

## RESEARCH REPORTS

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# *Shaping the Internet for Match-Making/ Dating: A Challenge for the Contemporary Nigerian Family Institution*

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### Introduction

Our contemporary world is a wired world (Giddens, 2000:392) going by the acceptance of the global system of interconnected computers, the Internet. Since its introduction during the Cold War period, which preceded 1989, the Internet has maintained a steady explosive growth as a result of the spread of home-based PCs. Users of the Internet live in 'cyberspace' where we are no longer 'people' but mere messages on one another's screens. Outside the e-mail, where users identify themselves, no one on the Internet knows who anyone else really is, or where they are in the world.

A major part of the Internet is the World Wide Web, which like a cuckoo in a nest, threatens to take over its host. The Web is a multimedia library invented by a software engineer at a Swiss physics laboratory in 1992, but an undergraduate at the University of Illinois wrote the software that popularised it across the globe (Doob, 2000). With the World Wide Web, www for short, it is thought that there were some 35 million people on line throughout the world in 2000 (Giddens, 2000:394; Doob, 2000:160) and with a frightening estimated annual growth of 200 percent since 1985, about 560 million people are now on line across the globe.

The widespread romance with the Internet encapsulates both hopes (of its potential for changing economic behaviour and unlimited access to vital information) and fears (of losing our identities and unlimited access to any kind of information). The typical Internet user worldwide is male, less than 35 years old, literate, urban based and English speaking (Dagon, 2001:28; MediaMark Research, 1997). Consequently, there are concerns about the regulation of the Internet and those who will regulate it (Gruenwald, 1998a:237). Among its other ills, the Internet has widened children's access to pornography with its estimated over 28,000 sex-oriented and porn sites on the www; child molestation (Ota, 1997:3029); promoted gambling (*New York Times*, 1997:8; Gruenwald, 1998a:238); encouraged terrorism with the influx of uncensored

materials across national boundaries (*Futurist*, 1997; *The Economist*, 1998); accentuated violence among youths through exposure to on-line/video games (*Awake*, 2002); unprecedented indulgence in cyber-carnality (Aregbeyen, 2003:21) and the vaunting of information of dubious quality and sources (Knowlton, 1997:18). Another area of concern is matchmaking via the Internet, which is the major focus of this paper. Specifically, the paper discusses the implications of the assumed role of the Internet in mate-selection for the modern family.

### **Internet Match-Making/Internet Dating**

Obsessive individualism and detachment from traditional ties are some of the various consequences of modernisation and urbanisation (Wirth, 1938; Simmel, 1950; Park, 1967). Thus, the freedom to choose dating companions is a mere extension of such modern trait. Rowe (2003), an Extension Family Life specialist, informs that since about 1920, young Americans have enjoyed much freedom when choosing dating companions and activities. The eternal quest – not wanting to be lonely, we reach out for others and many questions are often asked such as: Where is our perfect mate? Who might he or she be? Do they live down the street, or thousands of miles away? Is there only one perfect mate, or are there dozens? The Internet does not change any of these questions, it only provides new avenues to answering them. These days, our fast paced lives do not always allow us the leisure to casually socialise in crowds and make new personal connections but the Internet has created an option that suits many people's lifestyle and allows them to make connections in their own time.

Internet or Online dating is exploding and surging in popularity (James, 2003). In the words of Aregbeyen (2003:21), Internet access in Nigeria has increased by a such a stupendous extent in the last 24 months that you would think there has always been access with that ever vibrant mammoth crowd of Nigerians. It is now a common sight in many Nigerian cities and towns, to see the proliferation of cybercafes. You never know how much matchmaking occurs on a daily basis on the Internet. Sometimes, it may be bigger than the amount of single people online. Try any popular search engine (for example, USA 2017.com, Google.com, Yahoo.com, 100bot.com, angelrays.com, etc) such search strings as 'matchmaking', 'love', 'dating', 'can I find out a soulmate online?', etc, and you will see how huge is the virtual matchmaking world. Presently, there are over 10,000 matchmaking sites on the Internet (e.g. Harmony.com; Yahoo, 2004). Puzzled about the surging popularity of on-line dating, James (2003) wondered 'whether singles are giving up the flesh-and-blood meet-and-greet for the cold confines of the Internet'.

