profiles indicates commitment	1,2,3,4 2,3,4
4. Online love versus offline love	Types of love online	1,2,3,4

Three of the four participants loosely used the term love when describing their partners online but when challenged with what that term meant they became acutely aware that their emotions comprised of two of the three components explained by Sternberg (1986), namely intimacy and passion.

P2: Really, we would like profess our love for each other almost. You know it was really something.

P3: one relationship that came out of it, ja. But I met about 3 people for coffee or whatever, the last one was the guy I dated for like a year.

P1: We discussed a lot, what we want this in a relationship or we like this. I never really saw it as a love relationship.

These components also had different perceptive meanings online when compared to offline. The triangular theory of love suggests that love can be understood in terms of three components namely intimacy, passion and commitment (Sternberg 1986; Sternberg, 1997; Sternberg & Weis, 2006). Together these three components form a triangle that can be applied to a multiplicity of relationships.

6.4.3.1. Intimacy. Intimacy is the emotional investment in a relationship and is widely associated with an increase in truthful self-disclosure as a means to increase mutual understanding and caring (Franzoi, 1996; Robson & Robson, 1998). Taylor, Peplau and Sears (2006) explain that intimacy in a romantic relationship is created when an individual perceives they are being cared for, understood and validated, as well as if their significant other is being responsive and supportive. This was experienced by all of the current participants.

P4: *I mean some people like to tell everything about themselves you know share their darkest secrets*

P3: *There was an element of caring in that they were like why are you here*

P1: *I told him about my family and my problems and that sort of stuff, it got to the level ...it got quiet personal*

P2: *I told him everything and it was quick I mean within (long pause) a week maybe even a week and a half, we were already in that, we are in a relationship.*

Intimacy online exclusively refers to the interaction that took place via the electronic medium. All four participants reported high levels of intimacy online. The reasons for these included aspects such as anonymity, lack of social cues, constant connection, and the ability to moderate and control their communication online. It is also important to note that the participants in the present study engaged in evaluative intimacy, or emotional expressiveness as it is sometimes known, which is an integral aspect of an intimate relationship which was achieved in a very short period of time. Evaluative intimacy, or emotional expressiveness as it is sometimes known is an integral aspect of an intimate relationship (Robson & Robson, 1998; Taylor et al., 2006).

P2: *...you know thoughts and desires you know. This is what I would have loved to do in my occupation but this is what I am doing instead. I have a difficult relationship with my mom because she didn't do this with me, that type of thing*

P1: *That kind of stuff, they would share that level of stuff. Which for me does create some sort of intimacy.*

P4: *I mean some people just jump in too quickly, too much, too deep. Feelings wise. They say I love you after speaking for like a week.*

P3: *I suppose I get the intimacy part of it, I guess there is an element of that because you do tend to find out some very interesting stuff from people before you actually meet them*

The anonymity that the Internet provides leads to greater perception of intimacy because it is free of fear of disapproval and sanction (Kang & Hoffman, 2011). Multiple research studies indicate that intimacy shared on the Internet occurs more swiftly due to the absence of necessary social cues and the founding of relationships on a more substantial basis such as shared interests as opposed to physical attractiveness (Klein, 2013; Ross, 2005; Sprecher, 2009; Whitty, 2003). Individuals involved in online relationships have reported feeling that the distance actually assisted in increased levels of intimacy because there was a feeling of less inhibition and increased liberation (Anderson, 2005).

P3: *...everything about myself and this is ten times easier online.*

P2: *...things that you would certainly not be talking about with someone if you had just met them on a blind date because you can hide behind the screen you see so you tend to be a lot more intimate with details of your life.*

Three of the four participants agreed that trust was difficult to establish online. They were aware of the endless opportunities for individuals to portray themselves in the best possible light as well as the prospect of deceit and untruth. Participants also reported that there did not need to be a deep level of trust in order to experience intimacy.

P1: *I also trusted them as much as I would trust anyone that you had just met.*

P3: *Trust I think is a very difficult one, I mean I didn't really trust anyone online until I met them face to face. I think it's a gut thing. You meet someone and you go ok I think I can work with this or you go no he is a complete freak.*

P4: *..you can't trust someone you haven't met*

Individuals online share intimate information because they feel their online partners do not have access to the individuals social circle, thus the dyadic boundary cannot be broken and the individual cannot be judged socially (Bargh, Mc Kenna & Fitzsimons, 2002). Traditionally individuals would not consider it possible to gain a deep sense of understanding and caring in such an impersonal medium (Van Staden, 2010).

Participants in the current study explained that while they disclosed information that was very intimate after trust was formed, they were referring to the trust that their online partner would not judge or reject them and they could be sure that the information they were sharing was not going to be leaked. The participant's dyadic boundaries could not be damaged online and therefore while trust did facilitate disclosure and therefore intimacy, this was only one facet of trust within their online intimate relationship. The participants described a situation where until they met the person face to face they could not consider them real and therefore could not trust them wholly.

All four participants agreed that intimacy occurred rapidly online and they shared intimate details within two weeks.

P1: *It increased quiet quickly, it got quiet personal. While I was still going through a divorce we actually got quiet close.*

P2: *Yes, my husband and I got intimate very quickly. And that one guy.*

P3: *I think online dating does fast track you to a large degree*

P4: *It happens quicker online I share things quickly. I think you can feel comfortable with someone quicker chatting online then you can face to face, well I do.*

This is congruent with the ‘boom and bust’ phenomenon, detailed in chapter two, when individuals reveal more about themselves earlier than they would in face to face interactions, that is, relationships develop rapidly and intensely (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Such an accelerated process of revelation may increase the chance that the relationship will feel exhilarating at first and become quickly eroticised, but then not be able to be sustained because the underlying trust and true knowledge of the other is not there to support it (Kraut et al., 2002)

6.4.3.2. Passion. Passion may be considered the initial attraction toward an individual, and from passion intimacy is developed thereafter. Conversely, intimacy may spawn passion, where only after feeling close and connected with another individual will the passion component emerge, the passion component of love will almost always be highly and equally interactive with intimacy (Sternberg, 1986).

