



**ROLE OF TRUST AND GENDER IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
SOCIAL PENETRATION FACTORS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD
SUITORS IN ONLINE MOBILE DATING APPLICATIONS**

By

SARAH LOW MAY POH

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

September 2024

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved parents, my Mother, Anne Chin Mei Lai and my late Father, David Low Hock Heng.



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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment
of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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September 2024

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Online dating has become an alternative method to find a partner, whether for a serious relationship leading to marriage or just looking for fun or friendship. With the advancement of technology, dating can now happen simply by downloading a matchmaking or online dating app via one's mobile phone. To keep up with this fast-growing trend, this research has studied the role of trust and gender in the relationship between social penetration factors and attitude toward suitors in online mobile dating applications (MDAs) within the Malaysian context. This research has utilized quantitative surveys of Malaysian respondents who are Millennials (those born between 1977 and 1994). This research intends to support the social penetration factors and highlight the positive effect of online dating in Malaysia. Furthermore, positive attitudes toward online dating suitors are a strong predictor of perceived success in online dating. The research design utilized a cross-sectional survey such as pilot tests and questionnaires. The research design aims to measure the relationship between social penetration theory and online dating success in Malaysia. An extended Social Penetration Theory (SPT) model with five external elements was postulated (intention

of use, self-disclosure, initiation of face-to-face interaction, trust, and attitudes toward suitors in online dating). Finally, structural equation modeling (SEM) explained the relationship between variables. The study findings show a direct relationship between self-disclosure, initiation of face-to-face meetings, and attitudes toward suitors on mobile dating applications (MDAs). However, the intention of use requires a high level of trust before positive attitudes toward suitors in mobile dating applications are formed. Gender does not play a part in forming positive attitudes towards suitors while online dating. The implications of this study lie in its attempt to advance our understanding of online dating within the local Malaysian and Asian context. The study provides a deeper understanding of online dating needs, motivation, and trust to all stakeholders, including dating app developers, so that they can refine, modify, and update their policies.

Keywords: online dating, mobile dating applications, social penetration theory, trust, gender, Malaysia

SDG: GOAL 5: Gender Equality

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PERANAN KEPERCAYAAN DAN JANTINA TERHADAP PENGARUH
FAKTOR PENEMBUSAN SOSIAL TERHADAP SIKAP PASANGAN
DATING DALAM TALIAN DI MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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Online Dating telah menjadi kaedah alternatif untuk mencari pasangan, sama ada untuk hubungan serius yang bertuju ke perkahwinan atau hanya mencari keseronokan atau persahabatan. Dengan kemajuan teknologi, pencarian teman kini boleh berlaku hanya dengan memuat turun aplikasi mencari jodoh atau temu janji dalam talian melalui telefon mudah alih seseorang. Untuk mengikuti trend yang berkembang pesat ini, penyelidik akan mengkaji peranan kepercayaan dan jantina terhadap pengaruh faktor penembusan sosial terhadap sikap pelamar dalam aplikasi *Mobile Dating Application (MDAs)* dalam konteks Malaysia. Penyelidikan ini telah menggunakan tinjauan kuantitatif responden Malaysia yang terdiri daripada golongan *Millennial* (mereka yang dilahirkan antara 1977 dan 1994). Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk menyokong teori penembusan sosial dan menyerlahkan kesan positif *Online Dating* di Malaysia. Tambahan pula, sikap positif terhadap pasangan temu janji dalam talian adalah peramal yang kuat terhadap kejayaan yang dilihat dalam temu janji di atas talian. Reka bentuk penyelidikan menggunakan metodologi tinjauan keratan rentas dan termasuk beberapa instrumen, seperti ujian rintis dan soal selidik. Reka bentuk

