Risks of Online Sexual Scripts

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Abstract. The article examines the problem of risks of online romantic relations in contemporary society. The active growth of quantity and segmentation of online dating resources (websites and apps), implementation of new smart technologies (robotics and artificial intelligence systems) lead to new threats in both online and offline spaces that need to be highlighted, described, analyzed and conceptualized. The paper presents the sociological approach in the framework of social and sexual scripts theory to interpret the social and cultural aspects of online romantic and erotic behavior of users and its related risk. Risks and ethical problems of aggregating and using personal data of clients, limiting the autonomy of user decisions, and the bias of artificial intelligence requires discussion to search for adequate solutions both from socio-political institutions, the professional community, and the individual.

Introduction

Virtualization of private life in the context of the active spread of new information and communication technologies in the world leads to the need to analyze the sexual attitudes and practices of representatives of different age cohorts, especially of the current generation of young people, in the communicative space of the Internet and relating risks. The question remains open of what role information and communication technologies play in building the trajectories of the sexual, romantic, family and marriage life of modern young men and women. The Internet is simultaneously considered as a factor in the formation of sexual and gender culture, patterns of sexual behavior, i.e. represents a sociocommunicative space of sexual and gender socialization. But also the worldwide network is an arena for the implementation of acquired values, attitudes, behaviors, for experimenting with various patterns of erotic behavior, female and male images, and finding a partner. One of the currently widespread ways of establishing and developing romantic and sexual relations among men and women in the online environment is to get acquainted with a potential partner on dating sites (Mamba, Badoo, etc.), dating applications (Tinder, etc.). At the same time, the way of presenting oneself in this virtual space, the use of one or another communicative style is largely determined by the subjective assessment by users of the real and potential risks for themselves on dating sites, primarily the possibilities of protecting personal information and privacy.

The review of the latest works demonstrates the growing interest towards social and cultural effects of online dating services in scientific discourse. Thus, a number of interdisciplinary research is focused on highlighting and description of the main risks of these resources—physical, psychological, emotional, social and sexual safety [1, 2, 3]. The specific risks and crimes (e.g., cyber dating abuse) are considered [4]. The representatives of less normatively accepted, discriminated groups (gender and sexual minorities, individuals in disadvantageous conditions, etc.) in their online romantic interactions and their consequences are attracting attention as a socially vulnerable people [5]. To understand the factors that provoke risk of online dating, there are attempts to investigate the main online sexual practices that lead to unwanted negative outcomes [6], and/or interrelated with sexually risky behavior offline [7, 8].

Despite the vast empirical material there is still a lack in social conceptualization of the online romantic practices on dating services and its risks and threats. The aim of the paper is to consider from the perspective of sociological theory of social and sexual scripts the possibilities to extract, analyze
and interpret the real and potential negative consequences of online sexual communication and interaction.

Methods

The risk is an actively debatable notion in contemporary scientific literature. The paper is based on the understanding of the risk in general as a potential negative and/or undesirable outcome of certain actions (sexual activities). Sexual behavior of an individual could intentionally and reflexively (risk seeking) or unintentionally and not directly controlled by a person (risk exposure) be risky, so lead to various negatory results (e.g., sexual, security, psychological, etc.) [9].

The methodological basis and conceptual resource of work is a social constructivist approach to the study of romantic and sexual behavior and risks online, primary the theory of sexual scripts (J. Gagnon, W. Simon), which allows to identify, systematize and classify, interpret the specifics of sexual practices of young people. The concept of “script” is also used to study and understand family marriage and gender online practices of users (the concepts of “gender script” and “family script” are firmly embedded in modern feminist scientific discourse and psychology discourse, respectively). The “script approach” focuses on studying the interactions of people at the micro level (interpersonal relationships, communication), but it also takes into account the social and cultural context and to some extent individual (intrapersonal) aspects that cause romantic, gender and sexual practices. “Social scripts are conceptualized as the mental representations individuals construct and then use to make sense of their experience, including their own and others’ behavior” [10]. “Scripts are a metaphor for conceptualizing behavior within social life. Most of social life most of the time must operate under the guidance of an operating syntax, much as language is a precondition for speech. For behavior to occur, something resembling scripting must occur on three distinct levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts” [11].

In the paper, online romantic practices are interpreted in the frame of this scenarios approach, which means considering communication in the virtual space (dating sites and apps) as a more or less set, algorithm of actions. Online scripts are considered as patterns of action, norms or rules of behavior. Online scenarios allow you to set, maintain and develop sexual communication with a potential partner. But a script can’t be regarded as a play, it only suggests, includes variants of expression through which social meanings are transmitted. Scenarios indicate the social precepts that members of a society follow. Men and women play a “performance”, obeying the prescribed roles and established rules in virtual socio-communication space. A variety of sexual attitudes and practices derives from the social attributes of an individual (age, gender, lifestyle, etc.) and the specifics of the existing relations between individuals (close, superficial, etc.).