Passion is considered to be have a majority physical component which is not possible online as there is no physical proximity. However, individuals do report feeling sexually aroused by engaging in cybersex and the sharing of sexual information (Cooper

& Sportolati, 1997). Crystal (2001) suggested that the nature of the Internet has two advantages: it tends to keep actual behaviour at a distance, and individuals can engage in it without censure, that is individuals can share their erotic fantasies and sexual desires without censure, and without worrying about social rejection. All four participants reported high levels of passion in terms of sexual intimacy online. Participants explained that engaging in cybersex was the goal of some individuals on the online dating site but they always disengaged with these individuals as they were looking for something more.

P2: A lot of them want to introduce that subject quite quickly and a lot of them are freaks.

P3: A lot of them are just looking for a sort of no strings attached and they openly say that in their profile.

P4: I mean some people would jump on them like crazy and say things like got a hot profile picture do you want to meet up and shag,

Participants also agreed that anonymity and lack of social cues facilitated sexual expression more rapidly than in face to face situations, as discussed earlier. Participants reported that it was a natural progression in the online relationship for it to migrate toward sexual communication. Ross (2005) explains that on the Internet, intimacy is one of the possible outcomes of sexual use of the Internet because the discussion of sexuality would include the disclosure of intimate details. By minimising an initial attraction based on physical attributes and facilitating intimate, less inhibited sharing, the Internet allows erotic interests to develop out of emotional involvement rather than lustful attraction (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997; Gonyea, 2010).

P4: For most people it's easier to be... ja... to be sexually upfront with someone online. I mean it happens after you get to know someone online.

P2: *...that I never felt awkward*

According to Hatfield and Rapson (1993) passion in the traditional sense refers to a state of intense longing to be with a partner. In a loving relationship, sexual needs may well predominate in this experience. However, other needs, such as those for self-esteem, nurturance, affiliation, dominance, submission, and self-actualisation, may also contribute to the experiencing of passion. Participants in the current study never reported a longing to be with their partner as they were constantly connected to the person and could communicate with them whenever they felt the need arise.

P2: *People would say can you just put your phone down and I couldn't... Every time I heard my message tone I rushed to the phone and got this wave of emotion because I knew it was him.*

P4: *...well we had just spoke for like 3 hours and then as soon as we got back home we were talking to each other again via messages*

Participants did experience passion in terms of feelings of 'excitement' and 'butterflies' which in conjunction with constant connection afforded by the Internet contributed to the addictiveness of the Internet discussed earlier in the chapter. The passion component essentially includes the sources of motivational and other forms of arousal that lead to the experience of a rush of endorphins and a feeling of 'craze' in a loving relationship (Sternberg, 1986). The intimate disclosure, discussed later in the chapter, also contributed toward the passion element of love. However participants noted that the physical spark or chemistry, which was only determined when meeting face to face, was the deciding factor as to whether a relationship would continue.

P3: *Obviously it's very exciting when some contacts you and you have liked them*

P2: *And I really had massive feelings for him, my heart would race every time*

P3: *we realised at the first appointment that we didn't gel, and I was quite upfront about it*

P4: *getting messages it's exciting*

6.4.3.3. Commitment. Commitment is the decision to be with a partner, to deny all other partners and to maintain the relationship above all else (Young & Long, 1998). As with previous research (Finkel et al., 2012; Klein, 2013; Lawson & Leck, 2006), current participants reported that commitment was more readily accepted by individuals once they have met their online romantic partner face to face, and while engaging in online relationships there is a fairly low level of commitment. All four participants agreed that this was a negative of online dating, participants explained that it was common practice to communicate with more than one partner online and often while they developed intense romantic feelings for a particular partner they could never be sure that the partner was committed to only them.

P3: *...they start to date you but they still chatting to other girls until they realise ok she's actually the one I want to be with. I think that is one of the negatives of online dating because you never quite know whether your partner is offline or not.*

All four participants reported that while they were communicating with their online partner they still communicated with others. Cyberspace relationships are often 'just for fun' or 'unrealistic' and therefore are not taken seriously until individuals meet face to face (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001). Romantic relationships in cyberspace have substantial obstacles to the levels of intimacy and rewards obtainable, in turn, serious and long-term commitment to these relationships tends to be limited. Individuals perceive

their online relationships as fun, stimulating, and gratifying in their own right, and, despite a lesser sense of seriousness or long-term commitment, these more transient relationships are experienced as offering opportunities for further development (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001).

P4: um, I mean if I'm speaking to one girl online and another messages me I usually check that message and see if I'm interested. In normal relationships if you meet a girl and you like her you usually don't go to a bar the next night looking for another girl because you want to spend more and more time with her.

P4: almost like you can't consider it real because you don't know if this person even exists, you can't commit to someone you haven't met.

P1: Its different online, you don't like "date" you still talk to others and you still looking what's out there.

P2: I would speak to lots of people at the same time.

Three of the four participants also indicated that after meeting individuals face to face and deciding to pursue a traditional relationship, taking their profiles off the dating site indicated commitment to that partner. This decision involves a range of considerations, including the conflicting desires to convey a certain level of interest in this particular partner and to continue exploring potential alternative partners (Long, 2010).

P2: So eventually between us it became a frank conversation we both made the agreement we both said ok we are happy we are enjoying each other we are going to stop looking it was a conscious decision to go off the site.

In essence, the role of commitment in close relationships is linked to investments, satisfaction, and availability of alternatives (Finkel et al., 2012). Participants conveyed

the idea that in cyberspace there is a moderate amount of investment in relationship but the ease of connecting to people reduces the effort required to sustain a relationship.

There is also a limit on the amount of satisfaction that can be obtained from a strictly online relationships as the participants felt that the relationship was not tangible until they met their partner face to face and with regard to availability of alternative the Internet and Internet dating in particular, offers an abundance of opportunities at only a click of a button.

P3: *I guess it was whether or not there was a personal connection when you met with them*

P4: *I don't really stay online very long,*

P1: *its great to meet people online but I like to see them and see if we connect.*

6.4.3.4. Online love versus offline love. Participant responses regarding their online relationships revealed data that is comparable to the three components described by Sternberg (1986) and detailed in Chapter three. Online relationships were found to comprise of a combination of intimacy, passion, and commitment. Participants experienced a version of love online that is unique when compared with traditional types of love as explained by Sternberg (1986).