penyelidikan bertujuan untuk mengukur hubungan faktor antara teori penembusan sosial dan kejayaan temu janji dalam talian di Malaysia. Model lanjutan Teori Penembusan Sosial (SPT) dengan lima elemen luaran telah didalilkan (niat penggunaan, pendedahan sendiri, permulaan interaksi bersemuka, kepercayaan dan sikap terhadap pelamar dalam temu janji dalam talian). Maklum balas kemudiannya dinilai untuk kebolehppercayaan, kesahan, dan ketepatan model dengan praujian dan SPSS. Akhirnya, pemodelan persamaan struktur (SEM) menjelaskan hubungan antara pemboleh-ubah kajian. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan bahawa hubungan langsung antara penembusan sosial, permulaan pertemuan bersemuka, dan sikap terhadap pelamar pada aplikasi Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs). Walau bagaimanapun, niat penggunaan memerlukan tahap kepercayaan yang tinggi sebelum sikap positif terhadap pelamar dalam aplikasi temu janji mudah alih dibentuk. Jantina tidak memainkan peranan dalam membentuk sikap positif terhadap pelamar semasa temu janji dalam talian. Implikasi kajian ini terletak pada percubaannya untuk memajukan pemahaman kita tentang temu janji dalam talian dalam konteks Malaysia dan Asia tempatan. Kajian ini akan memberikan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang keperluan temu janji dalam talian, motivasi dan kepercayaan kepada semua pihak berkepentingan, termasuk pembangun aplikasi janji temu dalam talian, supaya mereka boleh memperhalusi, mengubah suai dan mengemaskini dasar mereka.

Kata Kunci: online dating, mobile dating applications, social penetration theory, trust, gender, Malaysia

SDG: MATLAMAT 5: Kesaksamaan Jantina

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SPT	Social Penetration Theory
MDAs	Mobile Dating Applications
SEM	Structural Equation Modeling
PLS	Partial Least Squares (regression)
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
SNS	Social Networking Sites
GSD	General Disclosiveness Scale
MAIN	Modality, Agency, Interactivity, Navigability (Sundar MAIN Model)
ITS	Individualized Trust Scale
IMBP	The Integrative Model of Behavioral Prediction
MDAU	Mobile Dating Application Usage
IU	Intention of Use
SD	Self-Disclosure
IF2FI	Initiation of Face-to-face Interaction
PIA	Product Indicator Method
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
CCA	Confirmatory Composite Analysis
<i>SD</i>	Standard Deviation
HTMT	Heterotrait-Monotrait
VIF	Variance-Inflation Factor
SARR	Significance and Relevance Relationships
BCA	Bias-Corrected and Accelerated bootstrap

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the subject and background of this study. It explains the reasons for understanding how social penetration aids trust and attitudes toward online dating in Malaysia. This section also illustrates the issues raised in the problem statement, the research objectives, the significance of the study, the scope and limitations of the study, and the definition of the key terms.

1.1 Background of Study

Marriage rates in Malaysia have decreased according to an online article published in New Straits Time (Muhamading, 2018). A 2014 survey conducted by the National Population and Family Development Board titled “5th Malaysian Population and Family Survey” has shown that the three core reasons why many Malaysians remained single include money, career and the inability to find the right person.

‘Marriage market’ is a term referring to the distribution of potential suitors given the various ways in which people meet one another both offline and online (Goldman et al., 1984). The Marriage markets have not changed drastically since the rise of online dating, except in the important respect that individuals have added the computer mediated communication (CMC) and mobile dating applications (MDAs) to the repertoire of means for meeting possible suitors.

However, apart from dating websites, social networking sites (SNS), forums, personal websites and chat rooms are ways in which people find other people online. The use of SNS, specifically, have risen drastically over the past ten years. Regardless of this rise, it is not accurate to state that when one is online “love will discover you when you least expect it” – especially when online dating sites remains the top choice for successful love matches.

Social network sites (SNS) and internet dating applications changed the way humans communicate and build interpersonal relationships. Additionally, it changes the characters and the standard of interpersonal relationships. Inside the context of intercultural communication, symbols of communication are strongly bound by any culture, rather than inter-cultural relations based on traditional media. The World Wide Web and Social Media enables people to connect with those that they have never met and out of their social circle and as a result changed the whole courtship process (Lawson & Leck, 2006).

