

**Attachment Theory and Online Dating:  
A Literature Review Supporting Adults Seeking Romantic Relationships**

by

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“NAMASTE”

### **Abstract**

The innate human desire for connection continues to drive the use of online dating platforms, despite their associated disadvantages. This capstone explores how attachment theory can serve as a framework for understanding online dating behaviors and relationship outcomes. Research indicates that an individual's attachment orientation—secure, anxious, or avoidant—shapes their approach to romantic relationships and influences trust development, a critical component in transitioning online connections into meaningful relationships. The disadvantages of online dating include emotional and psychological risks. Although empirical data on online dating success is limited, existing literature supports attachment theory as a robust model for explaining relational dynamics. Notably, therapy has been shown to foster secure attachment and improve relationship outcomes, offering a potential solution for individuals struggling with online dating challenges. The research suggests that integrating attachment theory into therapeutic practice may help mitigate the negative effects of online dating. Further research is warranted to deepen understanding and how attachment theory can inform the therapeutic process to support online daters form healthy romantic relationships.

*Keywords:* Online dating, attachment theory, romantic relationships, secure attachment, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, internal working model

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	2
Abstract .....	3
Table of Contents .....	4
Chapter 1 .....	6
Introduction of Research Topic: .....	6
Research Problem Statement: .....	11
Research Justification: .....	12
Contribution to the Field of Counselling .....	14
Theoretical Framework .....	16
Key Terms .....	18
Positioning Statement .....	21
Summary Conclusion .....	24
Chapter 2 – Literature Review .....	25
History of Online Dating .....	25
Advantages of Online Dating .....	28
Disadvantages of Online Dating .....	30
<i>Biased Algorithms in Online Dating</i> .....	34
Attachment Theory .....	35
Security Theory/Secure Base .....	35
<i>Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby</i> .....	36
Internal Working Models .....	37
Adult Attachment Style .....	38

Adult Attachment in Romantic Relationships ..... 43

Attachment Behavior and Social Development ..... 43

Online Dating and Romantic Relationships ..... 44

    Secure Attachment and Online Dating. .... 55

    Anxious Attachment and Online Dating. .... 56

    Avoidant Attachment and Online Dating. .... 56

    Disorganized Attachment and Online Dating ..... 57

Mental Health and Wellness ..... 58

    How is Attachment Therapy Help Online Dating Clients?..... 62

Concluding paragraph (s) ..... 68

Chapter 3: Discussion and Applied Practices ..... 71

    Introduction ..... 71

    Discussion. .... 72

Recommendations for Practice ..... 76

    Ethical Considerations ..... 77

    Recommendations for Future Research ..... 78

Conclusions ..... 79

References ..... 82

Appendices ..... 97

    Appendix A: How Couples Have Met Online..... 97

    Appendix B: Downsides of Online Dating ..... 98

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Online dating is here to stay! Over the past decade, the widespread use of the Internet, the rise of smartphones, and the emergence of geolocation features of dating apps (eg. Tinder, Grindr, Bumble) has transformed the traditional socialization methods and facilitated new ways of connecting with potential romantic partners (Anderson et al., 2020; Anzani et al., 2018; Castro & Barrada, 2020). The number of people meeting online continues to rise and the number of people meeting through friends has sharply declining. In the United States (U.S.) online platforms have become the most popular way for heterosexual couples to meet (Rosenfeld et al., 2019).

Dating apps were initially used by men seeking men but are now mainstream in the heterosexual market (Duguay, 2018; Rosenfeld et al., 2019). By 2009, 22% of heterosexual couples met each other online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012), increasing to 39% in 2017 (Harper, 2025). This rise in popularity of online dating globally was largely due to people viewing it as a normal and convenient way to meet others. Advances in technology, along with the widespread use of smartphones and the launching of mobile dating apps, have made online dating convenient (Bush, 2024).

Both Canada and the United States have significant online dating user bases, but the U.S. market is notably larger, with 53 million Americans actively using online dating in 2025 (Harper, 2025), compared to nearly three and a half million Canadians using dating apps in 2024 (Bush, 2024). A survey from the Pew Research Center (Anderson et al., 2020) indicated that in 2019, 30% of American adults used a dating site or app, with usage highest among adults aged 18–29 (48%) and lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) adults (55%). By age group, 48% of users were 18–29, 38% were 30–49, and 19% were 50–64. According to Online Dating Statistics in Canada

(Bush, 2024), approximately 20% of heterosexual relationships and 60% of same-sex relationships were initiated online. Most of the users were between 18-34 years old, with the 35–54 age group showing increased activity in the dating scene. Fifty-five per cent of the dating app users were serious relationship seekers and 45% were open to casual relationships. Surveys in both U.S. and Canada found that men used dating apps more than women, and there were no significant differences in app usage across cultures and races (Bush, 2024, Harper 2025).

The behavior of adults in romantic relationships were found to be influenced by the attachment patterns formed in childhood (Hazen & Shaver, 1987). To better understand how childhood attachment patterns may influence online dating behaviors, it is important to first understand attachment theory. The development of attachment theory began in the 1950's with John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, who posited that human beings were genetically predisposed toward attachment and that this relationship was essential for the survival of humanity (Bowlby, 1969). Initially Bowlby believed that an infant's attachment bond to their mother was driven by the need for food for survival, but he later changed his position after learning about the work of Konrad Lorenz and Harry Harlow (Bowlby, 1988; Davidson, 2005).

Harlow (APS, 2018; McLeod, 2023), an American psychologist, studied the attachment behavior of infant rhesus monkeys in a groundbreaking experiment on parent-child attachment. He separated newborn monkeys from their mothers and placed them in a cage with access to two surrogate mothers: one made of wire and one covered in soft terry cloth. Harlow also observed the infants' behavior when the wire surrogate had a bottle of milk attached, while the cloth surrogate did not. In both cases, the infant monkeys preferred to stay with the cloth mother and only approached the wire mother when hungry. After feeding, they would return to the cloth

mother for most of the day. When a frightening object was introduced, the monkeys sought refuge with the cloth mother, using it as a safe base. This evidence demonstrated that maternal touch, comfort, companionship, and love are essential for healthy infant development.

Lorenz (Benes, 2004; Davidson, 2005), an Austrian ethologist, studied the attachment behavior of goslings. Goslings hatched by their mother followed the mother goose, while those hatched in an incubator followed Lorenz. From this, Lorenz concluded that goslings become attached to the first moving object they are exposed to. Building on such findings, Bowlby concluded that an infant's physical and emotional well-being primarily depends on feeling safe, secure, loved, and comforted (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Van der Horst, 2011; Epstein, 2023).

Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al., 1979), a developmental psychologist, began a professional partnership with Bowlby in 1958. Before working with Bowlby, Ainsworth's research focused on infants' developing attachment to their primary caregivers, mainly their mothers. Combining her empirical research in Uganda and Baltimore with her laboratory study known as "The Strange Situation," she identified three specific attachment styles: secure, insecure anxious-ambivalent, and insecure avoidant (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Davidson, 2005, 2007). In 1986, a fourth attachment style, insecure disorganized/disoriented, was identified by Ainsworth's former students, Judith Solomon and Mary Main (Davidson, 2005; Main & Solomon, 2009; Duchinsky, 2015).

Ainsworth et al. (1979) found that children with secure attachment demonstrated trust that, when separated from their mother or primary caregiver, their sense of security would be restored upon reunion. Children with insecure-anxious or insecure-ambivalent attachment became extremely distressed when separated. Upon being reunited, they initially clung to their mother but quickly became angry and resisted being comforted. This ambivalent behavior

reflected the child's uncertainty about the availability of support. In contrast, children with insecure-avoidant attachment did not appear distressed during separation and, upon reunion, avoided connection by turning away. These children learned not to seek for connection because they believed it was consistently unavailable.

Ainsworth et al. (1979) found that children with insecure-disorganized attachment were less common. Children with disorganized attachment viewed their primary caregiver(s) as both a source of fear and comfort, often due to past experiences of inconsistent caregiving, maltreatment, or neglect. They responded to separation and reunion with inconsistent, unpredictable, and often contradictory behavior. During the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP), disorganized attached children were observed to switch between approaching the caregiver and then suddenly turning away, or suddenly freezing, or becoming fearful or disoriented (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Main et al, 1985). Attachment theory will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Hazen and Shaver (1987) were instrumental in extending the principles of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships. In 1987, they conducted a landmark study in which they used a questionnaire to examine the relationship between early attachment styles and adult romantic behaviors. Their findings suggested that attachment patterns formed in childhood influence how individuals approach intimacy and relationships in adulthood. This research bridged the gap between developmental attachment theory and adult social relationships, positioning Hazen and Shaver as pioneers in the study of adult attachment (Hazen & Shaver, 1987; Godwin, 2023).

Bowlby posited that humans are genetically predisposed to form close bonds, and that secure relationships are essential for both emotional and physical well-being (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988). Fostering a romantic connection requires social intimacy, which involves closeness,

warmth, and personal communication (Tatkin, 2024). Trust is critical to the success of romantic relationships, whether formed online or through traditional offline dating (Nayar & Koul, 2021). The success of online dating is often measured by the likelihood of the couple transitioning into a committed romantic relationship (West, 2019). Therefore, this Capstone explores how attachment theory may inform counsellors in helping clients confidently navigate the world of online dating and build loving relationships based on trust and connection.

Neuroscientist Amir Levine and social psychologist Rachel Heller (2010) authored *Attached: The new science of adult attachment and how it can help you find -and keep-love* to help people understand the scientific theory behind the development of adult relationships and to help them find a best partner or improve an existing relationship. The ideal partner was identified to be someone with a secure orientation because they tended to be warm, loving and comfortable with intimacy. The secure attached person may be better able to provide a secure base and emotional security for their partner than someone with insecure attachment orientation.

Accordingly, meeting a securely attached person online and understanding one's own attachment style may foster a successful online dating experience. Understanding the attachment behavior of the potential partner may help to foster the connection and potentially develop a bond based on trust (Levine & Heller, 2010; Menanno, 2024). Adult attachment behaviors will be further described in Chapter 2.

### **Research Problem Statement**

A wide range of social media platforms now provide easy accessibility for people all over the world to connect and explore a potential future together (Nayar & Koul, 2021). Online dating differs from traditional offline dating because of its unique environment. The Internet allows people to meet and form relationships with perfect strangers, people with whom they had no

previous social tie (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Meeting in person through work, social or family events provides a familiarity for connection, whereas online dating provides anonymity (Finkel et al., 2012). Online dating users can browse profiles and become aware of the person's intentions (like wanting a relationship or a casual meetup). Individuals who are part of a smaller specific population, such as gays, lesbians, and middle-aged heterosexuals, can more easily meet a partner online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

Finding love through online dating is a relatively new approach for Baby Boomers (born between 1946–1964) and Generation X (1965–1980), who are learning to navigate the digital world of dating. Millennials (1981–1996) came of age during the “internet explosion” and have adapted to meeting romantic partners online. Generation Z (1997–2012) and Generation Alpha (2013–2025) were born into a world that revolves around technology, making online dating their default paradigm (Dimock, 2019).

Compulsive social media use has been shown to impact users' social, psychological, professional, and personal lives (Thomas et al., 2023). Abbasi (2019) found that the online availability of romantic alternatives created an environment in which emotional or sexual affairs were more likely to occur. The use of dating apps, particularly the act of swiping, has been found to be addictive (Thomas et al., 2023). The swiping phenomenon along with the advantages and disadvantages of online dating will be further explored in Chapter 2.

There is a significant gap in understanding the factors that contribute to the success and impact of online dating (Nayar & Koul, 2021). Additionally, the literature lacks sufficient exploration of the relationship between attachment theory and online dating. To better understand how attachment theory influences adults seeking a romantic relationship through online dating, these four guiding research questions will be explored in Chapter 2

- 1) What is the relationship between attachment theory and adult romantic relationships?
- 2) What psychological and emotional challenges are associated with online dating?
- 3) How can attachment theory inform counselling practice to support clients seeking romantic relationships through online dating?
- 4) Does educating a client on their own attachment style mitigate the challenges of online dating?

### **Research Justification**

Dating apps have become one of the most popular ways to seek romantic or sexual partners (Harper, 2025). With the widespread use of smartphones, adults now have access to the entire dating market right at their fingertips (Timmermans & Alexopoulos, 2020). Attachment theory has been increasingly applied to adult romantic relationships and sexual behaviors for single people and people in relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). Menanno (2024) posited that all relationship behaviors are attempts to create, maintain, or restore closeness and security with loved ones. When attachment is insecure, the dysfunctional behaviors that arise are misguided ways of trying to meet these attachment needs.

