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Being online daters or not: Effects of individual factors, peers influence, and social reality

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Abstract

This study aimed to bolster knowledge regarding the factors affecting adoption behaviors of online dating sites. We held the view that the adoption of online dating sites is not only a diffusion of innovation process but also an outcome of the interactions among individual, peers and society. Using the data collected from a telephone interview by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project in U.S., this study explored the role of perceived usefulness, perceived peer influence and perceived social reality in the adoption process. As a result, perceived usefulness of online dating sites was found to be the principal factor in influencing one's choice of online dating sites. Also, perceived peer influence had been considered as another influential factor in this adoption process. However, perceived social reality had shown no impacts towards this adoption decision.

Keywords: online dating sites (ODS), adoption, perceived usefulness, peer influence, social reality

Introduction

In the colorful world of social networking sites, online dating sites (ODS) gradually develops as a new ground for individuals to meet, date, and even marry with a romantic partner. However, it is still not entirely certain why some people set foot on the new land of ODS, while some others still rely on face-to-face interactions to initiate a romantic relationship. Only if we can understand the adoption process of ODS, we can better discuss the online daters' following online behaviors, such as self-presentation, deception, or deception detection in the online dating scenario. Even though present studies have already tried to attribute the adoption decision of ODS to demographics or dispositional factors, they are still limited their discussions to the individual level. In fact, the adoption of online dating sites is not only a diffusion of innovation process but also a production of the interactions among individual, peers and society.

In the past decade, more and more researchers began to identify online dating as a common social practice rather than a marginal one it was used to be (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). The prevalence of ODS can be shown both in a significant number of users and diversified ODS services. In a survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2013, about 22% of Internet users in America have used online dating sites or Apps. This group of people accounts for more than one-tenth of all American adults. As to the development of ODS, several websites have already become quite popular among ordinary citizens, for example, OkCupid, match.com, eHarmony.com, and lovestruck.com. Regional preference is one key factor when people are choosing a ODS. For instance, Americans prefer OkCupid; Lovestruck.com is quite popular among Hong Kong adults; and nearly 100 million Chinese have registered as a member on Baihe.com. On online dating websites (Apps), users can achieve instant matching in a few clicks. With the powerful searching tool, almost every ODS user indulges in searching and browsing desired daters without making many efforts. Fundamentally, the searching tool panders to the "fast food culture" in current society. Thus, websites developers and researchers have devoted to developing the matching algorithm that can fit users' needs (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010). Overall, it is worth noting that ODS has become an important platform for people to seek for romantic partners.

Despite the fact that ODS spreads its influence around the modern society, a few studies have been able to disclose the whole picture of adoption process of ODS. Even though adoption is a widely-discussed topic that has received substantial attention as a means of exploring the diffusion of innovation, its application to the realm of online dating sites has still been limited. A closer look at the limited existing literature, it is not hard to find that researchers have mainly explained the reasons why people use ODS from the perspective of online daters per se (Blackhart, Fitzpatrick, & Williamson, 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). This approach failed to put the adoption process of ODS into a social context. Although the adoption of innovation is a decision of an individual, it cannot be confined the study to individual factors when discussing the personal adoption process.

In comparison with the individual approach, this study includes the interactions among individuals, innovation, peers and society into discussions. First, the perceived usefulness of ODS is an interaction between individuals and innovation. We suspect that the more useful of innovation, the more likely one would use it. Second, perceived peer influence is fundamentally a way to evaluate an innovation with the help of friends, families, and colleagues. We believe the more peer influence one had got, the more likely

he/she would adopt ODS as a means to find a romantic partner. Lastly, perceived social reality reflects the comparison between the online and offline partnership. People could turn to an online platform for finding a better match when he/she found it difficult to do so in the offline world. There is another possibility that an individual may use both online and offline ways to a develop romantic relationship because he/she can expertly attract others in both online and offline worlds. Overall, this study provides new insights into the diffusion process of ODS by adding the factors of perceived usefulness, perceived peer influence and perceived social reality.

Theoretically, this study will expand the diffusion of innovation theory to the realm of online dating. Also, it will help understand the adoption process of ODS from the interactions among individuals, innovation, peers, and society. Practically, the current paper is providing a complete picture of adoption behaviors on ODS, thus help online daters to know the mechanism behind why they are using the online dating sites or Apps.