Online dating services focus exclusively on helping users build short- or long-term relationships. In a world connected through advancements in communication technologies, the nature of personal interactions is changing. The advent of the Internet has eliminated many barriers to meeting new people

– geography, proximity, and chance. It has greatly expanded the potential dating pool for singles across the globe and made the possibilities for searching, screening and even starting a conversation with someone literally limitless.

With the bogus claims of successes by ever-increasing e-service providers, hundreds of thousands of people are turning to the Internet to find their soul-mates/twin-flames (absolute perfect match). There are a number of avenues to finding love partners on the Internet. In fact, any place on the Internet where you can mingle with others, whether it be e-mail, message boards, instant messaging, chat rooms, on-line games, on-line personal ads, or ‘whenever there is the spark of humans meeting’, love has a tendency to blossom. Rather than the long-standing ‘flesh-and-blood meet-and-greet’ practice of mate-selection at parties, bars, schools, etc, the Internet now flaunts sites such as [www.Match.com](http://www.Match.com), [www.Matchmaker.com](http://www.Matchmaker.com), [www.americansingles.com](http://www.americansingles.com), [www.love-by-net.com](http://www.love-by-net.com), [www.kiss.com](http://www.kiss.com), [www.edenlady.com](http://www.edenlady.com) and [www.christiansingles.com](http://www.christiansingles.com) among others, where searching singles in the contemporary world could turn to select marital partners. This notwithstanding, some cynics still believe that online dating is the forum for like-minded perverts to find the weirdo of their dreams or the last-ditch effort of some hopeless shut-in to finally get a first date (James, 2003).

Writing on the joys and benefits accruing to Internet dating, Rowe (2003) discloses that it provides opportunities for friends to enjoy each other’s company in social activities. Such dating, according to him, provides socialisation, which is a healthy outlet for relieving the pressure of work and school responsibilities. Dating, he adds, offers an opportunity for individuals to learn how to relate to others and experience the joys and sorrows of developing a ‘couple’ relationship. This, he argues, is because dating permits couples to interact in various settings, to test compatibility and to learn what tolerance and commitment are all about. In an article titled ‘The Art of Internet Dating’, Jones (2002) argues that Internet dating is socially acceptable and enjoyable and it was about time someone legitimised it.

Aside, Internet dating ensures personal safety and guarantees anonymity. Dating sites tend to offer good value for money, as subscription fees are usually only a few dollars a month. Also, the profiles on good dating sites contain so much more information than a typical newspaper ad. Internet dating equally offers users opportunity to view the listings and to respond to interest contained in the listings at one’s convenience. Compared with telephone matchmaker services that rack up monthly phone bills, Internet dating is cost-effective as most e-matchmaker charges as low as \$12.95-\$24.95 monthly, depending on users’ package deal; more months means less per month in general (Friendfinder Network, 2004).

While the rise of Internet dating sites opens up a world of possibilities for the modern singles, it also complicates the already perilous exercise of dating. The

limitless expansion of a person's possible dating pool is akin to the super-sizing of the proverbial haystack. It renders the needle ever more elusive (and the process of finding it more daunting and disheartening). Another danger of Internet dating is the possibility of falling head-over-heels in love with the wrong person. For instance, in a Nigerian film by OJ Productions (2003), captioned *To Love a Thief*, the heir apparent of a multi-millionaire business mogul, Raymond, was cajoled into marrying Angela, his supposed Internet date, not knowing that it was a ploy by an unsuspected Kelly-led syndicate to despoil him.

But as a way of making Internet dating more appealing and acceptable, one e-service provider, eHarmony.com, in a write-up entitled *Match-making on the Internet*, gave some useful hints about finding and nurturing Internet relationships. According to it, users are to be confident of finding a soulmate 'somewhere out there', wary of being getting enraptured with the first person that comes along and seems somewhat compatible, and they should have a mind-set of their ideal mate by creating a list of requirements. Armed with the list of requirements, users could then begin the 'process of elimination' and the 'process of qualification', where applicants or suggested matches would be diplomatically sifted to get the most compatible mate. Users are also urged to avoid attachment right away until they were sure that the person they have found is the perfect match.

However, in spite of the Internet's seeming limitless opportunities of meeting diverse people across the globe, there is still the hurdle of moving away from one's dating service and meeting up in the real world. This is one of the things that no Internet dating site can help users with. The users ultimately will have to pick up the telephone and ask for a date or arrange to meet someone. What the Internet can only do is to give the opportunity to 'talk' for as long as the users like through the messaging system until they feel they know the other person well enough to move on to the next stage.