The existing research on attachment theory and online dating is limited. Among the available studies, most focused primarily on anxious and avoidant attachment styles. Secure attachment was rarely mentioned, and disorganized attachment orientation was entirely excluded. Furthermore, the findings on the relationship between attachment orientation and online dating use have been inconsistent. For example, Atkins (2019) found that individuals with insecure attachment (anxious and avoidant) gravitated towards online dating simply because it provided a less intimidating way to initiate romantic relationships. In contrast, Chin et al. (2019) reported a significant association between anxious attachment and the reported *likelihood* of using dating

apps but found no statistically significant link between anxious attachment and *actual* dating app use. Individuals with high levels of avoidant attachment reported a lower likelihood of using dating apps and were less likely to become users.

Conversely, Timmermans and Alexopoulos (2020) found that individuals scoring high in attachment anxiety were significantly linked with using dating apps in search of emotional intimacy and would attempt to form relationships. However, individuals with higher scores on attachment avoidance were not significantly associated with using dating apps. Similarly, Coffey et al. (2022) found that individuals with attachment anxiety were associated with increased usage of online dating apps whereas attachment avoidance was unrelated to dating app use, aligning with the findings of Timmermans and Alexopoulos (2020).

In terms of online dating safety, Timmermans and Alexopoulos (2020) suggested that attachment orientation did not influence user behavior, such as meeting up quickly in private places or not informing others about face-to-face meetings. The inconsistencies and gaps underscore the need for further research to understand how attachment theory can inform the helping profession better support individuals seeking a romantic relationship using online dating platforms. The four studies discussed above will be further examined in Chapter 2.

Additional gaps in the literature include factors contributing to relationship success via online dating platforms, the intersection of online dating and therapeutic support, and the application of attachment theory specifically to online daters seeking romantic (as opposed to casual or sexual) relationships. Enhancing awareness of how attachment theory influences romantic behavior when using online dating is likely to be helpful for counsellors helping clients seeking a romantic relationship using online dating. Likewise, individuals using online dating

with the goal of meeting a compatible partner may benefit from understanding their own attachment style and the nuances of online dating.

The research topics targeted in this Capstone are online dating, adult attachment theory, behavior of online dating users, the psychological impact on users of dating apps, and the use of an attachment lens for helping online dating users seeking a romantic relationship. The gap in the literature justifies further research.

### **Contribution to the Field of Counselling**

Feeney and Fitzgerald (2019) found that attachment related interventions were effective in reducing behavioral responses that typically lead to conflict escalation in romantic relationships. Applying an attachment lens to relationship distress provided therapists with a roadmap for guiding couples from conflict and disconnection toward building more secure and connected bonds. Their findings supported attachment theory as an effective framework for therapists working with clients experiencing relationship conflict. Through this approach, clients can successfully transition from distress and disconnection to a more secure emotional bond.

Timmermans and Alexopoulos (2020) explored the motivation of dating app users and found attachment theory to be a useful framework for understanding both their motives and partner selection processes. Individuals with anxious attachment styles tended to enjoy physical intimacy and desired romantic relationships but worried about being abandoned. In contrast, avoidantly attached individuals were averse to both physical and emotional intimacy and were generally unmotivated to use dating apps nor engage in any form of intimacy, including casual sex. Securely attached individuals typically maintained close, trusting relationships with friends and romantic partners, thus were less inclined to use online dating platforms.

Dr. Sue Johnson (2019) is widely regarded as a leading innovator in the field of couples therapy and adult attachment theory. She is best known for developing Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) and has authored numerous professional and self-help books on enhancing, repairing, and sustaining relationships. Johnson posited that psychotherapy is fundamentally a relational, attachment-focused process that shapes the nature of an effective therapeutic alliance. In this framework, the therapist serves as a surrogate attachment figure, providing a safe and secure base from which clients can explore their internal world and interpersonal relationships more fully. The therapeutic alliance enables clients to feel safe, deeply understood, and connected, which fosters personal growth and healing. As a result, clients often experience increased self-esteem, reduced insecurity, and a strengthened therapeutic alliance (Burke, 2016; Johnson, 2019). Johnson emphasizes that attachment is central to what makes us human and essential to emotional development. Attachment theory thus offers a comprehensive framework for using the therapeutic relationship as an instrument for change (Burke, 2016).

Another contributor to the field of relational therapy is Julie Menanno (2024), a licensed marriage and family therapist. Menanno utilizes EFT to help couples create secure, lasting relationships. Menanno's book, *Secure Love: Create a Relationship That Lasts a Lifetime* (2024), focuses on helping couples and individuals understand their attachment styles and learn how to communicate in ways that nurtures secure bonds with romantic partners. A negative cycle occurs when the connection between two insecurely attached persons is damaged because of conflict (p. 76). Individuals are taught how to interrupt the negative cycle and restore the core relational need for safety and closeness, reestablishing harmony within the relationship. This demonstrates the value of using an attachment lens in relational therapy, indicating its potential

effectiveness in supporting online dating users have more positive experiences and ultimately, find meaningful connections.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical underpinning of my research is based on humanistic psychology and how the basic innate human need for safety and security is the driving force for survival of the human species (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1988). It is a natural phenomenon that humans desire and need connection and the attachment style is influenced by the child-parent relationship (Bowlby, 1969, Ainsworth et al., 1970, 1979).

All humans are genetically inclined toward bonding as couples, and the emotional and physical well-being of each person is reflected in the security of the relationship (Bowlby, 1969; Epstein, 2023). The four attachment orientations (secure, insecure anxious, insecure avoidant, and insecure disorganized) originally used to classify a child's attachment style are applicable to all adult romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1979; Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Heller, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Epstein, 2023; McLeod, 2024b; Menanno, 2024).

The earliest research study regarding attachment theory and adult interpersonal romantic relationships was by Hazan and Shaver (1987). They were instrumental in expanding Bowlby's attachment theory to be applicable with adult romantic relationships, focusing mainly on secure, anxious and avoidant attachment styles. Their study determined that adult attachment relationships had similarities to infant attachment relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Intimacy, closeness, supportiveness, and trust are characteristics of secure people's love experiences. Fear of intimacy and difficulty depending on others characterized avoidant people's love. Obsession, emotional instability, worry about being abandoned, strong

physical attraction, jealousy and the desire for union characterizes ambivalent people's love (as cited in Mikulincer & Erev, 1991, p. 274)

The importance of security in a relationship is important regardless of age. All humans are genetically inclined toward bonding as couples, and the emotional and physical well-being of each person is reflected in the security of the relationship (Bowlby, 1969, 1988, 2008; Heller, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Epstein, 2023; Menanno, 2024). Johnson (2019) facilitates bonding within a couple through teaching everyone how to be the secure base for each other. The process is grounded in the belief that as people explore their feelings, they become more aware of self and inherently move towards psychological growth.