Literature Review

Diffusion of Innovations

Rogers stated that "diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" in his original book *Diffusion of Innovation* (Rogers, 2003). Rogers (2003) called innovation, communication channel, time, and social system as the key factors in discussing the diffusion of innovation process. These key factors, especially perceived characteristics of innovations, have been adopted as the most important antecedents of adoption decisions in the subsequent studies. Also, Rogers (2003) also revealed the five stages in the innovation-decision process: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. Take an individual decision making process as an example, the socioeconomic status, personality and communication behaviors of a man may firstly influence his awareness of one innovation (knowledge stage); then the attributes of one innovation, such as relative advantage, compatibility, will affect a man's attitudes towards this innovation (persuasion stage); after the persuasion stage, this man will make a decision to accept this innovation or not; implementation occurs when this man actually use this innovation; and finally this man may still confront dissonance when using this innovation. Overall, the four key factors and five stages sketch the process of innovation diffusion.

The diffusion of innovations model has been widely deployed to explain the adoption patterns of those well-known information systems/technologies, such as the Internet, wireless communication technologies, and group support systems (Chin & Gopal, 1995; Wei, 2006; Zhu & He, 2002). For instance, Zhu and He (2002) investigated the reinvention of innovation by incorporating the use of Internet into the diffusion process to remedy a long-standing problem called pro-innovation bias. Instead of assuming no innovation will be rejected by audiences, Zhu and He (2002) categorized the adopters into four classes, including continuous adopters, discontinued adopters, potential adopters, and continuous non-adopters. These categories described the dynamics of the diffusion process and can be predicted by the key factors that Rogers mentioned in its seminal works (Rogers, 2003).

Studies concerning the adoption of ODS have been mostly expanded their discussions from the perspective of the individual, the knowledge stage mentioned above. For instance, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found males who are between 30 and 50 years

old more frequently visit online dating sites in Netherlands. Also, Blackhart et al. (2014) explored the relationship between personal dispositional factors and relationship initiation on online dating sites. Particularly, they found that people who are more sensitive to the rejection (by family members) about the usage of ODS would be more likely to use online dating sites. Though these individual factors had been used by researchers to predict adoption behaviors of ODS, it is still far more sufficient to reflect the dynamics of the adoption process of ODS.

Overall, the interactions among individuals, peers, and the society should be included in the discussion of actual adoption behaviors for two reasons. First, the actual adoption behaviors are the production of a series of decision-making actions, including personal awareness, evaluation of an innovation, peer influence, as well as social impact. Also, Rogers (2003) mentioned four factors in discussing the diffusion of innovation should not be neglected in considering the adoption of ODS. Second, individual factors mostly can be used to predict one's awareness of an innovation in the knowledge stage according to Rogers's five crucial stages (Rogers, 2003). The other decision-making actions are missing in the existing literature. Linking up the influential factors with actual adoption behaviors, this study would consider perceived usefulness of an innovation, perceived peer influence, and perceived social reality as antecedents to predict adoption behaviors of ODS.

Perception of innovation

The "subjective attributes" of an innovation have been found particularly related to adoption intentions and behaviors (Chin & Gopal, 1995; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989; Moore & Benbasat, 1991; Zhu & He, 2002). The subjective attributes, namely perceived advantages of an innovation, are more widely discussed than objective attributes. For example, in the information system implementation area, Moore and Benbasat (1991) revealed that it is a major focus to study "how potential users' perceptions of the information technology innovation influence its adoption" (Moore & Benbasat, 1991). In 1962, Rogers firstly pointed out five characteristics of innovations: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, observability, and trialability. From then on, researchers have explored dozens of characteristics, such as voluntariness, image, result demonstrability, visibility, playfulness, perceived popularity, perceived needs (Moore & Benbasat, 1991; Webster & Martocchio, 1992; Zhu & He, 2002).