The onset of smartphones, smartphone apps such as Tinder, Coffee Meets Bagel, Happn, TanTan, Paktor and many other Mobile Phone Applications (MDAs) have increasingly changed the state of dating and love in Asia. Even Facebook now has a dating option and ‘secret crush’ function to entice young millennials back to the Social Networking Site (Leskin, 2019).

Like advertisers, people utilize the biography section to describe their own best (and worst) features and qualities. These people adjust such qualities and characteristics as to what they think potential online dating partners are usually looking for. As a result,

researchers believe that the source of information found on an individual's biography gives a reasonably clear indication of human relationships and mating strategies.

On most mobile dating applications, users can register free of charge using their personal Facebook accounts, post up to nine photos and fill out an about me section that lists their background, interest and who they would like to meet. Once users are registered, they can begin to swipe matches. From the suitable matches, the app's algorithm provides, users, swipe right to "like" potential matches and swipe left to continue on their search. Most mobile dating apps such as Tinder, Coffee Meets Bagel, Happn, TanTan, and Paktor also offers free registration and the same types of algorithm where users can only start chatting with each other when both parties mutually like each other.

Coffee Meets Bagel's best function is that the app provides users with specially selected matches on a daily basis, promising higher quality matches instead of quantity like the Tinder app (Pikri, 2017). So, in contrast to the infamous utilization of Tinder as a hook-up app, Coffee Meets Bagel's functionality steers its users towards a more serious form of online dating. Once matched, users have a limited timeframe of one week to chat with each other before the chat room is closed. This give users a sense of urgency in moving the conversation towards other forms of communication platforms such as phone call or Whatsapp messenger and even Face-to-face dates. Facebook dating is available only on mobile built directly into the main Facebook app. Facebook dating introduces singles to connections who have common or mutual friends on the platform. There is also a prompt to speed up the dating process and to encourage each other to start messaging first (Nunez, 2019).

Even though there are increasing number of Malaysians who use online dating platforms, but topics on their dating activities are often not openly discussed because of constant fear of scrutiny from society, public, friends and family (Vijaindren, 2017). This stigma of dating online is often self-imposed because studies have shown that 45 per cent of all respondents would not have any negative perception towards a couple that met online (Vijaindren, 2017). However, it is important to discuss these issues not to “glorify” the easy accessibility of these platforms but to educate individuals on the security and safety aspect of using these platforms and also on strategies on how to communicate effectively and date successfully.

1.2 Statement of Research Problem

In exploring the complex dynamics of online dating and relationship formation, it is crucial to identify the gaps that persist within existing research. While various studies have examined communication theories, trust, and gender psychology in the context of both traditional and digital interactions, there remains a need to critically assess how these elements function in today’s fast-evolving digital platforms. Online dating, in particular, has brought new challenges, especially regarding the role of trust, communication depth, and changing societal norms in different cultural settings. These gaps provide an opportunity to refine theoretical frameworks, address practical concerns, and investigate under-represented populations, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the modern dating landscape.

1.2.1 Practical Gap

In today's fast-paced technological world, where communication often occurs through email and apps like Line, WhatsApp, and WeChat, many busy working individuals need help finding time for traditional dating. As online dating apps become more popular, they also present risks such as cyber-scamming (Shaari et al., 2019; Saad & Abdullah, 2018), cyber-blackmailing, stalking, and catfishing (Vijandren, 2017). Other adverse effects include the rise of hookup culture, mental health impacts from constant judgment based on appearance, and the "gamification" of dating apps, which fosters a need for immediate gratification and less seriousness in relationships (Alam et al., 2018).

Yuen (2017) noted that Malaysian youths are more traditional than their Western counterparts and still prefer face-to-face communication. Only 7% of Malaysian youths believe Tinder is a suitable way to meet someone, below the global average of 12% (Yuen, 2017). However, a YouGov survey found that 29% of Malaysians have used online dating apps (Vijandren, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic further reduced online dating stigma as apps added video chat features to adapt to global lockdowns (Sigalos, 2020; Watson, 2020).