The concept of the therapist serving as a surrogate secure base aligns with attachment theory in that it supports the healing process for individuals with insecure attachment patterns. The research suggests that an attachment-based approach is effective in supporting clients with conflict, insecurity, trauma, depression, anxiety, and attachment ruptures or injuries. Online dating users may begin to understand how their relationship challenges are related to their attachment orientation and be willing to learn new behaviors that foster connection. With therapeutic support, individuals may shift toward a more secure attachment style and experience greater satisfaction in online dating. Developing an internal sense of security may help reduce the negative effects associated with online dating which will be explored further in Chapter 2. To establish a clear and consistent understanding of the concepts central to this Capstone, certain key terms will be defined in the next section.

### **Key Terms**

**Attachment** - an emotional bond formed by a person to another specific person such that the primary behavior is to seek and maintain proximity to the attachment figure by means of

physical contact, communication, and interaction. This bond holds them together across time and space (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

**Attachment behaviors** - behaviors which promote proximity or contact, such as approaching, following, clinging, and signaling behaviors such as smiling, crying and calling (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970)

**Attachment behavioral system** - motivates us to feel emotional distress when attachment is threatened, or when we perceive it to be threatened, and to feel that discomfort until we return to safety (Menanno, 2024, p. 22).

**Attachment needs/attachment longings** - what you need in a relationship to feel close to your partner, and likewise what your partner needs to feel close to you (Menanno, 2024, p. 22).

**Attachment rupture** - when a disagreement between two people leads to one person's concerns not being responded to and the other person is treated with disrespect and a lack of appreciation. Both parties feel unappreciated, unheard and invalidated (Menanno, 2024, p.80).

**Attachment styles:**

**Secure** - people with a secure attachment style feel comfortable with intimacy and independence. They trust others and feel confident in their relationships.

**Anxious** - those with an anxious attachment style often worry about their partner's availability and may seek constant reassurance.

**Avoidant** - individuals with an avoidant attachment style might be uncomfortable with closeness and tend to maintain distance in relationships.

**Disorganized** - people with a disorganized attachment style may have mixed feelings about close relationships, often due to inconsistent or frightening experiences with caregivers (Menanno, 2024).

**Breadcrumbing** - leading someone along by sending text messages sporadically. You are being breadcrumbing when you receive messages that sound like that person likes you, but the relationship does not move beyond the messaging stage (Valdez, 2024).

**Catfishing** - the act of creating a fake identity online, often using stolen photos, personal information, and other details to deceive others. Romance scammers use this technique to gain your trust and affection online, never a face-to face-encounter, then con you by asking for large sums of money (Valdez, 2024).

**Dating App/dating application** - an online dating service through a mobile phone in which users create a profile that includes their description, pictures, relationship preferences, and location preferences. A dating app is designed to let people view pictures and profiles of subscribers that the app's algorithm determines are a possible match, then subscribers can “like” or “dislike” other profiles, and a match is made with further contact information provided when two subscribers “like” each other (Chin et al., 2019).

**Ghosting** - ending a relationship by abruptly cutting off all the contacts with the partner without any direct confrontation, closure, and explanation of why the person ended the relationship which includes ignoring partner’s calls and messages, blocking, or unfriending the partner from all social media platform without facing them directly (Jain, 2024).

**Internal working model** - a framework of thoughts, feelings, plans and goals with which we organize our interactions in relationship with others (Mikulincer & Erev, 1991; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

**Love Bombing** - when someone you have just met lavishes you with gestures of love and affection to impress you and escalate the progression of the relationship. When they get what

they want which is usually control over you, their behaviour changes to either ignoring you or moving on to someone else (Valdez, 2024).

**Negative cycle** – the resulting conflict behavior between 2 insecurely attached partners.

Resolution is stalled and connection is damaged (Mennano, 2024, p 76)

**Online dating**- a social media platform/internet-based dating applications, with the intention to assess the other's suitability as a prospective partner in an intimate relationship. The relationship can range from casual sexual encounters to committed romantic relationships (Finkel et al., 2012; Gatter & Hodkinson, 2016; Nayar & Koul, 2021).

**Secure attachment** – a secure connection with a significant other such that you have the resource within to survive and thrive in an uncertain world (Johnson, 2019, p. 7).

**Secure base** - an internal “felt sense” of secure connection, between a caregiver and a child or a secure connection with others that allows you to move out into the world, take risks, explore and develop a sense of competence and autonomy (Johnson, 2019, p.7).

**Swiping** - involves browsing through profiles by brushing a thumb right to accept or left to dismiss a profile. When two users mutually accept each other's profiles, they form a match (Thomas et al., 2023).

**Trigger** - when you experience a perceived threat and your attachment system gets activated to take action and find safety (Menanno, 2024).

**Zombieing** - when someone who has ghosted you (stopped talking to you without any reason or a goodbye, starts communicating with you again, without an explanation or apology (Shearing & Lavinia, 2023).

### **Positioning Statement**

I am a heterosexual, cis-gender, Canadian-born Chinese female, in my 60's with four adult sons. My parents are immigrants from China who opened a grocery store in a predominantly white middle-class neighborhood. I was born and raised in Regina, Saskatchewan and I am the fourth child of seven children. I am university educated, and I married when I was 28 years old. I relocated with my husband to Hong Kong at the age of 30 years old and remained there until I was 58 years old. While I resided in Hong Kong, I raised four sons, got divorced, had a common-law partner for eight years and became single again at the age of 50. I relocated to Victoria, British Columbia with my youngest son when I was 58 years old which is where I reside now.

I had a typical Chinese family upbringing in that there was minimal physical affection, we did not talk about our feelings, our basic needs were met, we learned to be responsible and hard working. I observed my mom's loyalty to my dad, and I observed my dad being so busy with the family business he had no time for any of us, including our mom.

I was hospitalized repeatedly during my early childhood, and I have memories of this experience. In my memories I did not realize I was preverbal. My mom told me this a month before she passed away. When I watched the video about Mary Ainsworth's research it became clear to me this was the beginning of my internal working model. To add to my internal working model, my "innocent child bubble" burst when I was in grade one when a classmate whispered something in my ear that bewildered me, I could feel the contempt in the words, but I did not know what his message meant. In that moment I felt like something was wrong with me, I did not belong, the world was not the friendly place I thought it was. Racism became the way of life in this new neighborhood we moved into, and I learned to take it in stride because that is what

my parents did, we never talked about it. In my first year of the Master of Counselling program I learned the word microaggressions. I was shocked at how I had normalized racism such that I did not know what microaggressions are and that I had been subjected to them for most of my life.