Perceived usefulness of an innovation is particularly common among most studies (Adams, Nelson, & Todd, 1992; Davis et al., 1989; Hendrickson, Massey, & Cronan, 1993; Mathieson, 1991; Moore & Benbasat, 1991; Zhu & He, 2002). Davis et al. (1989) defined perceived usefulness (PU) as "prospective user's subjective probability that using a specific application system will increase his or her job performance within an organizational context" (p.985). Using the technology acceptance model (TAM), Davis et al. (1989) found adoption intentions were strongly impacted by PU. When a person perceived the higher usefulness of an innovation, he or she have stronger intentions to use this innovation. Later, Adams et al. (1992) confirmed the determinant role of PU in adopting voice and electronic mails.

In the context of this study, perceived usefulness of ODS refers to prospective user's subjective probability that using ODS will increase his or her possibility to develop a romantic relationship. Based on the existing literature concerning the relationship between PU and adoption behaviors, we propose that:

H1: The more useful an individual perceives ODS, the more likely the person will adopt it.

Perceived ease of use (PEOU) is also a popular element in considering adoption of an innovation, but will not be included in this study. PEOU is defined as "the degree to which the prospective user expects the target system to be free of effort" (Davis et al., 1989). Put it in simple, PEOU refers to the easiness to use the ODS in the current context. This study did not consider PEOU as an influential factor for two reasons. First, PEOU has been found to have small though the significant effect on adoption intentions and behaviors (Adams et al., 1992; Davis et al., 1989) Second, it is not parsimonious to consider PEOU of ODS into the model in the era of Internet. It is never hard for a netizen to use ODS as a tool to add, follow and like people. Because most netizens have repeatedly been doing the same things over the Internet every day. Therefore, it is not necessary to include PEOU into consideration.

Perceived peer influence

To adopt or reject an innovation is not only a personal decision but also a decision greatly affected by peers. Peer often acts as a major reference group in a wide range of decision making. In one's early ages, the peer is one of the central sources for the process of adolescents' socialization (Kandel & Andrews, 1987). While grown up, studies in consumer behaviors have also confirmed the influence of peers on individuals' product and brand decisions (Childers & Rao, 1992).

On the one hand, peer influences an individual's decision by increasing the perceived acceptance and perceived popularity. In fact, perceived popularity could lead to varied positive outcomes such as academic achievement (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997) and prosocial behavior (Choukas-Bradley, Giletta, Cohen, & Prinstein, 2015), or adverse consequences such as bullying (Bruyn, Cillessen, & Wissink, 2009) and smoking behaviors (Harakeh & Vollebergh, 2012). Peer dating is also found to be a major reason for one's dating in early adolescence (Friedlander, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2007). In the field of online dating, although it is still datable whether ODS is beneficial or detrimental for social stable, peers' adoption of ODS would increase the perceived popularity which can further influence one's using of ODS. Adopting popular devices is a way to get well with others and get engaged with the group. The friendship and networks are based on social attraction and common interests (Ladd, 1999). People are often motivated to share common interests with others and to avoid alienation.

On the other hand, peer's positive feedback and successful examples to adopt ODS for meeting the right person would be very inspiring and encouraging. It is human being's nature to imitate from others' behaviors from infancy (Jones, 2009). The social cognition process is considered as a selective imitation process (Brody & Stoneman, 1981; Byrne, 2005). Furthermore, perceived effectiveness of the ODS from peers' adoption is a strong weapon for persuasion (Wilson, 2003). Particularly, when peers feel one product useful, the word-of-mouth would be very influential to their friends. If there are vivid cases for people to realize the effectiveness of ODS, it will enhance people's beliefs and confidence of their usage.

H2: The greater influence an individual perceives ODS from peers, the more likely the person will adopt it.

Online dating as a substitution of offline dating?

With the prevalence of Internet and social networking sites, ODS offers new possibilities to initiate the interpersonal romantic relationship in cyberspace. Compared to the traditional face-to-face dating, online dating is computer-mediated. In the computer-mediated communication (CMC), people may easily self-enhance themselves because of its hyperpersonal affordances, such as editable content, unlimited time, physical isolation, and lack of non-verbal cues (Walther, 2007). These affordances allow users to attract others via ODS by showcasing desired attributes strategically. For instance, women are more likely to post more information regarding their physical attractiveness to show their "healthiness," and men are more likely to embellish information related to their incomes, education levels, and careers. (Buss, 1989; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010). Due to the better image an individual self-present in ODS, he/she is more liable to find a more desirable partner through an online dating websites/Apps. Therefore, ODS become the new choice for people who are eager to search for and meet future romantic partners.