While most research has focused on online dating websites, the motives for using mobile dating apps (MDAs) still need clarification. Studies suggest users are drawn to MDAs for accessibility, mobility, social benefits, self-status seeking, entertainment, information, and the pursuit of happiness (Lin et al., 2014; Gerlich et al., 2015). Though romantic connection or marriage is often secondary to other motivations (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016), face-to-face meetings are still necessary for developing

genuine online relationships. However, users still face risks, such as encountering individuals solely seeking casual encounters (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016).

Online dating scripts are also heavily gendered, with distinct expectations for men and women (Kim et al., 2007). Traditional roles often require men to be assertive and women to be passive, with males prioritizing sex and females focusing on relationships (Kim et al., 2007). These gender norms can have harmful effects, such as increased drug use and delinquency in boys and lower self-esteem in girls (Aubrey, 2006; Grabe et al., 2007; Impett et al., 2006).

Trust is crucial in online interactions, often starting at a zero baseline and building over time (Rousseau et al., 1998; Lewicki et al., 2006). In dating, trust is essential for fostering relationships, but users often face challenges in discerning genuine intentions, especially in mobile apps that enable anonymity and casual interactions. Despite these issues, dating apps continue to grow in popularity, transforming how people meet and form relationships globally (Dixon, 2024).

Western and Eastern communication philosophies also influence online dating behaviors. Western traditions prioritize individualism and low-context communication, in contrast with Eastern views emphasizing interconnectedness and high-context communication (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003; Gudykunst et al., 1996).

These cultural differences affect how individuals approach dating and relationships through mobile apps, with Western models often favouring linear communication methods, while Eastern perspectives may prioritize deeper, non-verbal cues (Chen, 1998).

In conclusion, dating apps have reshaped the modern relationship landscape, but the complexities of gender, culture, and trust continue to shape user experiences and outcomes in online dating.

1.2.2 Contextual Gap

Existing research highlights significant East-West differences in cooperation and trust, particularly in interpersonal and social contexts. For instance, in their experimental studies, Hemesath and Pomponio (1998) and Buchan et al. (2000) provide broad evidence of these differences, showing how sociocultural factors influence trust and cooperation. Parks and Vu (1994) further reveal that Vietnamese participants demonstrate higher levels of cooperation in public goods settings than their American counterparts, with a sustained rate of cooperation over time. This suggests that cultural factors deeply affect trust dynamics in social interactions, central to understanding interpersonal relationships in various cultural contexts, including online dating.

Choi and Han (2011) note that trust is a crucial sociocultural mechanism that enables personal survival and the flourishing of intimate relationships. Trust is indispensable for intimacy and is crucial in determining whether an individual can be perceived as trustworthy in face-to-face and online interactions. Sociocultural factors shape the process of determining trustworthiness and have evolved as a survival strategy (Axelrod, 1984). However, the expression and interpretation of trust differ across cultures, as Han and Choi (2011) argue. In South Korea, trust is culturally nuanced and balances traditional academic interpretations with societal values.

This cultural variability in trust formation is echoed in the World Value Survey (WVS) from 1999 to 2002, which found that trust levels are typically higher in developed countries. In Asian societies, obligations toward family and community are often prioritized over individualistic concerns, potentially leading to deeper forms of trust (Inglehart et al., 2004). Similarly, in collectivist societies like China, interpersonal trust is often confined to in-group members (Han & Choe, 1994; Kim, 2009). In Chinese villages, for example, romantic partners are often either trusted insiders or cautiously approached outsiders (Liu, 2008).

The concept of "guanxi" (Lin & Bian, 1991; Riley, 1994) also plays an important role in shaping trust and relationships within Chinese culture. Individuals rely heavily on "strong ties" for employment, relationships, and marriage. This contrasts with Western societies, where "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1974) often suffice for securing employment and fostering new relationships. In China, the long-term mutual benefits derived from guanxi relationships are predicated on trust and extended social networks, which are also relevant to online dating.

When examining gender differences, research shows that men and women often engage with online dating platforms for distinct purposes. For example, McGrath (2015) reported a 60:40 male-to-female ratio on Tinder, reflecting gendered preferences for specific dating platforms. This further indicates that gender could significantly shape online dating behaviors, including how trust is developed between suitors.