I was hospitalized again when I was in grade one and I have many vivid memories of this hospitalization. I have no memory of my parents ever visiting and many other memories that shaped my internal beliefs about my lack of self-worth. My journey into my subconscious patterns/beliefs commenced 20 years ago and “pandora’s box” was now open and there was no turning back. Reading about attachment theory gave me great insight into how my worldview was created and helped me to understand the relationship I had with my parents and my romantic partners.

My heart felt broken when I broke up with my first boyfriend at age 16. I never dated again because I was scared, and heart broken. When I was in university, I dated a few times but never more than two dates with any one person. In my third year I met the man that I eventually married in 1988 after being together for five years. I have a clear memory that I married because that was what was expected of us, and I did not have the courage to do otherwise. We divorced in 1999, I met someone in 2002, had my fourth child with this person and we parted ways after nine years together. By this time, my self-esteem was at its lowest, it felt like I would never know what joy feels like and my greatest fear was that I would die alone. The survivor in me carried on and I continued with my internal healing and taking care of my family.

I turned 59 years of age in the year 2020 and I felt I was ready for a romantic relationship. I entered the world of online dating. It was awful! The online dating experience was frustrating, heart-breaking and discouraging. The feelings of being unlovable, not good enough, rejection, abandonment and loneliness were triggered repeatedly yet I did not give up.

In February of 2024 I swiped right and matched with someone, we met for coffee and chatted for hours which led to continuing our chatting over dinner and into late evening. We both felt like we finally found the one! During this time, it was early stages of learning about attachment styles, and I was also learning about dialectical behavioral therapy. I even asked this person to take the online test to identify his attachment style. In May of 2024, I ended this relationship took a break from the disappointment of online dating.

Everything I have learned about myself and all the readings I have done for this paper has helped me understand my how my internal working models and my attachment behavior have been in play with all my relationships. The wound became fully exposed while working on Chapter 1 of my Capstone. I experienced tremendous grief, masked by what felt like depression. I was able to get support from a counsellor which was very helpful. The counsellor validated all my feelings which helped me to feel the deep pain, grieve the loss of connection that started 64 years ago, and finally heal that deep wound that felt so untouchable. I now know I am lovable and good enough. I feel gratitude towards each person I have dated because each experience pushed me to look within myself and heal. I no longer fear rejection.

I have come across many people who want a romantic relationship but are averse to online dating or had a negative experience with online dating and gave up. I wish for anyone discouraged by online dating and is still seeking a romantic relationship, to reach out for support from a professional with attachment theory experience. I believe so strongly in the power of understanding one's own attachment orientation for inner growth and healing that I recommend it for everyone, not just those seeking love online.

## Summary Conclusion

The primary focus of this Capstone is on how counsellors can apply attachment theory to help adults using online dating in search for a romantic relationship. Chapter 1 presented an overview of the popularity of online dating and a glance at the pros and cons. There was an introduction to attachment theory, the founders, the four attachment styles and their typical distress responses. The link between attachment theory and adult romantic relationships was identified as well as the link between online dating use and attachment styles. In the field of relational therapy, attachment theory has been applied for many years and the research questions presented guide the literature review. The central research question, “how does attachment theory help counsellors support adults seeking a romantic relationship through online dating?” will be addressed.

Chapter 2 is a literature review on the topics of online dating, attachment theory, and romantic relationships. You will read about the history of online dating and the pros and cons identified by online dating users. There will be a review of attachment theory followed by an exploration of secure, anxious and avoidant adult attachment behavior in online dating and disorganized attachment in dating relationships. Chapter 2 will finish with an exploration of the potential psychological effects of online dating and how an attachment lens approach in counselling can help online dating users shift away from their insecurities to become more secure and be able to navigate online dating with confidence and security.

Chapter 3 will be a summary of the findings from the literature review and address the research questions presented in Chapter 1. There will be a discussion about the research findings and their contribution to determining whether attachment therapy can help online dating users navigate online dating safely and securely as they seek for a romantic relationship. Any

limitations of the research will also be identified thru out Chapter 2 along with recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter will present a brief history of online dating and identify the more recognized pros and cons of online dating. To better understand adult attachment in romantic relationships, different attachment styles will be examined in terms of how they influence the behavior of adults seeking love. There will be a review of the clinical results of an attachment theory approach with adults experiencing relationship difficulties. The purpose of the literature review is to address the following research question: How does attachment theory help counsellors support adults seeking a romantic relationship through online dating?

### **History of Online Dating**

At its core, "online dating" isn't a recent phenomenon. Lee (2017) wrote about how the concept of online dating existed well before the Internet. Personal ads served the same purpose and became a popular means with the invention of the newspaper in 1690. Personal ads were mainly used by British bachelors seeking a wife and used by same sex couples because it was a discreet and safe option for seeking a partner. In the 1800s, aristocrats started to use personal ads to announce their interest in romantic courtship, listing the requirements the young lady needed to possess. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, personal ads continued to be the mainstream means for seeking a partner.

Lee (2017) also wrote about the world's first computer dating service, Operation Match, created by a team of Harvard students in 1965. It was a social experiment in which a questionnaire was distributed to colleges across the United States. The information was put through an IBM computer and for three dollars, users received six names, phone numbers and a location. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, access to the Internet led to more connections being made online (Lee, 2017).

Sayej (2016) wrote about Andrew Conru, a mechanical engineering doctorate student at Stanford University, who launched Web Personals, one of the first online dating sites in 1994. Web Personals featured one large photo and plenty of text space for one's profile. Although the attitude towards online dating was taboo and users were regarded to be desperate, a loser, or to be regarded with suspicion, in 18 months the website had approximately 120,000 sign-ups, 50% were students and university staff. The other dating sites at this time were mostly focused on international dating with a "mail order bride" approach (Ali & Wibowo, 2011). A mail order bride is a woman in contact with a man or agency, for the purpose of marriage in another country such that the bride could migrate to a country that offered better socio-economic opportunities than in their own country (Oxford reference, n.d.).

A year after the launch of Web Personals, Gary Kremen created competition by launching Match.com (Sayej, 2016). Sayej (2016) wrote about how Kremen was able to grow his data base quickly by offering free membership without an expiry date. Web Personal's popularity quickly surpassed that of Match.com and multiple online dating sites were launched over the following years. The more well-known dating platforms still in operation include Plenty of Fish, eHarmony and OkCupid; all use detailed questionnaires to find compatible matches (Ali & Wibowo, 2011; Edwards, 2024). The launching of Grindr in 2009 was the first gay dating app and the first to use geolocation technology (Stylight, n.d.; Edwards, 2024). Tinder and Hinge launched in 2012 and Bumble in 2014 (Pamanian, n.d.). Match.com presently holds a reputation as the dating app to use for long term relationships (Matthews, 2022).