The importance of each of the three components of love differs when considering if a loving relationship is short-term or long-term. In short-term relationships, and especially romantic ones, the passion component is prominent while the intimacy component is moderate and the decision/commitment component is in most cases not applicable. In contrast, the intimacy component and the decision/ commitment

component typically are significant factors in a long-term close relationship, while the passion facet changes (usually declines) over time (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg, 1997).

What can be reasoned from the participants sentiments above, online relationships do exist and can consist of components of intimacy, passion and commitment. However, these feelings were very short lived and didn't last longer than four weeks. The researcher notes that participants also struggled to identify these components because they felt they didn't occur the same as in offline relationships. When probed as to what commitment, passion, and intimacy meant, they agreed they did at times feel these, however, because they had never met the person it was difficult to accept these feelings as real. It can be concluded that participants did experience elements of love, albeit in a different manner compared to traditional dating.

From the above themes one can infer that high levels of intimacy and intimate disclosure was experienced by the participants, resulting in bonding, caring, and a deep sense of connection. There was an essence of passion, participants felt excited and often engaged in sexual words with their potential partner, however, there was no physical connection or 'spark' which was deemed as very important to the participants. From the above information it can be seen that participants spoke to many potential partners online, therefore there was low levels of commitment experienced in strict online relationships. The participants only committed to their partner after meeting face to face.

Certain qualities distinctive to writing and unavailable in spoken interactions can heighten the experience of being intimately understood when communicating online (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997). As P2 explained, she was in love with the words and not

the person. She loved the idea of the person and when she met the person in the flesh he was not like the ‘words’ she had experienced.

P2: *...because you developing a relationship with a person that you don't even know what he looks like but you get so caught up in the words and I mean I felt a little giddy, and that with.. like that with a man I have never even seen a picture of.*

P2: *They are love letters, they do get quite intimate and you can talk about... (pause) you know thoughts and desires you know.*

Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) explain that words online are powerful, many individuals acknowledge that online exchanges are not enough to sustain long-term relationships. Participants in the current study increased the type of information available to them about their partners by incorporating a secondary medium, such as moving their relationships to Whatsapp, as discussed earlier in the chapter. The participants reported the need to meet face-to-face and experience the physical side of intimacy. This suggests that as online romances intensify, individuals wanted to maximise additional ways to develop the experience. Without a physical component, online romantic participants are only able to access a portion of their relationship partners and humans may need a more tactile physical presence in order to make a lasting bond (Klein, 2013; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007).

Companionate love is essentially a long-term, committed friendship that commonly occurs in marriages in which the physical attraction (a major source of passion) has either been absent from the start or disappeared over time (Sternberg, 1986). While participants did experience companionate love with their online partner it was not long term, there were high levels of intimate disclosure in a short period of time resulting

in participant's feeling intimate and close with the person and committed to disclosing information and being a source of support and caring.

P3: *...a lot more intimate with details of your life and with feelings and how badly you have been treated before and what you looking for and just mundane stuff.. I mean when compared with the olden way of dating*

P4: *I mean the chats didn't last very long on the site.*

Hatfield (1978) conceptualises passionate love in terms of strong and uncontrolled emotional engagement, Individuals experiencing this type of love have the deep connection of intimacy and the physical attraction of passion and low commitment (Sternberg, 1986). While the Internet typically does not have the physical component of passion there are elements that can sustain the feelings of passion in participants, short term, which in turn could produce a passionate love.

P3: *The other relationship was more of a fling I knew there wasn't any long term prospects but he was just a lovely guy and we just had loads of fun together. He was younger and it was good for my ego and his I suppose.*

Fatuous love has both the commitment and passion component but is missing the intimacy element. It is described as the characteristics seen in whirlwind romances and is often associated with an impulsive decision by the partner to be committed after a short period of time (Sternberg, 1986). The passion and commitment combined is associated with fulfilment and ecstasy but unrequited fatuous love is associated with emptiness, anxiety, or despair. This type of love is considered to have a strong emotional state in which individuals experience continuous interplay between elation and despair, thrills and terror (Hatfield & Kim, 2004; Hatfield & Rapson, 1996). Individuals who have

engaged in an online romance often describe the fast intimate progression of the relationship in similar terms to fatuous love. While the commitment component is questionable as participants reported above, feeling they cannot commit to individuals they have not met, they are committed to investing time and energy into the relationship and are open to meeting the person face to face.

P3: *It's a bit of a rollercoaster ride*

Having just explored the theme of Cyberlove, the theme of The language of love: Self-disclosure online will now be discussed.

6.4.4. The Language of love: Self-disclosure online. The fourth and final category that was explored was self-disclosure online. Since online interactions have no physical components, the core of an online intimate relationship is the disclosure that occurs between partners. The main themes that were extracted were (1) intimate disclosure, (2) constant connection, (3) rapid disclosure, (4) deception and dishonesty and (5) miscommunication online. Participants agreed that communicating online was different when compared to offline communication and one participant referring to her emails as 'love letters'. All participant's agreed that online self-disclosure was easier and occurred more readily than in face to face interactions. Table 6 illustrates the main themes and the sub themes.

Table 6: Category four: The language of love: Online self-disclosure

Main Theme	Sub theme	Participants
1. Intimate disclosure	Anonymity linked to intimate self-disclosure Surface information is already disclosed on profile	1,2,3,4 1,2,3,4
2. Constant connection	Modern technology linked to increased self-disclosure	2,3,4
3. Rapid disclosure		1,2,3,4
4. Deception/dishonesty	Trust in online disclosure	1,2,3,4

6.4.4.1. Intimate Disclosure. All of the participants reported more intimate disclosure online than in their offline relationships. Participants attributed this intimate disclosure largely to the fact that because they were anonymous they felt they could share information with very little recourse. Disclosure online has been described as an intentional act typically communicated through verbal behaviours describing the person, his/ her experiences, and feelings, and it is not the amount of self-disclosure, but rather the depth of self-disclosure, that accounts for the increased interpersonal attraction in CMC interactions (Antheunis, 2009). The more intimate information individuals disclose about oneself, the higher the level of interpersonal attraction. Relationship development is also accompanied by changes in partners' communication. Specifically, as relationships develop, self-disclosure breadth and depth are expected to increase (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1978).