While a significant body of research has explored trust and sociocultural factors in East-West interactions and the role of trust in various cultures, there remains to be a

gap in the literature concerning how trust operates in online dating environments within the Malaysian context. Additionally, although some studies address gender differences in online dating behaviors (McGrath, 2015; Statistic Brain Research Institute, 2015), few studies have examined the intersection of trust, gender, and social penetration factors in shaping attitudes toward suitors on mobile dating applications (MDAs) specifically within Malaysia. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring how self-disclosure, initiation of face-to-face interaction, and intention of use, in conjunction with trust and gender, influence positive attitudes toward suitors in the Malaysian mobile dating scene. Given Malaysia's unique cultural landscape, which blends both collectivist and individualist elements, this study aims to provide new insights into how trust is developed and maintained in online dating relationships within this context.

By focusing on the local experience of Millennials in Malaysia, this research offers a culturally relevant extension to the broader understanding of online dating, trust, and relationship-building dynamics.

1.2.3 Theoretical Gap

Low et al. (2022) mention that while Social Penetration Theory (SPT), first introduced by Altman and Taylor (1973), initially focused on relationships formed through traditional communication pathways such as face-to-face meetings, written letters, and telephone conversations, it remains relevant in today's digital world, including through social networking sites and mobile applications. Low's study examines the use of SPT in academic journals over the past ten years (2011-2021) in the context of social networks and dating services, such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Tinder.

These platforms serve as landing pages for individuals' information, interests, and interactions, aligning with SPT's premise that the breadth and depth of communication contribute to relationship formation. Multiple studies have shown that websites, as a form of online contact, play a crucial role in shaping relationships (Constine, 2012), as an individual's preferences and frequency of interactions directly impact closeness or intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

However, SPT has notable weaknesses, particularly in today's digital communication landscape. One criticism is that it overly emphasizes linear progression, assuming that relationships develop in a predictable, gradual manner through self-disclosure. This neglects the complexities of modern relationships, where interactions can be more dynamic, fragmented, or non-linear, especially with mobile dating apps that allow for varying levels of intimacy without consistent depth (Petronio, 2002). Additionally, the theory overlooks the importance of external factors, such as technology-mediated communication, which influence trust and emotional connection differently than face-to-face interactions.

1.2.4 Methodological Gap

In Malaysia, Alam et al. (2018) and Adam et al. (2020) have studied teenagers and university students between the ages of 18 till 24 years, and other studies also look at young adults aged up to 30 years old (Liew et al., 2023; Chan et al., 2023; Balan et al., 2021). The age range in some studies can also be too broad. Ong (2019) states that young adults in Malaysia are between 21 to 40 years old. This wide spectrum is too broad as this research is only looking at adults (Millennials) that are established

financially (Huffman et al., 2013; Mehta et al., 2020), marriage age and marriage-minded (born 1977 till 1994) instead of those just looking for friendship and fun.

Millennials aged 30 to 47 are expected to be financially independent and stable when they enter established adulthood (Mehta et al., 2020). Financial problems emerging in this period of life may create challenges for adults to maintain their well-being and interpersonal relationships.

Established adulthood, the years from 30 to 45, is considered the most intense and demanding period of adult life (Huffman et al., 2013; Mehta et al., 2020). The intersection of work and family responsibilities during established adulthood is the central developmental challenge of these years (Mehta et al., 2020). Different from emerging adults (age 18 to 29; Arnett, 2000) who are still finishing education and exploring their career opportunities with frequent job changes, adults in their 30s and early 40s are expected to become financially independent from parents, establish their career and family, maintain their work-life stability, and move up in the organizational hierarchy (Day et al., 2008).