Refer to Appendix A (Rosenfeld et al., 2019, p. 17755) for the decline of traditional ways of meeting romantic partners in the United States post-World War II and the increase in use of online dating. The data was based on heterosexual couples because they represented the known

dating population at that time. The first significant rise occurred around 1995 when Match.com was launched followed by many more dating sites over the years. Another significant rise occurred between 2009 – 2012 aligning with the launching of Grindr, Tinder and Hinge.

Duguay et al. (2024) explored the impact of the global outbreak of COVID-19 on the popularity of online dating. A comprehensive method was used combining perspectives from Science and Technology Studies and cultural studies which provided insights into the experiences of both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ communities. The technological infrastructures of dating apps' and public-facing messaging were examined. As workplaces, schools, and entertainment venues shut down online dating became a popular option for forming new relationships. People worldwide relied on digital technologies to remain connected and seek new connections. The popularity of owning a smartphone contributed significantly to the increased use of dating phone apps.

A survey by Anderson et al. (2020) was conducted shortly before the outbreak of Covid-19. The findings were based on a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center on the patterns, experiences and attitudes towards online dating in America. The survey was conducted in October of 2019 amongst 4,860 U.S. adults (not required to have any online dating experience, national random sampling of residential addresses, including persons who identified as gay or bisexual). The margin of sampling error for the full sample was plus or minus 2.1 % points. The survey indicated that online dating is most popular with 18- to 29-year-olds (48%) and LGB adults (55%). In these two groups, approximately 20% have married or been in a committed relationship with someone they first met through these platforms. Overall, 30% of American adults have used an online dating site or dating app and 23% have gone on a date with someone they met online. Furthermore, 12 % were able to find a meaningful connection which led to

marriage or a committed relationship which started through a dating site or app. In comparison to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2013, the 2019 results reflected an increased use of a dating or app (11% use and 3% marriage or long-term relationship). The findings have reflected an increasing use of dating websites and mobile apps for people of all ages seeking a romantic relationship.

The research has reflected the growing popularity of online dating. As a point of interest and example of the world-wide popularity, China reached 114.1 million monthly active users in December 2021 (Gao et al., 2024) and Malaysia has forecasted 1.19 million users by 2027 (Muller, 2023 as cited in Liew et al., 2023). With the growing use of online dating, it is relevant to note that aspects of online dating are under researched. Further research is needed regarding the effectiveness of using online dating for seeking a romantic relationship, and the impact on the emotional well-being of the person seeking a romantic connection online. There is also a gap in the research regarding the influence of attachment theory on the behavior of online dating users. Let us learn more about online dating by reviewing the pros and cons of online dating.

### **Advantages of Online Dating**

Anderson et al. (2020) reported on the positive features of online dating identified in the 2019 Pew Research Center survey. Online dating users found using a dating site or dating app was easy and efficient because they could browse profiles at their convenience, taking time to compare and decide whether they would like to connect with someone or not. Online dating users liked having the time to learn about the other person and establish suitability, find people that they were attracted to, and shared common interests which minimized their fear of rejection. Dating phone apps have made it much easier to meet potential partners especially when busy lifestyles challenged one's ability of finding time for socializing (Bush, 2024). The popularity of

owning a smartphone contributed significantly to the increased use of dating phone apps (Duguay et al., 2024).

According to Online Statistics in Canada (Bush, 2024), Canadians liked online dating because the selection pool for dating options went beyond one's traditional social circles which allowed for privacy, a factor which can be more important for the LGBTQ+ population in comparison with the heterosexual population. Additionally, Canadians liked that more of the dating platforms now have identification measures which provided a system for reporting suspicious or harassing profiles. Another desirable feature was that some online dating platforms provide a free tier in which users can view potential matches without having to subscribe to the service. This allowed everyone accessibility if they had internet access. Another pro is that users can state up front what kind of relationship they are seeking, such as long term, marriage, casual, non-monogamous, same sex and heterosexual affairs (Anderson et al., 2020; Bush, 2024).

Ali and Wibowo (2011) authored a review paper comparing online dating services and traditional dating methods. The paper focused on accessibility, user engagement, and success rates. The online dating pros reported were that initial communication did not require any travelling, booking a restaurant or buying tickets to an event. Additionally, diversity as well as large numbers of people to choose from broaden the dating pool beyond the traditional social, geographic and demographic boundaries. Dating sites users could preview other dating app users' age, gender, sexual orientation, type of relationship they are seeking, culture, race, religion, and even specific hobbies. This feature allowed users to find matches that aligned with their interests and preferences. There are now dating platforms for specific groups (for example, Christian Mingle, JDate for Jewish, Grindr for gay and bi men, HER for women and non-binary people, SilverSingles for adults aged 50+). A weakness of the paper was that it was more of a

conceptual overview than a robust academic analysis. The strength of the paper was that it provided an overview of online dating at a time when information and understanding of the dynamics was needed.

### **Disadvantages of Online Dating**

There is a less flattering narrative about the impact of online dating found in the research, written about in magazines, talked about in social media and expressed by users of online dating. Anderson et al. (2020) reported findings from the 2019 Pew Research Center survey on online dating in America. Refer to Appendix B for the downsides of online dating identified by the 4,860 participants (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 9). The largest complaint, at 70%, was persons using dating platforms lied to appear more desirable. Receiving sexually explicit messages and/or images that were not requested for was at 57%. Americans who have used a dating site or app in the past year said the experience left them feeling more frustrated (45%) than hopeful (28%). A general opinion by online dating users was that dating sites or dating apps were becoming a venue for bothersome or harassing behavior. Sixty percent of the females under the age of 35 reported being continually contacted by someone from online dating even after they said they were not interested.

Online daters identified multiple problems such as being scammed, sexually harassed, lying/deception, fake profiles and outdated profile photos (Anderson et al., 2020). Individuals can upload pictures of themselves which are outdated, often to make themselves look younger than they are which has led to frustration and disappointment at the initial meeting date (Ali & Wibowo, 2011; Forness, 2022). Individuals averse to commitment tended to use online dating as an opportunity to have an affair even though they already have a relationship partner (DeWall et al., 2011).