To benefit from the Internet matchmaking exercise, prospective searchers, who should at least be eighteen years old (Friendfinder Network, 2004), are made to fill out an extensive questionnaire. The questionnaire seeks to obtain a wide range of information of users covering their biological, psychological and social characteristics. The sincere and honest answers to both the close- and open-ended questions allow the e-matchmakers to calculate a profile that lets them more accurately match searchers with other registered members. Notably, searchers' profiles are available to other members. This done, users should use the 'search', 'match', and 'browse' features provided on most of the higher-end matchmaker services to filter choices. Basically, all online matchmakers permit members/users to use an anonymous 'handle' or 'user name'. This provides users with absolute anonymity. Most matchmaker services allow users to choose their own User ID, Number, Password as well as a free e-mail account for use within the matchmaker service. For the sake of anonymity and

security, users are advised to use a non-identifying handle, nickname or something cute as a sign-in name. In addition, users are at liberty to try more than one Internet matchmaker before settling in on one with which they are most comfortable.

### **The problem and questions**

A lot of things change in this world. While new values come and quit the stage, the right choice of a life and romance partner has always been of primary importance for a human being. Sometimes we find our mate at a glance, whereas sometimes a lengthy time period precedes the minute for making the final choice. However, rather than patiently and painstakingly relying on the proven age-old mate-selection process, many singles and separated in contemporary times have conceded the choice of perfect match to the faceless and anonymous Internet. But how effective has the Internet been in its assumed role as a matchmaker? What implication does this new romance with Internet dating have on modern family? What future do the Internet-arranged marriages have? What factors contribute to the preference for online dating?

### **Objectives of the study**

The major objective of this study is to explore the socioeconomic characteristics of people engaged in Internet matchmaking and its implications for the contemporary Nigerian family institution. Specifically, the study tries to ascertain the effects of social variables such as age, education, religion, ethnic affiliation, on the acceptance of Internet dating.

### *The method*

A sample of 1,019 willing participants who are registered members of eHarmony and users of americansingles.com web sites were drawn using the simple random technique. To achieve the objectives of the study, the researchers adopted the participatory research method and used a well-designed involvement process questionnaire for data collection. By so doing, the researchers registered as one of the searching singles looking for a 'serious relationship' with a female. As registered members online, we carefully completed the extensive questionnaire from which our profiles were drawn. In the questionnaire, the researchers indicated that their religious affiliation as 'Christianity', age as '34 years', highest educational level as 'University Graduate', occupation as 'Unemployed Graduate Student', marital status as 'Never Married', and their state of origin as Ekiti, among other socio-demographic variables. We also showed no preference. However, the researchers did not submit their photographs for security reasons. Periodically, the researchers then checked their e-mail addresses to view willing applicants

whose profiles were used for the study. Data generated for the study were analysed using simple percentages.

## Findings and discussion

The study reveals that over one-third of the respondents were in the age cohort 30-34 years, one-fifth were aged 24-29 years, and 14.4 percent aged 35-39 years. Only an insignificant proportion of the respondents, less than one-tenth, belong to the age cohorts 40-44 years, 18-23 years, 45-49 years and 50-54 years. Further, the fact that the highest proportion of the respondents belonged to 30-34 years age bracket shows that age has become an important determining factor when the choice of marriage partner is to be made by women. Most of the respondents preferred to marry someone who is older, or at most, someone of the same age. Thus, since the bulk of the respondents (67.3 percent) were aged between 24 and 39 years, it could be concluded that Internet dating has gained a high degree of acceptability among Nigerian youths.

On the highest educational qualification of those who date via the Internet, the study showed that more than half (approximately 57 percent) had tertiary education while a little less than four-tenth had just secondary education. Only about 5 percent of the respondents had primary/standard six education. In agreement with MediaMark Research's (1997) finding, this result indicates that western education has a significant role to play in the respondents' accessibility to the Internet and hence their romance with Internet dating. It obviously implies that computer literacy is a prerequisite for users of Internet.