Will ODS substitute face-to-face interactions as a dominant way to develop romantic relationships due to the advantages of computer-mediated communication? Another factor may influence people's choice in adopting ODS is the anxiety caused from offline dating. Valkenburg and Peter (2007) tested two competing hypotheses, social compensation hypothesis and the rich-get-richer hypothesis, to determine the role of offline dating anxiety in ODS usage. In the social compensation hypothesis, researchers claimed that people who have higher offline dating anxiety would be more likely to use ODS because of the compensation effects. However, rich-get-richer hypothesis proposes that individuals who have more confidence in offline dating, that is to have lower dating anxiety, would more frequently use ODS. As a result, Valkenbug and Peter (2007) confirmed that the lower dating anxiety one has, the more active he/she is in ODS. This result suggests an important way understand how offline social reality influences online interactions.

Therefore, we would like to explore further whether offline dating difficulties would influence one's choice of ODS. Due to the limited literature in understanding how the perception of difficulties impacts adoption behaviors, the answers could be controversial. Therefore, we propose a research questions as following:

RQ: Will an individual be more likely to adopt ODS when they feel difficult to meet a partner offline?

Method

Data were obtained from the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, which was collected from April 17 to May 19, 2013, by telephone interviews in the United States. A total of 2,252 adults, age 18 and older participated in the survey. Respondents who did not use the Internet (N=357) were removed. Overall, our sample (N=1,895) included 874 (46%) males and 1,021 (54%) females, with an average age of 47.76 (SD=17.77). Nearly half of the respondents completed bachelor or higher education (42%).

Adoption of ODS. Adoption of ODS refers to participants' ever usage of ODS. It was measured by whether the participant used an online dating site or a dating app on the mobile phone. Participants, either having experiences of using online dating website

or app on the cell phone, were considered as adopters of ODS. Among the valid cases, 22% (N=223) reported the adoption of ODS.

Perceived usefulness. Perceived usefulness refers to how people feel ODS is helpful for them to seek for partners. It was measured by two items. Respondents were required to check how they agreed on two statements; specifically, whether "ODS was a good way to meet people" and whether ODS allowed "people to find a better match because they can get to know a lot more people". The two variables were averaged for data analysis (γ =.40) with higher score inferred greater perceived usefulness, M=.57, SD=.44.

Perceived peer influences. Perceived peer influence refers to perceived popularity among the peer group and the perceived effectiveness of peer's usage. Respondents were asked to assess on two items; "whether knew anyone who had used an online dating site or app before" and "whether knew anyone who had been in a long-term relationship with or married someone they met through an online dating site or app." Among the participants, 48% (N=904) knew others use online dating site or app. Meanwhile, 33% (N=623) of all the respondents knew the positive outcome of others using online dating site or app. The two variables were averaged for data analysis (γ =.54) with higher score meant stronger perceived peer influences, M=.41, SD=.43.

Perceived social reality. Perceived social reality refers to the perception of difficulties in seeking for partnership in offline society. It was assessed by the extent to which a person reported it "easy or difficult to meet people in the city or town where they live". It is a bivariate item, and respondents chose either easy or difficult. Among the valid case, 50% (N=60) reported easy, and another 50% claimed that it is difficult to meet people in reality. Feel difficult to meet people was coded as zero in further analysis.

Control variables. Past studies suggested that gender, age, education, income and marital status might influence the likelihood of adopting ODS. Marital status was classified into six categories: married (N=964, 52%), living with a partner (N=104, 6%), divorced (N=210, 11%), separated (N=47, 3%), widowed (126, 7%) and never been married (N=420, 22%). The respondents who were divorced, separated, widowed and never been married were also considered as the group of "not married" for the subsequent analysis.

Results

To test Hypothesis 1 and 2, we have performed a logistic regression analysis to ascertain the effects of perceived usefulness of ODS and perceived peer influence on the likelihood that people adopt ODS. The dependent variable adoption of ODS is dichotomous, so we carried out a binary logistic regression analysis. Also, age, gender, education, income, and marital status has been controlled in the models. The results are shown in Table 1.

