

“LET’S FALL IN LOVE...AFTER I VET YOU”: ROMANCE AND VETTING

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With news media coverage of free dating app horror stories of serial rapists and undergraduates reporting having been lied to in previous relationships, 157 undergraduate students at Morehead State University and East Carolina University completed an anonymous, voluntary 31 item online survey to assesses vetting/background checks on potential/current romantic partners. Over three-fourths (75.5%) of the respondents reported that they had Facebook/social media stalked a potential romantic partner with about a quarter reporting having conducted a background check on someone they were considering meeting or were already dating. Focus groups were also conducted with 23 undergraduate students who provided further insight into vetting. Exchange theory was used to interpret the findings. Vetting today may be more about survival than distrust.

Introduction

Dating can be dangerous. Many free on-line dating sites (including Tinder, Ok Cupid, Hinge and Plenty of Fish) do not vet/conduct background checks to identify previously convicted sexual assault felons. Janine Dunphy (one of ten million who has used these sites) met someone on Plenty of Fish who turned out to be a registered sex offender (he raped her the night they met) (Battiste, 2019).

In addition to the potential for sexual assault, over half (53.4%) of 7390 undergraduates reported that they had been lied to in terms of a previous romantic partner cheating on them (Hall and Knox, 2019). Awareness of rapists and liars swimming in the dating pool suggest the wisdom of being cautious (even suspicious) and vetting each potential/new romantic partner. The practice is not new—deceased late night host Johnny Carson had

his 4th wife, Alexis Mass, vetted by private investigator Joe Mullen (Bushkin, 2013).

The purpose of this research was to determine the degree to which undergraduates vet/conduct background checks on a potential/existing romantic partner they were considering meeting, had already met, or were dating. We also examined the degree to which vetting varied by sex of respondent, race, and sexual orientation.

Background

A review of the psychological, sociological and criminology literature revealed the complete absence of professional articles focused on vetting and background checking (BC) of a potential romantic partner. While vetting/background checks are common in regard to buying a gun (Vernick et al., 2017)

and applying for a job (Levashina et al., 2017; Selbin et al. 2017), they are “under the radar” in regard to scientific inquiry when applied to romantic relationships.

Stalking is sometimes thought of as vetting/background checking. But stalking is typically thought of as a jilted lover observing/following another without the person’s permission (and often without awareness). In regard to stalking in general, in a study of 873 students at a university in the upper Midwest, 43% of the females reported that they had been stalked at some point in their lifetime (13% while in college). Of the male respondents, 34% reported that they had been stalked (18% while in college) (McKenzie and Stichman, 2018). These “stalks” were mostly in reference to a past lover who was angry at having been jilted rather than “Facebook stalking” as a means of finding out information in regard to a potential romantic partner (Marcum et al. 2018).

Sample, Analysis and Findings

A 31-item internet survey (developed by the authors) was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Morehead State University and East Carolina University, respectively, and emailed/completed by undergraduate students in the first and last authors’ classes. Sociology faculty in the last authors’ university also sent a link to the students in their respective introductory classes.

Data were analyzed by the research team at Morehead State University using version 25 of the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program. Frequency and crosstabulation measurements were performed to analyze respondent answers in accordance with project objectives.

One-hundred and fifty-seven predominately unmarried undergraduates completed the survey. Almost eighty percent (79.5%) of the respondents were females with almost 90% (88.7%) identifying as heterosexual and three-fourths (75.8%) reported their race as

white. When asked about their current relationship status, 39.5% were not dating anyone while 47.1% were romantically involved. Almost a third of the participants (30.5%) reported being moderately religious, closely followed by 27.2% of the participants reporting being “about midway.” When asked about vetting, 75.5% of participants admitted to Facebook/social media stalking someone that they were seeing or considering seeing with 43.7% stating that they told the person they had done so. Background checks on potential partners occurred less often with less than a quarter (23.1%) reporting that they had ever run a background check on someone they were seeing or considering doing so.

In regard to gender differences, 64% of the women compared to 59% of the men reported Facebook/Social media stalking/vetting a current or potential partner. The difference was not significant. There were too few racial or sexual minority respondents to make meaningful comparisons.

Focus groups were also conducted at the respective universities. Both the first and third author asked participants the same questions including: have you ever Facebook/social media stalked someone you were considering seeing?, have you completed a background check on someone you were considering dating?, do you know if your parent’s have ever conducted a background check on someone you were seeing or considering seeing?, do you know someone who has ever stalked someone on social media?, if you had a child would you vet their potential partner?, and have you or do you know someone who found something negative about someone as a result of vetting?. Most participants responded by stating that “yes,” many of them vet potential partners, even to the extent of looking into their friends and parents/family members. Examples of statements by focus group participants regarding vetting a potential romantic partner follow:

Quotes from Focus Group Respondents:

Alex “Say if I find somebody on like Tinder or find someone on Instagram and they DM me, I look them up on Facebook. I look their parents up on Facebook. And I go through their pictures seeing what they look like and seeing what they’ve done in their life and everything like that and I would never tell them that obviously because that’s really weird that I would like look their parents up on Facebook too.”

Claudia “So there’s this one time where I didn’t know if this guy had a girlfriend or not and so I stalked him on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and he was DMing me that’s why, so um in all of his profile pictures he had his girlfriend so I went and talked to him and I told his girlfriend that he was like talking to other girls and insinuating hooking up and hanging out and she was like ‘thank you so much’ and she dealt with that information”

Anna “My boyfriend that I met, one of his friends gave me his number, I never even saw him. I was like okay; I’ll give it a shot, so I texted him and I was like first of all what’s your Instagram and I got all of his information. And I definitely looked at his exes and like the kind of people they were. I looked at his family, I just think that its important if were getting into a relationship that you kind of know the person that you’re talking to. I asked him what school he went to and asked my friends there if they knew about him and the kind of person he was.”

Exchange Theory Framework

Exchange theory provided the framework for understanding the data. Exchange theory is focused on relationships in which the respective partners seek the greatest rewards at the lowest cost. One of these rewards is a partner who is both honest and faithful. But having learned in previous relationships that individuals sometimes lie, one may be inclined to vet a new partner to avoid being tricked. Hence persons who vet are simply protecting themselves from later discovering the person has been lying all along.

Conclusion

Vetting is unromantic. It signals distrust. Yet over three-fourths of the respondents, mostly undergraduate women, reported having vetted a person they were considering meeting or had already done so. The mistrust is born out of previous experiences with partners who have lied, cheated, or both. In addition, many free online dating sites including Tinder, OkCupid, Hinge and Plenty of Fish do not screen their registries from previous sexual assault convictions. Hence, vetting may be more about survival than distrust.

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