The researchers also gleaned from the profiles of the respondents that the vast majority of them (approximately 66 percent) were 'never married', an indication that Internet dating is more fascinating to contemporary Nigerian spinsters. It also implies the high preference of the Nigerian spinster for a suitor who has never been married, thus making the suitor's marital status an important factor. Also, the fact that one-fifth (21 percent) of the respondents were 'divorced', shows that the unwillingness of people to own up to the failure of their marriages due to the social stigma which is disappearing gradually. It again shows the preference for the 'never married' suitor. In addition, the 13.2 percent of the respondents who were 'separated' is an indication that separation is gradually being interpreted by Nigerian women to signify divorce, thereby foreclosing any possibility of re-union with the estranged husband.

Furthermore, the researcher found that religious affiliation is a significant factor in Internet dating. This fact is demonstrated by the finding that well over half of the respondents (about 56 percent) practised Christianity. This result is not surprising because Christianity is closely associated with western education, which encourages liberality and dynamism. However, the over one-third of the respondents who were adherents of the Islamic faith is instructive. It is even intriguing when one realises the restrictions placed on Muslim women by Islam, even though Muslim men are allowed to marry the

people of the Book, Christians (Ali, 1973; Hammudah, 1982). Specifically, the Qur'an declares:

...(Lawful to you in marriage) are chaste women from the believers and chaste women from those who were given the Scripture (Jews and Christians) before your time, when you have given their due *Mahr* (bride-money given by husband to his wife at the time of marriage)... taking them in legal wedlock... (Qur'an, 5:5).

In addition, a tenth of the respondents practised 'other' religions. The significant proportion of declared non-Christians (44 percent) of the respondents, despite the researcher's affiliation to Christianity, implies that the barriers to inter-religious marriages are gradually collapsing among contemporary Nigerian single youth.

On the state of origin of the respondents, the study reveals that an overwhelming majority were from Edo (approximately 40 percent) and Delta States (15.2 percent). This finding might possibly be a fall-out of the recent deportations from Italy of some Nigeria-born commercial sex workers who are mostly from these States. The implication is that spinsters from both Edo and Delta State might be exploring Internet dating as an alternative to prostitution and a safe means of getting their perfect match. However, while about three-tenths of the respondents were from Southwest, less than two percent each were from Southeast and Northcentral. Approximately three percent were from Southsouth, none was from the Northwestern and Northeastern Nigeria. This outcome might partly be due to the absence of cybercafes, the exorbitant cost of Internet access and religion fundamentalism as reflected in the Sharia legal system, which frowns at anything that could promote immorality. The study equally shows the increasing preference for inter-State marriages among contemporary Nigerian singles.

On the number of children, the majority of the respondents (53.4 percent) had none, while 27.4 percent and 19.2 percent had one child and two children respectively. This implies that some (2.4 percent) of the respondents were single parents since only 44.2 percent had experienced marriage (see Appendix 1). In relation to this, we sought to know whether the respondents 'are ready to have own children from the union'. We found that 51.4 percent were not ready while the remaining 48.6 percent were ready to have their own children. This is an indication that the value being placed on children in contemporary Nigerian society has drastically eroded. This finding affirms the borrowing of one important trait from the Western world, where most persons have refused (and are refusing) to take over the responsibility of parenthood (Doi, 1984). Also, it shows a clear disregard for the biblical injunction describing children as God's heritage (Psalm, 127:3-5) and teaching of Islam, which considers parenthood to be the duty of every human being (Doi, 1984).

On the average, the monthly income of the respondents was well above the Minimum Wage, hence they were relatively comfortable. However, it is instructive that this relative comfortability predisposes the respondents not to

mind the researchers' status as 'Unemployed Graduate Students'. This might imply the desperate need of a husband by the respondents and the reversal of the role of a husband as the breadwinner in a patriarchal Nigerian family system. It is worth noting that about eight percent of the respondents did not disclose their average monthly income, probably to avoid getting a gold-digger for a husband or to brighten their chances by increasing their bargaining power.

The researchers equally made an effort to crosstabulate some variables for the bivariate analysis. In this regard, possible relationships were sought between variables such as 'highest educational level' and 'religion'; 'Number of Children' and 'Love to have own children from the union'.

We discovered that 37.1 percent of respondents worked in financial institutions, 32.5 percent works in education institutions, 15 percent each in government parastatals and self-employment. This high percentage from the first category implies that the access to computer technology of workers in financial institutions might have influenced their high involvement in Internet dating. This again holds when one considers the fact this category of workers spends most of their time in the office and had little or no time to search for marital mates through other avenues.