Online dating has developed a unique vocabulary to describe undesirable behaviors of online dating users. Journalists, magazine reporters, blog post reported that online dating users complain most about catfishing, ghosting, breadcrumbing, and love bombing (Lee, 2017; Shearing & Lavinia, 2023; Bush, 2024; Edwards, 2024)

*Catfishing* is when a romance scammer creates a fake profile and gains a vulnerable person's trust. Meeting in person is promised but never happens and, in the meanwhile, the scammer will ask for money. (Valdez, 2024). *Ghosting* is when the other person suddenly stops all communication without an explanation (Jain, 2024). Ghosting can affect the recipients psychological state of mind when there is lack of clarity that the relationship has ended (Leckfor et al., 2023). Ghosting can be considered as a type of ostracism, in that a person is ignored or left out, which threatens a person's psychological need for belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence, and control (Freedman et al., 2019). *Breadcrumbing* is when flirtatious non-committal messages are sent or received sporadically and it never leads to anything offline (Khattar, et al., 2023) and *love bombing* is when someone lavishes you with romantic gestures to secure the romantic relationship and their true personality or intent of wanting to control you comes forward (Valdez, 2024).

Any one of the negative experiences of online dating can cause an emotional upset or imbalance. Potential effects include, but are not limited to, increased risk of anxiety and depression, diminished self-esteem and confidence, difficulty forming or maintaining healthy relationships, or fear in dating settings. Online dating users experiencing mental health issues may look to counsellors for help to process emotional trauma and rebuild self-esteem and confidence to regain trust in others, in self and feel safe in the world.

In recent years, sexual harassment, manipulation and abuse have emerged in online dating which can result in psychological damage to the recipient (Anderson et al., 2020; Duggan, 2020; Holmes et al., 2021). These issues are particularly prevalent among vulnerable groups, such as women and sexual minorities, who face higher risks of such negative experiences (Castro & Barrada, 2020; Rowes et al., 2020; Lilly & Buehler, 2023). An example of sexual harassment that has been reported by online dating users is the use of sexually explicit initiation (SEI) messages (Lilly & Buehler, 2023). SEI messages are like unsolicited sexts (messages that include explicit sexual language or images) that the receiver did not expect or request (Holmes et al., 2021). These negative experiences have undermined all the advantages of online dating, causing stress and low self-esteem, higher levels of depression and anxiety, feelings of shock and disgust, and feelings of being violated (Holmes et al., 2021; Lilly & Buehler, 2023). Consequently, online and offline dating violence now coexist, becoming a significant social problem (Anderson et al., 2020; Jaureguizar et al., 2024). As a counsellor, our client's safety is primary. When our client is at risk of harm, a counsellor has the responsibility to recognize when the limitation of confidentiality needs to be applied and report to the appropriate authorities of the potential harm targeted at the client. When working with online dating clients it important to always check with the client that they are aware of the risk of violence and discuss measures to remain safe.

Thomas et al. (2023) found excessive swiping to be detrimental for dating app users between the age of 16- 25 years old. Dating apps have the function of "swiping" to indicate a yes or no to profiles the user is interested in. A user "swipes" by sliding their finger across the phone screen to the right to indicate "yes, I am interested" or swipes to the left to indicate "no, I am not interested." The act of swiping informs the algorithm of the matches the user is interested in.

When two users mutually accept each other's profile, they form a match. When a dating app user receives many matches, it creates a feeling of being desirable which leads to more swiping. Excessive swiping can also lead to negative feelings such as comparing oneself with others perceived to be more desirable, a fear of being single, or a feeling overwhelm because of an overload of matches. Coffey et al. (2022) explained how excessive swiping can become a compulsive behavior with potential of becoming an addiction. Dating apps are programmed much like slot machines in that many matches keep the user swiping, chasing the initial pleasure of new matches which reinforce the positive feedback loop and avoid rejections.

Edwards (2024), the online culture reporter with The Globe and Mail received feedback from readers about their experiences with online dating services. Ali and Wibowo (2011) wrote in their review paper also about the experiences of online dating users. Frustration was a common theme on matters such as the time and money spent in multiple conversations that never lead to an actual date, unsuccessful dates that meant having to return to swiping in hopes for a better match and increasing costs for membership. Users had to pay extra for features that pushed their profile to the front of the queue, extra to see who liked your profile, and extra for the option to reverse your last swipe. The increasing costs have become a deterrent for some users to continue their quest for a romantic connection online (Ali & Wibowo, 2011; Edwards, 2024).

In Chapter 1, gender and racial hierarchies were identified to be prevalent in the online dating platform (Kao & Joyner, 2018; Qian, 2022). As counsellors, we must be aware of the impact of diversity, which includes culture, race, religion, and social beliefs. For example, Gao et al. (2024) examined online dating in China. Online dating platforms are used mainly by youth and young adults. They use dating apps for seeking social approval, sexual experiences (males more so than females), a relationship and social interaction. The male users were found to

experience sadness and anxiety more than the females likely because the females had more matches and thus engaged in conversations more than male users. The females felt recognized and validated whereas the males were feeling rejected and frustrated due to lack of responses. The feeling of unattractiveness contributed to higher levels of sadness and anxiety in users of online dating. Counselling support would be very beneficial for online dating users in China. To help these persons, a culturally aware counsellor would either already understand the Chinese culture or would take time to learn about the cultural influences and beliefs on the matters of dating, romance and self-worth. The frustration in China may be caused by the same thing that causes frustration in North America, the algorithms in online dating apps!

### ***Biased Algorithms in Online Dating Apps***

A biased algorithm either has errors that result in a biased outcome, or the algorithm has been intentionally created to “systematically and unfairly discriminate against certain individuals or groups of individuals in favor of others” (Friedman & Nissenbaum, 1996, p. 332). Samantha Edwards (2024) an online culture reporter with *The Globe and Mail* (2024, May 30) wrote about Tinder, Bumble and Hinge using algorithms that placed the most attractive users into the subscriber-only sections. Hinge has a subgroup called “Standouts”; users must pay to access these separated profiles. Average people are placed in the queue with other average profiles and often feel frustrated with the process of using dating apps where it feels like a game of diminishing reward, the longer you play the less rewarding it starts to feel. With all the negative experiences with online dating, the latest survey on attitude indicated a balanced position.

### **Attachment Theory**

The literature has shown that navigating the digital world of dating for a romantic partner is not as easy as just swiping right! Whether offline or online, meeting a suitable romantic

partner has its challenges. As stated in Chapter 1, the ideal partner is a person with secure attachment (Levine & Heller, 2010) and the likelihood of a successful outcome from online dating would be to find someone that is securely attached (Levine & Heller, 2010; Menanno, 2024). Learning about the components of attachment theory will help understand how attachment theory influences adults seeking a romantic relationship through online dating.