Results

On the Internet it is possible to use both specialized (websites and dating apps) and other communication resources (social networks, forums, online games with shared chats) that allow users to search for potential partners, build communication aimed at establishing long-term or short-term romantic and/ or sexual relations. Modern websites and applications for searching for the second half are diverse, and the online dating market is segmented. Accordingly, the socio-demographic portrait of users of various resources can differ a lot. One of the key reasons for positioning services is the goal, that is, the result that users are encouraged to achieve through communication on a particular resource - building “serious” relationships, finding a sexual partner, discussing common interests. At the same time, along with large players (Badoo, Mamba, Tinder), niche resources are spreading that offer online spaces for meeting representatives of specific social groups with cultural characteristics, that is, the sociocultural foundations of market differentiation prevail for followers of a particular religion (e.g., Muslims “Nikah.su”), by sexual preference (for example, sexual orientation “Hornet”), by ethnicity, social and economic position (“Luxy”), hobbies. According to the information published
on the websites of the leading services of these services, the number of registered users as of August 2019 is more than 445 million worldwide in the Badoo social dating network, more than 40 million in the Mamba system. Dating resources are an actively growing part of sociocommunicative space of sexual interactions in the Internet in modern societies, as it could be seen below on Figure 1.

Figure 1. Descriptive model of a segment of the socio-communicative space of the Internet related to sexual issues.

The basic script (prototype) of the partner selection process on these resources includes a number of stages: from collecting information about dating sites and registering on one or more of them, to creating your own profile with personal information and building a communicative strategy for interacting with applicants (passive, active; online, offline, mixed) [12]: seek information about one or more dating sites; register for one or more dating sites; create a profile on one or more dating sites—and, where relevant, complete a matching questionnaire; browse others’ profiles (optional); initiate contact through the dating site (optional); receive contact through the dating site; engage in mutual mediated communication; meet face-to-face; develop an offline relationship.

At the same time, the choice of sexual script (patterns of sexual communication), the way of presenting oneself in this virtual space, the use of one or another communicative style is largely determined by the users’ subjective assessment of the real and potential risks to themselves on dating
sites, primarily the ability to ensure the protection of personal information and privacy. These are such risks as [13]: the opportunity to experience a feeling of awkwardness, shame; disclosure of personal information to third parties without the user's consent; communication with bots and scammers; violence, (cyber) harassment, inappropriate messages.

The use of artificial intelligence systems and robotic technologies on online dating platforms is becoming a trend in the development of this industry (active distribution of chat bots, face recognition capabilities, analysis of personal information in social networks, etc.), reflecting the logic of formal rationalization, or McDonaldization process in G. Ritzer [14] sense, of romantic relationships in modern society. Risks and ethical problems of aggregating and using personal data of clients, limiting the autonomy of user decisions, bias of artificial intelligence require discussion and search for adequate solutions both from socio-political institutions, the professional community, and the individual. Thus, artificial intelligence technologies for face and emotion recognition that are or may be used at the stages of collecting information about the user, filling out the “profile” of the client by automatically processing visual content on accounts on social networks, in the client’s smartphone/tablet, etc., as well as in face-to-face communication the phone’s camera”, when selecting a partner/partner to take into account the anthropometric characteristics of a person. It is in connection with the use of tools for access to personal information that ethical and sometimes legal risks are especially actualized, which often lead to a violation by the service of access to data on the user’s private life (their collection, use and storage).

Social data mining is a prerequisite for the automated selection of partners in an application whose algorithms are based, as in modern Internet marketing, on predictive analytics and recommendation systems. Actually, a potential partner is determined based on the similarity of personality traits, preferences and life orientations (common hobbies, the same tastes in music, food, close plans for the future, etc.) of the user. The straightforward approach to pairing is surprising and rise doubts about its effectiveness. The riskiest and ethically vulnerable issue is the operationalization and coding of sexual morality, erotic and emotional culture which is at the core of sexual scripts—values, norms and patterns of intimate, romantic relationships. Do gender-based and sexual norms embedded in application algorithms meet the needs, perceptions, and expectations of clients, or does the technology “impose” a system of sociocultural coordinates, forcing romantic and intimate relationships to specific scenarios, and monitoring their execution? Personalized marketing is another technology becoming relevant for online dating resources. But does personal marketing allow to overcome the risks and ethical problems of the formally rationalized online dating industry or does it reproduce them again through the implementation of the principles of control, predictability, calculability and effectiveness in the algorithms of artificial intelligence systems?

Conclusion

Active development of the online dating industry in the world is associated with the trend of implementation of new smart technologies and marketing principles in them. The associated risks of informational, physical and psychological security, as well as the importance of ethical foundations and principles of the work of smart systems, which have an increasing impact on people’s privacy, requires the participation of various socio-political actors in regulation through the development and implementation of political, legal and sociocultural norms human-technology interactions, as well as reflexive behavior in realization of sexual scripts by the users of dating apps. In the focus is the support of the moral and ethical principles, such as: ensuring the autonomy of decisions and actions of users; safety of use; privacy and data protection; transparency of technology; design of systems free from algorithmic biases and prejudices, taking into account the cultural specifics of society.

To develop a sound and adequate understanding of sexual interactions in the information and communication environment further conceptualization of ethical foundations and risks of online dating services, as well as comprehensive interdisciplinary research to analyze and interpret modern processes and problems are necessary. Particular attention is required to study the gender
characteristics of identifying and interpreting situations as risky in the framework of online sexual scripts for searching for intimate (emotionally and physically close) relationships in the context of the various modern gender orders and cultures of different groups of the online services users.

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