P3: Actually people are surprisingly open, some of them jump in and tell you their entire life story straight away.

P1: *...suppose people feel like they don't have too much loose because they are anonymous, so they are quite open and honest*

P4: *I think you can feel comfortable with someone quicker chatting online then you can face to face, well I do.*

P2: *The conversations are much more intimate, much, much, much more intimate.*

All of the participants explained feeling at ease and more open to revealing intimate details about themselves. These intimate details resembled what Rogers (1951) described as the 'true self' which is the individual's inner core and essential aspects about themselves they would disclose after trust and intimacy has been established. Being able to express the individual's true self over the Internet creates empathetic bonds and facilitates the establishment of intimacy (Bargh, Mc Kenna & Fitzsimons, 2002). In terms of the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008) individuals are more open to revealing the 'secret pane' of themselves

All participants reported that due to the dating site filtering out potential partners, surface level information such as age, vocation, and interests are already disclosed in the individual's biography on their profile and therefore they don't spend time disclosing surface level information and this adds to the rapid intimate disclosure.

In terms of the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008), the hidden quadrant of the window appears to be small in online relationships, the public window is large as individuals feel freer to disclose information about themselves due to the anonymity the Internet provides. There is a tendency for individuals to maintain information that portrays them in a negative light hidden. The blind window pane in the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008) can be interpreted as controlled as

individuals are free to play with their self-portrayal online and explore different aspects of themselves. The safety and space available for interpersonal interactions on the Internet allows individuals a chance to experiment with putting normally inhibited parts of themselves forward (Cooper & Sportolati, 1997).

6.4.4.2. Constant connection. Three of the four participants reported that the ability to stay connected with their partner allowed them more intimate self-disclosure. They could send messages and connect with their potential partner any time of the day and reported talking for hours a day, every day. This is remarkably different from face to face interactions. In a new relationship face to face interactions would only take place at a prescribed time and place and for a short while. Strangers communicating via CMC such as instant messaging tend to disclose with greater frequency (Antheunis, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002) and intimacy (Jiang et al., 2013; Tidwell & Walther, 2002) than do those communicating face to face.

P2: *I mean you must have something to say if you sending 50 or 60 text messages a day. I told him everything*

P4: *...if you meet someone traditionally you might go on a date and then you might go on a date a week later and there is very little interaction in between.*

P3: *Whereas online dating you can sit and chat to someone every night for a week the level of sharing of information and learning of the persons characteristic and qualities, you get a lot of that from how they communication online.*

6.4.4.3. Rapid Disclosure. Participants reported that disclosure rapidly progressed to intimate details. Self-disclosure online is richer and progresses faster since the Internet affords a level of anonymity that can reduce feelings of discomfort one may experience in

face-to-face relating (Orr et al., 2009). All of the participants reported that individuals shared more online because they lacked the feeling of responsibility toward owning their feelings and felt as if the potential partner behind the other screen couldn't judge them.

P3: *...generally speaking by the time I went for coffee with a guy I felt like I knew him*

P4: *...it happens quicker online I share things quickly.*

P1: *It increased quiet quickly, it got quiet personal.*

P2: *you can hide behind the screen you see so you tend to be a lot more intimate with details of your life and with feelings*

Online information is disclosed rapidly and early in the relationship and this disclosure of personal information is what leads to greater intimacy online (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Wong AnKee & Yazdanifard, 2015). Trust is a critical issue in both face to face and online disclosure of personal information. By disclosing information, individuals make themselves vulnerable, this applies equally to disclosure to online mediums (Joinson et al., 2008). Joinson (2001) explains that individuals communicating online have higher levels of self-disclosure of intimate details in shorter time frames. This was explained as the result of the decrease in public self-focus (how an individual portrays the self in public in relation to the societal norms and standards) due to the anonymity that the Internet offers the participants also had repeated contact with their partners online, consequently this early self-disclosure lays the foundation for a close intimate relationship

6.4.4.4 Deception/dishonesty in online relationships. All four participants reported feeling very little dishonesty in terms of intimate disclosure and sharing of information pertaining to feelings and emotions. However, they reported high deception in how individuals online portrayed themselves.

One limitation of online interaction that is widely recognised within research is that deception is possible to a greater extent, and with greater ease online than in face to face situations (McCown et al., 2001; Ruppel, 2014). Participants did report that individuals tend to only portray the positive aspects of themselves in initial contacts as well as in their profiles. Cyber-space offers more opportunities for exaggeration or outright deception in self- presentation (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001).

P3: “well when you meet them, and they not anything like their profile”

P1: *That is what puts me off, people lie on their profiles because I am honest when I put things on there and it's not the same*

P4: *I can't, I mean, these days it's so easy to just.... its a lot more easier to fake yourself these days.*

P2: *...I am not interested in anybody who lies, I am a very honest person and I don't want fraudulent people for example if you say you are divorced and you are not*

Participants reported that once they established a relationship with their partner, the personal information disclosed was truthful and honest and most of the dishonesty was experienced when physical features were not disclosed honestly. One of the participants reported dishonesty from individuals with physical disabilities, this dishonesty was only discovered when the individual met their partner face to face.

P1: *he was very disabled in the way that he walked and the photos obviously didn't portray that and he didn't disclose that in his profile.*

Three of the participants reported dishonesty in terms of ethnicity. The potential partner constructed his profile and didn't disclose he's ethnicity, the participants found that to be very dishonest.

P1: *...Blonde hair and hazel eyes turned out to be albino*

P3: *He sent me his photograph and he was an albino, I was so shocked.*

P2: *I am really sorry but you are not white, I know its shallow*

Numerous researchers have indicated that in an online context individuals appear to be primarily concerned with how others are untruthful about themselves and provide inaccurate self-presentation (Donn & Sherman, 2002; Gibbs, Ellison & Heino, 2006; Whitty, 2008; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Anonymity allows individuals freedom to hide aspects of themselves that they consider undesirable.