The basic model including control variables explains 15.1% of the variance in ODS adoption. Of the five control variables, there are two were statistically significant and one was marginally significant: age, education, and marital status (shown as Model 1 in Table 1). The older people are more likely to adopt ODS as a platform to seek a romantic partner. People who received higher education would be more likely to adopt ODS. Compared to people who have never been married, married people are less likely to adopt ODS. However, divorced people had 2.33 times higher odds to adopt ODS than those who have never been married.

As predicted in **Hypothesis 1**, when an individual perceives ODS as more useful, this person is more likely to adopt ODS to develop a romantic relationship. Increasing perceived usefulness of ODS was associated with an increased likelihood to adopt ODS. When one more unit of usefulness was perceived, the likelihood this person adopt ODS would increase 2.67 times.

Hypothesis 2 is also strongly supported. The greater influence an individual perceives ODS from peers, the more likely the person will adopt it. There is an association between increased perceived peer influence and the likelihood to adopt ODS. One unit of perceived peer influence increased, the likelihood the person adopt ODS would increase 3.04 times.

Adding two independent variables to the basic model, Model 2 explains 20% of the variance in adopting ODS. Two control variables, age and education, are still statistically significant though marginally. Also, people with lower income would be more likely to adopt ODS. Still, married people are less likely to adopt ODS, and divorced people are more likely to adopt ODS when comparing them with people who have never been married respectively.

Table 1
Logistic Regression Coefficients Predicting Adoption of Online Dating Sites

Predictors		**Model 1**	**Mode2**
Control Variables	Age	1.01#	1.01#
	Gender(female=0)	1.3	1.38
	Education	1.15*	1.12#
	Income	.93	.90*
	Marital Status (never been married=0)		
	Married	.15***	.15***
	Living with a partner	1.11	.94
	Divorced	2.33**	2.05*
	Separated	.87	.81
	Widowed	1.02	1.33
Independent Variables	Perceived Usefulness		2.67***
	Perceived Peer Influence		3.04***
	Constant	.18***	.07***
Log-likelihood		713.81	672.33
Cox & Snell R^2		.15	.20
Number of cases		1895	

Note. Entries are odds ratio, Exp(b).
#p< .1, *p< .05, **p< .01, ***p< .001.

To answer the research question we proposed earlier, we conducted another binary regression analysis by only selecting people who are currently looking for a partner.

This group of people is divorced, separated, widowed or have never been married. In the models, perceived usefulness of ODS, perceived peer influence, and perceived social reality had been used to predict adoption of ODS. Again, age, gender, education, income, and marital status have been used as control variables. Table 2 shows the results of these models.

In the basic model, it only explains 5% of the variance in adopting ODS. No variable is statistically significant in predicting adoption of ODS (see results as Model 1 in Table 2). Adding three independent variables, Model 2 (in Table 2) can explain 20% of the variance in the ODS adoption behaviors. Perceived usefulness and perceived peer influence are still statistically significant in the group of people who are looking for a partner. One unit of perceived peer influence increased, the likelihood the person will adopt ODS would increase 5.87 times in this group. Also, there is also an association between perceived peer influence and ODS adoption behavior. When one person perceived one more unit of peer influence, the likelihood he/she would adopt ODS will increase 3.7 times. Perceived social reality is not able to predict the adoption behavior in this group of people. So, the perception of offline social reality would not influence whether a person would adopt ODS or not.

Table2
Logistic Regression Coefficients Predicting Adoption of Online Dating Sites Among People Who Are Currently Looking for Partner

	Predictor		**Model 1**	**Mode2**
Control Variables	Age		1.01	.99
	Gender(female=0)		.84	1.25
	Education		1.06	1.07
	Income		1.01	.94
	Marital Status (never been married=0)			
		Divorced	2.26	1.76
		Separated	1.69	1.53
		Widowed	2.78	6.37
Independent Variables	Perceived Usefulness			5.87*
	Perceived Peer Influence			3.70#
	Perceived Social Reality(difficult=0)			.47
	Constant		.77	.32
Log-likelihood			97.99	84.8
Cox & Snell R^2			.05	.20
Number of cases		138		