The researchers' attempt to find out the premium placed on children by contemporary Nigerian youths shows that 53.9 percent of those without children, 32.3 percent of those having one child and 71.6 percent of respondents having two children, did not desire to have their own. The implication of this finding is that the premium being placed on children in marriage and the primordial function of family as means of procreation has changed. Thus, marriage is probably being sought in contemporary Nigerian society for reasons ranging from economic gain, companionship to social prestige.

On the relationship between educational level and religious affiliation, the study reveals that 61.5 percent Muslims and 62 percent of Christians had tertiary education while 36.5 percent of Muslims and 30.9 percent of Christians had secondary education. In effect, most of the Muslim and Christian respondents have been widely exposed to western education and values. Hence, western education has significantly impacted positively on Nigerian youths, especially the Muslims by reducing the dogmas of religion, which barred them from public life.

### **Internet for Matchmaking: The Challenges ahead**

In line with the objectives of this study, the findings have established the widespread acceptability of Internet dating among contemporary Nigerian singles, especially those from the southwestern, southeastern and northcentral parts of the country. The major reasons for this development is the proliferation of cybercafes and the level of western education in these areas. Also, this study has demonstrated that though the romance with the Internet is capable of leading to cyber-carnality and other social ills, it has created a veritable avenue



for contemporary Nigerian singles to select marital mates. In fact, as early as 18 years, Nigerian singles have started relying on the Internet to help them find a partner. The Internet dating has also encouraged inter-religious and inter-ethnic relationships, which are capable of strengthening the fragile unity existing amongst Nigerians, especially the youths.

The Internet technology and Internet dating/matchmaking have become part of the evolving way of life in modern Nigerian society, hence the contemporary family institution should be ready to transmit cautiously and effectively, this evolving culture to the unborn generations. The Internet has a better chance to succeed as a tool for matchmaking/dating if properly linked to existing matching mechanisms in Nigerian family institutions. Also, developing local web sites, in local languages if possible, could catalyse interest in the Internet and encourage more active participation from concerned people.

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### Appendix: Socioeconomic characteristics of respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age:		
18-23	085	8.3
24-29	201	19.7
30-34	338	33.2
35-39	147	14.4
40-44	101	1.9
45-49	080	7.9
50-54	067	6.6
Highest Educational Level:		
Primary/Standard Six	047	4.6
Secondary	393	38.6
Tertiary	579	56.8
State of origin:		
Akwa Ibom	011	1.1
Anambra	008	0.8
Bayelsa	005	0.5
Benue	002	0.2
Ebonyi	010	1.0
Ekiti	019	1.9
Edo	407	39.9
Delta	155	15.2
Abia	011	1.1

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
State of origin: (cont.)		
Kwara	013	1.3
Kogi	004	0.4
Lagos	109	10.7
Ogun	105	10.3
Osun	102	10.0
Oyo	030	3.0
Plateau	028	2.8
Religious Affiliation:		
Islam	345	33.9
Christianity	566	55.6
Others	108	10.6
Marital Status:		
Never Married	671	65.9
Divorced	214	21.0
Separated	134	13.2
Number of Children:		
None	544	53.4
One	279	27.4
Two	196	19.2
Monthly Income:		
N10,000-N19,999	064	6.3
N20,000-N29,999	241	23.7
N30,000-N39,999	334	32.8
N40,000-N49,999	269	26.4
Above N50,000	035	3.4
Will Disclose it Later	076	7.5
Workplace:		
Self-employment	156	15.3
School	331	32.5
Government Parastatal	154	15.1
Financial Institutions	378	37.1
Ready to have own children from the union?		
Yes	495	48.6
No	524	51.4
Total	1019	100*

Source: Authors' field survey, 2003.

\* Total may not add up to 100 due to approximation.

**Appendix 2: Cross-tabulations of responses**

Number of Children and Desire to have more			
Number of Children	Love to have own children from the union?		Total
	Yes	No	
None	206(46.1)	241(53.9)	447(100)
One	218(67.7)	104(32.3)	322(100)
Two	071(28.4)	179(71.6)	250(100)

Religion and Western education				
Highest Educational level	Religious Affiliation			
	Islam	Christianity	Others	
Primary/Standard Six	007(2.0)	040(7.1)	–	047
Secondary	126(36.5)	175(30.9)	035(22.4)	336
Tertiary	212(61.5)	351(62.0)	073(67.6)	636
Total	345(100)	566(100)	108(100)	1019

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2003.