P2: *It's nice to be hidden but at the same time the people on the other side are also hidden and you get some serious freaks*

P3: *I could see who he was, I mean he didn't look anything like the photograph, not at all, I meant the guy in the photo had blonde hair and this guy had red hair.*

Ellison and Heino (2006) suggests that individuals were concerned that others misrepresent themselves online by intentionally neglecting to reveal negative information about themselves. Individuals experience anger when they find that when they met face-to-face that their online partner had misrepresented themselves in their profile or in their description of themselves during communication (Whitty, 2008).

Participants did report that although they did experience dishonesty and deception online they still proceeded to look for potential partners online. Individuals take physical and emotional risks to gain trust and are willing to continue seeking online relationships even after others had lied to them (Lawson & Leck, 2008).

6.5. Conclusion

The transcendental phenomenological approach of the present study revealed the complexity of dynamic interactions of online partners and influential factors that encompass the lived experience of online relationships. The findings of this study provided a far-reaching description of online relationships expressed through the six key areas of the online participant's experiences. Exploration of their experiences were assembled in the main themes that emerged within these categories. The conclusion, limitations, and recommendations of the present study will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

7.1. Introduction

Chapter Seven provides a summary of the present study and highlights the implications and outcomes of the research. The outcomes of the study focus on the findings obtained from the research as well as the methodology used to actualise the researcher's goals. Recommendations are highlighted for future research on online relationships.

7.2. Summary of Methodology

The present study aimed to gain a wide-ranging understanding of the process of online intimate relationships through the description of the subjective meaning the participants attribute to these relationships. Research into this phenomenon is necessary considering how the Internet is embedded into the daily lives of individuals and is rapidly changing how individuals communicate. Considering that a core need of individuals is to form relationships, the Internet has become an instrument to form connections and deep bonds. Research is furthermore necessary to comprehend the dynamic nature of relationships and provide assistance in developing an indepth understanding of relationships that occur online and how they develop and progress. By understanding the complex phenomena of such relationships comparisons on theories relating to offline relationships can then be used to initiate explorations of these dynamics.

A transcendental phenomenological approach was used to actualise the researcher's goal of understanding and reflecting upon the phenomenon as it is perceived

by the individuals engaged in online relationships. This approach emphasised the role of subjectivity and discovery of the meaning of experience by focusing on the meaning of the lived experience. As stated by Moustakas (1994), such an approach highlights the relationship between the individual's conscious awareness of what exists and what exists in reality. Understanding and insight into this awareness can thus be used as a foundation to understand the complex nature of online intimate relationships.

A theoretical sample was used through which the participants were selected based on their knowledge and experience with regards to the phenomenon through the use of biographical data forms. Following this, the face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted and transcribed by the researcher. These transcriptions provided first person descriptions of the lived experience of online relationships. The data analysis was conducted simultaneously by the researcher as well as an independent research psychologist with experience and expertise in qualitative research methodology using Tesch's (1990) eight steps. Following this, the participants were contacted telephonically to verify the findings of the data analysis. This contact also provided the participants with the opportunity to reflect on their involvement in the study. Through a discussion of these findings, the essence of online intimate relationships was described.

The approach and methodology of the present study allowed the researcher to implement the four phenomenological research processes, namely epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meaning. Furthermore, the research process incorporated Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four principles of trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The aim of a phenomenological study is to describe the essence of a

phenomenon as it is perceived and experienced by the individual. The findings of such studies cannot be generalised but comparisons can be made between the experiences reported by the participants as well as their correspondence to existing literature. In terms of the present study, the findings were found to be consistent with existing literature and previous research.

7.3. Outcomes of Research Findings

The findings of this study have been presented according to the key categories that have emerged through the conversations with the participants. The findings illustrate the participant's experience of online relationships. The objective of exploring and describing the lived experiences of online relationships provided the researcher with a detailed, rich description of the elements that encompass online relationships.

The first main theme that was identified involved the dynamics of online dating. The main motivations for using a dating site was a combination of a strong affiliation need and the participant's age, marital status, and geographical location. Participants were drawn to the affordability, anonymity, and the accessibility of online dating. While online dating had its benefits, the participants still perceived the relationships online to be unnatural. The participants reported feelings of addictiveness and felt a greater sense of control while using online dating. Rejection online still held the same concerns as offline rejection.

The second theme that emerged was the progression of the online relationship. An objective of the study was to explore the development of online relationships and the psychological impacts during this progression. It was found that there are similar prerequisites to offline relationships for relationship development such as proximity,

similarity and familiarity found in online dating, however, they are not perceived or implemented the same way as traditional dating. While there are stages that the participants report moving through, these involve the underlying forces of using a dating site and include setting up a profile, cataloguing through potential partners, initiating contact, engaging online, and finally meeting face to face. The researcher did gain some insight into the psychological processes that occur at these stage. Participants indicated that the ultimate goal of online dating is to meet face to face. Online relationships have a shorter duration and form rapidly. There is a great deal of disclosure in a short time frame which results in intense intimacy and bonding.

The third theme that emerged included elements of Sternberg's (1987) triangular theory of love which were present in the participant's relationships. They functioned differently online than in the traditional sense. Intimacy online develops rapidly and quickly. Online relationships last for approximately two weeks and within this time frame participants report the development of intense self-disclosure and deep intimacy. This rapid development of intimacy can contribute toward the feeling of online relationships being unnatural. The participants also reported that passion does occur in a unique way online. It was easier to express themselves sexually online and often participants reported passion toward their partner. There was no commitment present in the online relationships, participants only reported committing to a partner after meeting them face to face. This commitment to their partner was indicated by removing their profile from the site.

The final theme that emerged illustrated how self-disclosure functions online. The anonymity provided by the Internet allows individuals the opportunity to self-disclose

information about themselves they would normally keep hidden. There was deception found predominately regarding individuals not disclosing information about their physical disabilities, however intimate exchanges that occurred online were perceived to be truthful.