Note. Entries are odds ratio, Exp(b).
#p< .1, *p< .05

Discussions

This study investigates the relationship between perceived usefulness, perceived peer influence, perceived social reality and adoption of ODS. The first hypothesis, higher perceived usefulness relates to the higher possibility to adopt ODS, was supported. This outcome is consistent with the existing literature (Adams, Nelson, & Todd, 1992; Davis et al., 1989; Hendrickson, Massey, & Cronan, 1993; Mathieson, 1991; Moore & Benbasat, 1991; Zhu & He, 2002). Three implications can be concluded from these results. First, perceived usefulness is the leading factor in impacting one's choice of an innovation, as well as ODS. Second, to meet people and find a better match are the main reasons for people to adopt ODS. Third, the technology advantages are accelerating the online dating development, especially the big data approach and matching algorithm.

Also, it was confirmed that people who perceived more peer influences are more possibly become ODS adopters. Peers constitute the microenvironment where people lives and thus becomes more directly influential to one's decision making. Peer influences have been identified in various areas; for example, peer reference group is found to exert more influences than the societal-level public in encouraging people's opinion expression (Oshagan, 1996). Meanwhile, the concept of peer group homogeneity also suggests that peers are likely to flock together and conduct similar behaviors (Cohen, 1977), although it is unsure whether the homogeneity is caused by influence or selection (Engels, Knibbe, Drop, & de Haan, 1997). Nevertheless, this study not only provides evidence to support the effect of peer influences on ODS adoption but also looks at the peer influence from the perceived popularity of ODS among peers and its perceived effectiveness. Based on our findings, it would be interesting for further studies to explore to what extent the adoption of ODS is a simple behavioral imitation from peers, or peers' adoptions exert influences in people's beliefs of ODS before using.

However, the perceived social reality is not able to predict ODS adoption behaviors. In other words, the perceived difficulties of meeting a romantic partner in offline worlds have nothing to do with the ODS adoption behaviors. Although Valkenburg and Peter (2007) had verified the validity of the rich-get-richer hypothesis, their results still cannot be extended to the discussion of offline dating difficulties. Both social compensation and rich-get-richer hypothesis cannot be applied in this study. One possible reason is that people do not take ODS as a special platform to meet girlfriend or boyfriend, in particular among those who have grown up with the Internet in the past decades. In other words, using an online platform is no longer a new thing to try when something can(not) be achieved offline. Also, it is plausible to explain this result from the design of the measurement scale. Respondents have been asked to answer either easy or difficult to the question of perceived social reality. Therefore, the results may show different stories when using perceived social reality as a continuous variable.

An interesting finding is that divorced people have higher tendency to use ODS than people have never been married. This is in line with the findings of Valkenburg and Peter (2007) that divorced are far more likely to use ODS than the others. It is reasonable to infer this is because the divorced become more cautious in the re-select mate process. On the one hand, they would like to project a more favorable image to others through ODS. On the other hand, they would find a better match partner with the help of searching tool in ODS. Overall, it deserves to pay closer attention to the group of divorced people in the online dating scenario.

Limitations of the current study are that the adoption behaviors are not specific enough. When a person has ever used ODS over Internet or cell phone Apps, he or she will be counted as an adopter of ODS. This measurement neglected different categories of adopters, as well as the changing dynamics of adopting process. Also, the usage of ODS, such as frequencies, time length, is not included in this study. Without these details, this study was not able to extend the discussions to the usage stage. An additional limitation of this study is the small sample size of people who are currently looking for a romantic partner. The small sample size may not lead to accurate generalizations regarding the whole group of single people who are eager to find a significant one. However, the findings may contribute to scholarly understandings of how an individual adopt ODS as a tool to develop a romantic relationship in the current society and raise further research questions for future studies.

Future studies may develop a survey questionnaire targeting the group of ODS users, among whom adoption motivations would be clearer and stronger, and their specific usage would be elaborated. Also, it would be meaningful to further discuss the effects of offline dating difficulties towards ODS usage, because the answers to this question are still controversial. Furthermore, a thorough research is needed for the group of divorced people, who are pickier in the mate re-selection process.

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