1.3 Research Questions

Considering the issues stated in the problem statement, the following research questions are formulated:

1. How do Millennials exhibit self-disclosure in the context of Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs)?

2. What is the degree of the intention of use in Millennials regarding Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs)?
3. To what extent do Millennials initiate face-to-face interactions through Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs)?
4. What degree of trust do Millennials place in Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs)?
5. What are the attitudes of Millennials toward suitors within the context of Mobile Dating Applications?
6. What is the relationship between the degree of trust and attitudes toward online dating in Malaysia?
7. How does self-disclosure relate to trust and attitudes toward suitors in mobile dating applications among Millennials?
8. What is the relationship between the intention of use, trust, and attitudes toward suitors in mobile dating applications among Millennials?
9. How does the initiation of face-to-face interaction relate to millennials' trust and attitudes toward suitors in mobile dating applications?
10. What is the correlation between trust and the relationship among degrees of self-disclosure, intention, initiation of face-to-face interaction, and attitudes towards suitors on mobile dating apps?
11. What effect does gender have on the relationship between levels of self-disclosure, degrees of intention, initiation of face-to-face interaction, and attitudes toward suitors on online dating applications (MDAs)?

1.4 Research Objectives

The general objective is to identify the factors and strategies, which aids users positive experience when the online dating particularly the contribution of Social Penetration Theory:

1. To assess the degree of self-disclosure exhibited by Millennials in the context of mobile dating applications (MDAs).
2. To assess the degree of intention of use exhibited by Millennials in the context of mobile dating applications (MDAs).
3. To assess the degree of initiation of face-to-face interaction exhibited by Millennials in the context of mobile dating applications (MDAs).
4. To assess the degree of trust that Millennials have in mobile dating applications (MDAs).
5. To ascertain the attitudes toward suitors in mobile dating applications (MDAs) among Millennials.
6. To investigate the relationship between degree of trust and attitudes towards online dating in Malaysia.
7. To measure the relationship between Self-Disclosure, Trust and Attitude toward suitors in mobile dating applications (MDAs) among Millennials.
8. To measure the relationship between Intention of Use, Trust and Attitude toward suitors in mobile dating applications (MDAs) among Millennials.
9. To measure the relationship between Initiation of Face-to-Face Interaction, Trust and Attitude toward suitors in mobile dating applications (MDAs) among Millennials.

10. To examine the correlation between Trust and the relationship among degrees of self-disclosure, degrees of intention, Initiation of Face-to-face, and attitudes towards suitors on mobile dating applications (MDAs).
11. To investigate the effect of Gender on relationship between levels of self-disclosure, degrees of intention, initiation of Face-to-face and attitudes towards suitors on mobile dating applications (MDAs).

1.5 Scope of Study

In this research, the main purpose is to identify the factors that encourages positive attitudes towards suitors in Malaysia. Specifically, this current study highlights on the theoretical application of Social Penetration Theory that are applied in mobile dating application research in Malaysia. This study centers on the previously mentioned concepts to understand better the trust of online dating on Malaysian users. To accomplish this goal, this research will look at top most-used English-based heterosexual mobile dating applications in Malaysia. A quantitative survey which includes 500 single respondents who are Millennials (born between 1977 till 1994) will be conducted via online by adopting variables from past literature on online dating, Social Penetration Theory (SPT), gender and trust. The reason why the survey is conducted online is because it is important for users to be technologically savvy and also online surveys have the ability to reach respondents out of Klang Valley and as far as east Malaysia, namely the state of Sabah and Sarawak.

For the purpose of this research, English-based mobile dating apps in Malaysia will be studied. There are several mobile dating applications such as Tinder and Coffee Meets

Bagels that were launched since 2012, however, many have similar and yet different approaches to their how their apps are used.

This study would look at men and women who are Malaysian by nationality, hence, data would solely be collected online as this research will look at respondents who are using Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs) and thus, there is a need for respondents to be technologically savvy. Online questionnaire would also ensure further reach across Malaysia plus offer a safe space to answer questions as there are still stigma surrounded online dating. Kang and Hoffman (2011) discovered that Internet users who engaged in more activities were likelier to utilise online dating sites. They argued that because these individuals were already familiar with the Internet, they used it to find romantic partners. This is consistent with the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989), which states that the perceived simplicity of technology predicts attitude towards that technology, intent to use it, and subsequent use.

1.6 Significance of Study

The area highlights a research study focused on online dating in the Malaysian context, exploring the role of trust and gender in Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs) among Millennials. The significance of this study lies in several key aspects:

1.6.1 Theoretical Contribution

The study addresses the relatively underexplored area of online dating in Asia, specifically Malaysia. While online dating has gained popularity in the West, there is

a lack of comprehensive literature on its dynamics in Asian countries. Understanding the nuances of online dating in Malaysia can shed light on cultural differences, attitudes, and behaviors toward online dating platforms.