7.4. Strengths of the Present Study

The present study allowed for several strengths of the research process to be identified. The first strength was the integration of the phenomenological approach and the utilisation of a semi structured interview style. From the qualitative perspective, the richness and complexity of human reality is seen as closely related to the structures and meanings of natural language. Evidence from phenomenological research is derived from first person reports of life experiences. In accordance with phenomenological principles, scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge and information sought after is derived through descriptions that make it possible to gain an understanding of the meanings and essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1996). Each participant in the current study was given the opportunity to describe their experience fully, giving rich, detailed descriptions of their experience of online relationships. Unstructured conversations were utilised and organised around areas of particular interest, allowing considerable flexibility in scope and depth. This flexibility was particularly valuable in the present study as it allowed the participant to include and discuss other issues that may be used to expand their perception of online relationships.

The format, style, and setting allowed for a high degree of comfort in the interaction between the researcher and participant. The researcher also utilised her experience as a Registered Counsellor to ensure adequate rapport was established. It was

found that participants wanted to talk about their experiences. Having audio-taped the conversations facilitated the phenomenological research process most appropriately. It gave the ideal opportunity to contemplate and reflect on the content that emerged through the conversation.

The sampling strategy viewed the participants as the ‘experts’ in the field under study. Participants were all relevant candidates for the phenomenon under study. In addition, all participants had a reasonable – in fact vivid – linguistic capacity. Thus, a major strength in the present study was allowing for the unstructured conversations to be viewed through the ‘phenomenological lens’ of research methodology.

Although this research contributes to psychology’s expanding body of knowledge in South Africa regarding online relationships, it has limitations. These limitations will now be discussed

7.5. Limitations of the Present Study

While a number of aspects of this research can be regarded as strengths of this study, there are some aspects that have been identified as limitations. The first limitation is related to the demographics of the research participants. The study was conducted in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape. Four participants were interviewed. All of the participants were white adults, most of whom spoke English as their home language. Consequently, there is a possibility that the sample of participants in the study did not accurately represent the total population.

A further potential limitation of the study is that by making use of a qualitative study method, it is not possible to infer clear causal relationships (de Vos et al., 2011).

This means relationship development in online and offline contexts cannot be meaningfully compared in an unambiguous way. Qualitative, exploratory research does not often yield definitive findings, and further explanatory research is needed to obtain satisfactory answers to research questions (Babbie, 2005). Romantic relationships and intimacy is also a complex phenomenon and can be understood as consisting of many components, and is also influenced by the subjective meaning attached by each individual.

A further criticism is that qualitative research lacks the objectivity of the quantitative approach (Schurink, 1998). This limitation can be understood as the differing epistemological viewpoints of these approaches. Qualitative methodology rests on the assumption that research participants understand their worlds by subjective means, and that social scientists need to explore these subjective appraisals if they are to understand human behaviour (Schurink, 1998).

The researcher also notes the limitation of the literature available on the subject of intimacy and self-disclosure in online romantic relationships. Research into the topic of online dating is relatively new and tends to focus on communication processes and not upon psychological constructs such as intimacy, passion or commitment. Journal articles are also expensive due to a majority of the articles being from international scholars, most require payment to receive a copy which limits the researcher in finding peer reviewed articles.

7.6. Personal reflections

The journey of completing my research project has brought with it a major sense of achievement. Being able to research such a novel and rapidly changing topic has given

me the opportunity to reflect on the great deal that I have learned throughout this research process. I have found benefits to planning and being prepared and I have learned that as prepared as I may be, there are times when unexpected challenges occur.

The curiosity of the unorthodox dynamics of online relationships, and the lack of research pertaining to this topic is what drew me to engage in this research. I also experienced an increase in the use of online dating sites from individuals in my surroundings.

The interviews with the participants was particularly rewarding. The participants allowed me to delve into their narratives and intimate recollections of their experiences. This act of trust was extremely gratifying for me. The themes that emerged from the narratives were also incredibly interesting and unique. The recollections of the participants inspired me to produce work that was credible and of a high academic nature.

Throughout the conversations I noted how challenging it could be to collect credible data if I did not reflect on my own preconceptions and assumptions. This aspect of the research process therefore highlighted that one has to constantly remain open to all possibilities of meaning that could be expressed by the participants and that I need to keep my own preconceptions separate. I had to remain aware of how I may possibly impact on the data collection process and during the process of analysis. This process highlighted that the researcher is not an objective bystander but has a significant role to play in the research process and the findings that are generated through the research process.

Overall, despite the hurdles, I thoroughly enjoyed the entire process of research. I enjoyed writing and presenting the research proposal. The writing of chapters was at

times frustrating but I found that as I started thinking critically about the specific sections, the content fell into place.

I am drawn to the unique themes that were uncovered in this research process and will definitely keep exploring them in an academic setting. I am on the whole grateful to have worked under the guidance of my supervisor, he allowed me to grow both academically and personally on this journey, while providing a goal to achieve work of a very high standard.

7.7. Recommendations

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this study is one of the few studies conducted in South African focusing on the experience and meaning ascribed to online dating and romantic relationships in the online context. In light of this, the overall broad goal was to obtain exploratory data from which further studies could be conducted. It is recommended that the findings of this study be used to generate further related studies. This study can be replicated in different contexts and with different age groups for more generalisable findings. By including a quantitative element that compares online and offline romantic relationships, more unambiguous conclusions can be reached.

The present studies identified several stages that online relationships move through, additional research into the psychological aspects and emotional components of each stage could provide researchers as well as practitioner's insight into online relationships. Further research into termination of online relationships and the controllability of online dating could similarly be possible.

7.7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has provided an indepth account of four participants who engage in online relationships. This qualitative, exploratory study made use of snowball sampling. Data was gathered through an online questionnaire and analysed thematically.

The aim of the study was to explore and describe the lived experience of online relationships in order to gain insight into the elements that comprise the online relationship, the subjective meaning attached to the relationships, the processes these relationships encompass, and the progression of the online relationship. The dynamics of online relationships including anonymity, self-presentation, and how the relationship progresses proved to provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of online relationships. Sternberg's Triangular Model of Love (1986) and the Johari window (Verderber & Verderber, 2008) was used to conceptualise the study.

It is the hope of the researcher that the present study provided the participants with a small opportunity to have their voices heard in the scientific community. In a relatively new field where knowledge is rapidly developing and changing it may be valuable to have such insights to balance the divergent and often extreme views of both the public and social scientists. While the study does have its limitations it provides useful information to further the exploration of online relationships in the South African context.

