"Breaking up and being dumped": Exploring young men, masculinity and partner-initiated relationship dissolution on digital platforms

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1.Introduction and Project Aims

Introduction

Although research does recognise the influence of digital media on young people's lives, the integration of digital media into young people's love-lives and the possible ending of these relationships is very limited. The frameworks through which men's behaviour can be analysed, therefore, appears based on the idea that men take control in relationships and are solely predatorial against women in the context of online dating. I felt this not to be true from knowing young men on dating apps in my personal life and wished to include a more diverse perspective into research.

Project Aims

The intention of this project was to begin to explore how men really negotiate a new online dating sphere, what communication methods they may use and how it makes them feel to be broken up with online. Alongside this, I intended to talk to my interviewees about mental health, as some research indicates that psychological health may be affected by digital media(5). The fact that young men are statistically more likely to commit suicide and also less likely to access psychological help indicates most importantly that conversations about what it is like to live as a young man in a digital world is not only interesting for contemporary research but important.

> "I always assumed that they [women on Tinder] would assume I was a creep... so, if they didn't respond, I wasn't too fussed. I fully expected them to be getting messaged twenty-four-seven"
>
> Jack, 26, Northumberland

2.Method

> I read and synopsised total of thirteen book chapters and journal articles in order to find commonalities and/or to identify room for development.
> Once I'd written a Literature Review I could break down information which was relevant to the topic into three succinct sections to work from: *Masculinity and Breaking-Up; Social Media vs. Dating Tradition; Risks of Breaking-Up Online*
> I broke these sections into a series of questions related to each section which were used in interviews with four men between 18 and 26.
> I then transcribed the interviews and compared them against the research I had come across in my reading. This was useful to determine if my findings correlated with existing research or not.

> "I'd smash the bloody phone. You trying to break up with me online? Like, are you mad?"
>
> James, 26, Newcastle

3.Results

What arose from my research, and especially the interviews, was that young men are very aware of negative perceptions of young males on dating apps. Research indicates that young men will use social media to communicate with other young men in homogenised friendship groups in which hyper-masculine stereotypes are pushed upon each other and then reflected across the rest of social media(4), and therefore online dating apps. My interviews revealed a divided opinion on this matter, with most perceiving online dating as very private and perhaps shameful, where James described using Tinder as a social experience with his friends: *"I'd just be like, "Look." showing them like...certain people"*.

Every young man who I interviewed had been on at least one dating app (Tinder), with one describing a few others to which he was also a member. This scenario is distinctly different from the experience of young men of the same age even five years ago, which makes the dating experiences of young men today totally unique compared to the established traditions of dating before online dating. Research identifies dating etiquette as we know it today becoming first established in around the 1920s, in the last century (1). When asked to describe the 'normal' way to end a relationship, every participant of my study responded with a similar perception, that a relationship should be ended in person. What I hypothesised from this reaction is that, while dating technology is advancing, dating etiquette is not. There is research which indicates that young men are more likely to behave aggressively and not accept online break-ups(2), leading in some cases to anti-social behaviour offline, which could correlate with this hypothesis.

4.Conclusions and Future Work

Conclusion

My experience from this project lead me to believe that it important to talk to young men about their feelings and experiences as I hypothesised at the beginning of the project. My interviewees talked very understandingly and rationally about online dating's place in their lives which came somewhat as a surprise as some theorists had described men as being 'competitive' and 'misogynistic'(4) in regard to online dating. As I expected, the research that was available in the field did not describe the online dating experiences of the young men I spoke to, in an extreme example of this, both James and Jack described the kind of man whom they imagined using Tinder and illustrated in both cases an image of a hyper-masculine male who they spoke disparagingly of as a bad example of men. Finally, the split was around half and half around whether young men felt they could access mental health support or not, which is marginally more hopeful than contemporary research suggests but of course the interviews were conducted with a small selection of people.

Future work

The research that has been conducted is the first of its kind, and therefore it is very basic and certainly not comprehensive enough to paint a picture of the environment of breaking up on digital media as a whole. The imperative going forward, therefore, may be to gain a greater sample of young men from across the United Kingdom. From this, a classification system may begin to be developed through which characteristics such as class, education level, race and sexuality may begin to be explored.

Acknowledgements

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