Existing literature on online dating in Malaysia has primarily focused on negative aspects, such as scams and technological developments. This study aims to contribute to the field by exploring the positive effects of online dating. The research seeks to provide a more balanced and nuanced view of the subject by examining the positive attitudes and perceived success in online dating.

The study employs the Social Penetration Theory to analyze and understand the dynamics of online dating. SPT is a well-established psychological theory that explains how relationships develop through gradual and systematic self-disclosure. By applying this theory, the research aims to gain insights into the depth of online connections, trust-building, and relationship formation in the context of MDAs.

The study proposes an extended Social Penetration Theory (SPT) model that includes five external elements: Intention of use, Self-disclosure, Initiation of face-to-face interaction, Trust, and Attitudes toward suitors in online dating. This extended model provides a more comprehensive framework for analyzing the factors that contribute to successful online dating experiences.

1.6.2 Methodological Contribution

The research adopts a cross-sectional survey methodology of Malaysian Millennials. The study ensures a systematic and rigorous approach to data collection and analysis

by using survey instrument, pilot test, and questionnaires. Focus group was used to get feedback, gauge and understand if the questionnaire of the study was suitable for local context. The items used in the questionnaires was to measure variables of interest.

A google form with the list of questionnaires will be created and distributed through online platforms such as forums (e.g. Lowyat.net), social media (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok) and instant messaging applications (e.g. WhatsApp).

As the online survey requires respondents who are internet-based communities who utilises computer-mediated-communication (CMC) platforms, specifically Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs) users, conducting the survey using this method would reach more eligible respondents as respondents can answer survey questionnaires through their mobile phones. Other reasons for online questionnaire collection are wider reach of people who have niche interest (e.g. location, specific age group, attitude, activity), and online survey collection would offer a safe space to answer stigmatized topic (e.g. sex, gender, religion). Furthermore, this method is time saving, information of respondents can be collected even when not actively approaching random strangers in public and respondents can answer at their convenience (time/space) without environmental pressure or stress) and lastly, cost saving (on printing) and contribute to saving the environment as electronic medium ensures eco-friendliness (Evans & Mathur, 2005).

The study aims to provide a more inclusive method for examining diverse gender views in online dating. By analyzing the role of gender in MDAs, the research can contribute to a better understanding of potential gender-based differences in online dating experiences and interactions.

In summary, this study's significance lies in its focus on the positive aspects of online dating in Malaysia, the application of Social Penetration Theory, the development of an extended SPT model, and the exploration of gender dynamics. By filling gaps in the existing literature and providing practical insights, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of online dating in the Malaysian context. It offers valuable implications for stakeholders and developers in the online dating industry. This study explores *Social Penetration Theory* in verifying the relationship between gender, trust and attitudes of suitors in Mobile Dating Apps in Malaysia. This study has identified if trust is the factor for increase of positive attitudes towards suitors in Mobile Dating Applications (MDAs) as positive attitudes towards mobile dating suitors cannot happen without trust.

1.6.3 Practical Contribution

The higher demand for single Malaysians searching for a mate online justifies the need for more effective strategies for success in dating from a human communication perspective. Thus, individuals that apply the new online dating practices and recommended approach derived from the results of this study will have a higher chance at dating successfully.

This study will have a beneficial effect on society considering that the high Internet penetration rate in Malaysia makes online dating inevitable. The greater demand for single Malaysians searching for a mate online justifies the need for more effective strategies for positive attitudes and experience in dating. Thus, individuals that apply the recommended approach derived from the results of this study will have a higher chance at communicating effectively and thus, dating successfully. As technology is

changing the landscape of how individuals search for a mate, this thesis can also be a reference for technological start-ups and dating app companies to look at creating better and more efficient apps as through the intersection of human communications, technology, and gender. This thesis examines how mobile dating apps (MDAs) has allowed both heterosexual male and female in Malaysia the platform for visibility when it comes to dating and finding a marriage prospect. This thesis also traces the mobility and flexibility of online dating by focusing on communications via the online dating platforms and real-life opinions (through surveys that will be conducted in this research) outside the online dating platforms.