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Appendix A: Newspaper article requesting participants

Zest... Thursday May 2, 2013

RELATIONSHIPS

Love bug bytes in cyberspace

NMMU student researches new way to date

Neo Bodumela
bodumelan@timesmedia.co.za

FINDING a partner worth keeping used to be a matter of courtship, going on several dates and getting to know the person face to face. But with the advent of the internet, it has now become a matter of clicking on the right online profile.

A random search for online dating on Google brings up thousands of websites dedicated to helping singletons find their potential life partner – proof that people are willing to turn to the internet for help in the love department.

This led Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University masters student Carmen Froneman to conduct research into the psychology behind the phenomenon. Froneman is calling on people over the age of 18 who have had or are in online relationships to share their dating experiences as part of her research.

“I have always had a keen interest in the psychology of romance and romantic relationships. I started to notice that more and more people were meeting and forming meaningful romantic relationships online.

“After some initial research I realised there was very little research regarding this process and the components involved.

“I am extremely intrigued by the unorthodox romance that occurs online and how people interact online, which is obviously very different from how they interact in face-to-face situations,” she said.

Her research, titled *Dating in the Dark: A phenomenological study of the lived experiences of online relationships*, is a study “to investigate the process of the formation of online romantic relationships” from any source on the internet, including Facebook and dating sites.

By its very nature, online dating goes against orthodox dating practice but Froneman said this did not stop people dating online from having meaningful relationships.

“The internet is becoming embedded in our everyday lives and online dating is becoming less of a taboo and more accepted in society. Psychologically, online relationships have many of the traditional key components missing, yet individuals are meeting partners online and engaging in meaningful romantic relationships.

“I would like to explore concepts like how people connect online, what mediums they use – e-mails, Skype, instant messaging and so forth – and what emotional factors are involved, to name a few.

“Individuals will be required to participate in an interview where several questions will be asked and they will have the opportunity to share their stories and experiences. The aim is to hear people's experiences of online dating and explore their ideas and accounts,” she said.

Confidentiality and anonymity of all participants will be ensured throughout.

● To take part in the research contact Froneman at s208030374@live.nmmu.ac.za and provide your name, e-mail address, phone number, age and a brief explanation of your online relationship experience.

“I am intrigued by the unorthodox romance that occurs online”

Appendix B: Participant consent form

**NELSON MANDELA METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY****INFORMATION AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

<u>RESEARCHER'S DETAILS</u>	
Title of the research project	Dating in the Dark: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Online Relationships
Reference number	
Principal investigator	Carmen Froneman
Address	PO BOX 15628 Emerald Hill
Postal Code	6070
Contact telephone number (private numbers not advisable)	078 697 4470

<u>A. DECLARATION BY OR ON BEHALF OF PARTICIPANT</u>		<u>Initial</u>
I, the participant and the undersigned	(full names)	
ID number		
<u>OR</u>		
I, in my capacity as	(parent or guardian)	
of the participant	(full names)	
ID number		
Address (of participant)		

A.1 I HEREBY CONFIRM AS FOLLOWS:	<u>Initial</u>
---	-----------------------

I, the participant, was invited to participate in the above-mentioned research project		
that is being undertaken by	Carmen Froneman	
from	Psychology Department	
of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.		

THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS HAVE BEEN EXPLAINED TO ME, THE PARTICIPANT:				<u>Initial</u>	
2.1	Aim:	The investigators are studying the formation of online romantic relationships			
	The information will be used to/for:	A research treatise that will be published as well as a research article that will be submitted to research journals			
2.2	Procedures:	I understand that I will be required to take part in a recorded interview			
2.3	Risks:	I realise that the interview will cost me time and that it will include information regarding my online intimate relationships			
2.4	Possible benefits:	As a result of my participation in this study knowledge will be generated on online romantic relationships			
2.5	Confidentiality:	My identity will not be revealed in any discussion, description or scientific publications by the investigators.			
2.6	Access to findings:	Any new information or benefit that develops during the course of the study will be shared as follows: Feedback of the findings will be emailed to me after the research had been finalised as well as be available in the NMMU library.			
2.6	Voluntary participation / refusal / discontinuation:	My participation is voluntary	YES	NO	
		My decision whether or not to participate will in no way affect my present or future care / employment / lifestyle	TRUE	FALSE	

3. THE INFORMATION ABOVE WAS EXPLAINED TO ME/THE PARTICIPANT BY:								<u>Initial</u>
Carmen Froneman								
in	Afrikaans		English		Xhosa		Other	
I was given the opportunity to ask questions and all these questions were answered satisfactorily.								

4.	No pressure was exerted on me to consent to participation and I understand that I may withdraw at any stage without penalisation.	
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5.	Participation in this study will not result in any additional cost to myself.	
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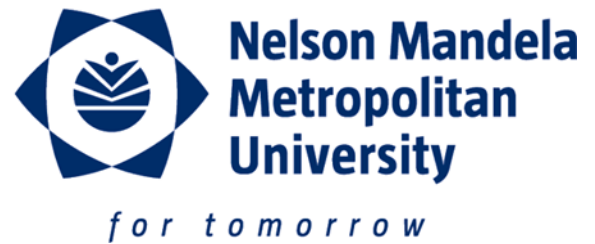
A.2 I HEREBY VOLUNTARILY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ABOVE-MENTIONED PROJECT:		
Signed/confirmed at		on 20
Signature or right thumb print of participant	Signature of witness:	
	Full name of witness:	

B. STATEMENT BY OR ON BEHALF OF INVESTIGATOR(S)									
I, Carmen Froneman declare that:									
1.	I have explained the information given in this document to								
	and / or his / her representative								
2.	He / she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions;								
3.	This conversation was conducted in	Afrikaans		English		Xhosa		Other	
	And no translator was used <u>OR</u> this conversation was translated into								
	(language)			by		(name of translator)			
4.	I have detached Section D and handed it to the participant				YES		NO		
Signed/confirmed at					on 20				
Signature of interviewer				Signature of witness:					
				Full name of witness:					
C. DECLARATION BY TRANSLATOR (WHEN APPLICABLE)									
I,		(full names)							
ID number									
Qualifications and/or									

Current employment			
confirm that I:			
1.	Translated the contents of this document from English into	(language)	
2.	Also translated questions posed by	(name of participant)	as well as the answers given by the investigator/representative;
3.	Conveyed a factually correct version of what was related to me.		
Signed/confirmed at		on	20
I hereby declare that all information acquired by me for the purposes of this study will be kept confidential.			
Signature of translator		Signature of witness:	
		Full name of witness:	

D. <u>IMPORTANT MESSAGE TO PATIENT/REPRESENTATIVE OF PARTICIPANT</u>	
Dear participant/representative of the participant Thank you for your/the participant's participation in this study. Should, at any time during the study: - an emergency arise as a result of the research, or - you require any further information with regard to the study, or - the following occur (indicate any circumstances which should be reported to the investigator)	
Kindly contact	Carmen Froneman (s208030374@nmmu.ac.za)
at telephone number	078 697 4470

Appendix C: Participant information letter



Participant Information Letter

RESEARCH DISSERTATION ON ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

My name is Carmen Froneman. I am a research Masters Student at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). I am conducting research on online relationships; the information below will give you more information:

Title of Study: Dating in the Dark: A Phenomenological Study of the lived Experience of Online Relationships.

Aims: The primary aim of the study is to gain insight into the formation of online romantic relationships. The study will explore the subjective descriptions of individuals who have engaged in online dating. It will look at the formation of the relationship, the progression of the relationship as well as what constitutes the relationship. The study also aims to compare these to offline relationship.

What will happen to the findings: The findings of the research will be published in a treatise which will be available from the NMMU library. The research will also be presented in an article which will be submitted to accredited scientific journals. Should the opportunity arise the findings will also be presented at a scientific conference.

Confidentiality/ Anonymity: The identities of all participants will be confidential; your name will not appear in any published material. You will be required to fill in your details on a standard NMMU consent form for legal purposes; however this form will be kept separate from any data collection material. Your contact information will only be available to the primary researcher and will only be used to contact you to notify you about the research project (i.e. time of data collection, availability of findings.)

What do participants need to do:

- Once you have been identified as a potential candidate by another participant, you will receive a short registration form. This form will be emailed/handed to you.
- You will fill in the registration form, I will contact you for a meeting should you meet the research requirements.
- Once contacted you will be required to take part in a +- 1 hour interview with myself where information will be collected regarding the aims of the research on online relationships. Please note that these interviews will be recorded, all data obtained via recordings will only be accessible to the primary researcher.
- You will be required to sign a legal consent form, this form will state that you are voluntarily taking part in the study and understand what the study is about.
- After all the data has been collected it will be analyzed by the researcher, you will not be required to do anything else.
- Once findings have been evaluated you will be emailed a brief summary of the findings.

- You are welcome to contact me at any time if you have any questions or concerns, before or after data collection.

Participation Requirements:

To participate in the study you should:

- Be 18 years or older and in possession of a valid ID/Passport number.
- Have completed high school
- Have access to the Internet
- Have been in at least 1 romantic/intimate online relationship.
- Frequently engage in online social interaction
- Be literate in English as all communication and correspondence will occur in English.

Thank you for taking time to read this information letter. Your involvement in this research project will provide invaluable data. If you know of anyone who would be interested in this study please forward their details to me, if you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me.

Carmen Froneman

s208030374@nmmu.ac.za

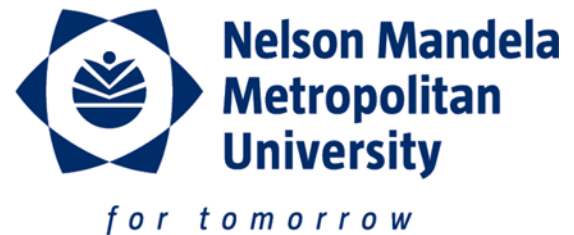
0786974470

Supervisor: Prof. Greg Howcroft

Co-Supervisor: Ms. Tania Lambert

HOD Psychology: Prof. Louise Stroud

Appendix D: Biographical questionnaire



BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. General:

Please fill the following information about yourself. Your email address will be used to communicate with you and will not be given to any third parties.

Code:		
Gender:		
Sexual orientation:		
Age:		
Race:		
Nationality:		
South African ID/Passport number:		
Highest Level of Education:		
Email Address:		
Average number of hours online a week		
Are you currently in an online intimate relationship?	Yes	No

2. Specific to online relationships:

Please answer these questions pertaining to your online romantic relationship.

Average number of hours spent communicating online:		
Total number of online relationships:		
Average duration of relationships (years/months):		
Have you ever met any of your online partners face to face?	Yes	No

How did you meet your online partner?	
Gender of partner	
Age of partner	

Appendix E: Participant interview schedule

Participants Interview Schedule:

- a) Describe your online relationship
- b) Describe your previous/current online partner
- c) Describe your general perception of intimacy (level of caring, trust and bonding) you experience from your online romantic partner
- d) Describe how you meet your online partners?
- e) What attracts you to a potential online partner?
- f) What type of information do you disclose to your online partner?
- g) Describe the differences you experience if you compare your online relationships with your offline relationships.

NOTES

N O : _____
DATE _____

① Online Romantic Relationship

- affiliation needs
- commitment
- passion
- ~~affiliation~~ intimacy

- stages of relationship development

↳ meet f2f quickly

NOTES

NO: _____
DATE: _____

1 cyberlov → off
→ 3A

2 devel → sm
prox
form
off
online
intimacy

intimacy / decep

3 cyberlov dis

4 online relat + date

→ soc site
→ date
→ self pres
→ sense of control
→ risks
→ stigma

5 conclusion

NOTES

NO: _____
DATE: _____

(2) Disclosure

- intimacy
- relationship develop.
- rapidness
- ~~managing impressions~~
- social anxiety
- stages of rel
- deception
- (*) ~~anonymity~~
- create a better impression online.

NOTES interview 2

NO: _____
DATE: _____

→ ~~don't~~ 'cataloguing' of potential partners

certain feelings of fear
of rejection
↳ did like netive
self

- self esteem
- can real "trust" be establish online?
- social anxiety
- self prescription online
- impression management

↳ strategic in way
present themselves