1.7 Ethical Considerations & Limitations of Study

There are possibilities of several types of ethics related issues that need to be taken into consideration with this research. This research required the informed permission of all the respondents. All of the respondents would be briefed in advance concerning the purpose of this research. There will be strict confidentiality in regards to participants' identity in order to adhere to the University's code of ethics. Since certain subjects in this study are very sensitive, such as views on the “hookup” culture or issues related to religion, race and sexuality, hence, this research will withhold information about the true identity of these respondents. If requested, this research will mask identities to protect the businesses of individuals using these dating platforms and the research participants. Children, elderly, those who live outside of Malaysia should not qualify in participating in the study. This research is only pen to individuals 18 years old and older. Those below 18 years old please should not answer the questionnaire. Specifically, only Millennials those born between 1977 till 1994 are required to answer the questionnaire.

Several possible problems and challenges are projected in this research. Although there are as many as fifteen dating mobile apps and websites used by Malaysians, this research will be narrowed down to four mobile apps or websites that are most popular in Malaysia.

This study has mainly focus on mobile apps catered to heterosexual male and female though there are apps that cater to same-sex individuals such as Grindr. There will be a possible challenge in recruiting a sufficient number of participants. This is due to specific requirements (e.g., age, nationality, marital status and prior experience in the usage of mobile dating applications) for participants before they can answer the questionnaires. Therefore, access to the respondents and obtaining permission for the study would be a major challenge.

Secondly, there might be time and cost restrictions, which is why more efficient instruments like questionnaires would be used as opposed to the more time-consuming focus groups. In addition, most Millennials which are those who are born between 1977 and 1994 (Vijandren, 2017) are working professional who holds full-time positions, there would be a possibility that respondents may not submit questionnaire according to time schedule as online surveys can be done at any time and hence, there would be a possibility that a combination of online and offline questionnaire survey effort might be required.

1.8 Definitions of Terms

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure refers to the process of sharing personal information, thoughts, and feelings with potential partners on mobile dating applications (MDAs). This study measures how users reveal personal details, such as preferences, values, and experiences while interacting with suitors on MDAs (Gibbs et al., 2006).

Intention of Use

Intention of use is defined as the degree to which an individual plan to continue using MDAs for dating purposes. It reflects users' motivations for engaging with the platform, whether for seeking serious relationships, casual interactions, or friendships (Botnen et al., 2018).

Initiation of Face-to-Face Meeting

Initiation of face-to-face interaction refers to the transition from online communication to physical meetings between users of MDAs. In this research, it assesses how often and under what circumstances users move from virtual to in-person interactions as part of their dating experience (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017).

Trust

Trust is the belief in the reliability and integrity of potential suitors on MDAs. In this study, trust is operationalized as the extent to which users perceive their suitors as honest, dependable, and safe to engage with online and offline (Koranteng et al., 2019; Choi & Han, 2011).

Gender

Gender in this research refers to respondents' biological identification as male or female. It is considered a moderating factor in the relationship between self-disclosure, trust, and attitudes towards suitors on MDAs (McGrath, 2015).

Attitude toward Suitors

Attitude toward suitors represents users' general feelings or evaluations about potential romantic partners on MDAs. It is measured through users' perceptions of their suitors' likability, attractiveness, and desirability based on their interactions on the platform (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1990).

1.9 Summary

This chapter comprehensively introduces the research, outlining its background, research problem, and objectives. It identifies gaps in existing literature—phenomenal, contextual, theoretical, and respondent—and formulates research questions and objectives to address these gaps. The chapter also discusses the scope and significance of the study, emphasizing its contribution to understanding online dating in Malaysia, bridging gaps in the literature, and applying Social Penetration Theory (SPT) with an extended model. Ethical considerations and limitations are highlighted, along with definitions of key terms.

Overall, Chapter 1 sets the stage for the subsequent investigation and underscores the importance of the research.

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