### **Security Theory/Secure Base**

A key element of attachment theory pertains to whether a primary caregiver was able to provide a secure base for their child (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Bowlby, 1988). The concept of a secure base came from William E. Blatz, a German Canadian developmental psychologist (Winestock, 2010). Blatz (1944) developed security theory during the 1920s and lectured extensively about it during the 1930s and 1940s. Blatz posited that security extends beyond physical safety; it is a mindset fostered through early relationships and this emotional safety is the primary goal of all human beings. During infancy and early childhood, a child needs to form a secure bond with a primary caregiver (typically the mother) to feel confident enough to explore the world. The parent(s) becomes the secure base for the child such that the child learns to trust and feel secure that the emotional connection will always be there. The secure base is a felt internal sense from which a child, adolescent, or adult can develop trust in others.

Blatz (1944) argued that a lack of psychological resilience and self-confidence in adulthood comes from not developing a secure base in childhood. Having a secure base is essential for emotional development and stable functioning throughout one's lifetime (Bowlby, 1988). While Bowlby is widely recognized as the founder of attachment theory, Van Rosmalen and colleagues (2016) authored an article on the foundational influences on attachment theory

highlighting the significant contributions of Mary Ainsworth (described in the next paragraph) and the often-overlooked impact of William Blatz's security theory.

### ***Mary Ainsworth's Contributions***

Mary Ainsworth worked with Blatz for 20 years, starting as a student and then became a colleague and close friend (Ainsworth et al., 1979). Ainsworth learned from Blatz that “a child needed a sense of belonging and that children needed to be able to rely on their parents to grow up mentally healthy” (as cited in Van Rosmalen et al., 2016, p. 25). Ainsworth's contributions to the development of attachment theory included the concepts of secure base, exploratory behavior, maternal sensitivity, her empirical studies of the infant-mother relationship in Uganda and Baltimore, and the (SSP) that led to the identification of the different bonding patterns.

### ***John Bowlby***

John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1988, 2008) posited that all humans have a natural, biological process to seek proximity from attachment figures for comfort and connection when distressed or exposed to perceived threats. Children are biologically programmed to seek closeness from their parents or primary care giver for safety and protection. Bowlby (1988) argued that having a secure base was essential for emotional development and stable functioning throughout one's lifetime. A sense of safety and security in romantic relationships was influenced by having a secure base provided by a partner (Main et al., 1985; Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). This foundation, established through early childhood experiences and reinforced over time, supported adults in confidently facing the future and accepting the outcomes of their choices (Van Rosmalen et al., 2016). In turn this suggested that a person seeking a romantic relationship through online dating may be influenced by the availability of a secure base in early childhood. Further exploration of attachment theory is next.

## **Internal Working Models**

Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1988) described internal working models as cognitive-affective schemas formed from early childhood attachment experiences. The internal models are thoughts, memories, beliefs, expectations and emotions formed around the self as worthy/unworthy and of others as being reliable/unreliable sources of support. Mikulincer and Shaver (2014) further explained that when children have consistent interactions with their caregivers, they develop mental models based on those experiences and the models become part of their automatic, unconscious thinking and are hard to change. During the SSP, children demonstrated that they understood whether their mother would consistently be available to respond to their distress and help them feel safe and secure (Ainsworth et al., 1979).

Internal working models function throughout ones' lifespan and are continually being shaped, refined, influencing how a person experiences, interprets and responds to social situations (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Hazen & Shaver, 1987; Bowlby 1988; Davidson 2007; McLeod, 2023). These early experiences become core parts of their personality, carried into new relationships and affecting how they connect with others as adults. Understanding the role of a secure base and the influence of internal working models on attachment behavior can be helpful for both the counselor and the client when addressing issues that arise during online dating experiences. The secret to feeling safe in a relationship is in having a secure base (Blatz, 1944).

As we move into the next section of this Capstone, it is important to note that while internal working models refer to the underlying thoughts and beliefs about self and others, and attachment style refers to the observable behavioral patterns that stem from these models, current literature often uses the term 'attachment style' or 'attachment orientation' to refer to both concepts collectively (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Allen, 2023)

## **Attachment Style/Orientation**

Ainsworth et al. (1979) identified four attachment styles which are secure, anxious/ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized. A child's attachment orientation developed early in childhood, influenced by the response from the primary attachment figure towards the distressed child seeking proximity and emotional support. A child's attachment style determines whether they have the necessary secure base from which they can feel safe to venture away from their mother to explore with an internal knowing they can return to her intermittently for comfort (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Bowlby, 1988, 2008).

Ainsworth et al. (1979) posited children with secure attachment have an established secure base with their primary caregiver. They have an internal working model of success when seeking proximity and attaining security because they learned to trust that their felt sense of safety will be restored consistently by their primary caregiver whenever they encountered a stressful/ strange situation. During the SSP, they exhibited distress when separated from their mother but recovered quickly and continued to explore the environment with interest. They greeted their mother with joy and affection when reunited and responded positively to being comforted and held. Some children even attempted to comfort their mother. During the home observations, the mothers were a source of attachment security. They were emotionally available in times of need and responsive to their infants' proximity-seeking behavior. These children learned they can explore their environment and feel safe and calm (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth et al., 1979).

In contrast, Ainsworth et al. (1979) described children with anxious/ambivalent attachment as lacking a secure base with their primary caregiver. The internal working model is of an attachment-system hyperactivation in which the child demonstrates heightened attempts to

gain attention or reassurance in response to feeling insecure. During the SSP they were extremely distressed during separation and exhibited conflictual responses towards their mother at reunion. Their anxiety was expressed by their clinging behavior, followed with resistance to being comforted and pushing their mother away, and then expressing their anger and upset with tantrums. The conflicting behavior was the child's attachment strategy for seeking connection with their primary attachment figure. A child with insecure anxious/ambivalent attachment orientation when distressed, will become anxious and use exaggerated proximity seeking behaviors to gain attention or reassurance. During the home-based observations, the interaction between the child and mother was characterized by a lack of harmony and lack of consistent responsiveness.

Ainsworth et al. (1979) classified a child as having insecure-avoidant attachment when the child attempts to minimize their feelings of distress by avoiding their primary caregiver. The internal working model is one of attachment-system deactivation, which means to distance themselves emotionally to avoid feeling vulnerable or hurt. These children learned that emotional support from their caregiver is unavailable and unreliable resulting in the strategy of suppressing their desire for proximity to their attachment figure and rely on themselves. During the SSP, avoidant attached children were not distressed when separated from their mother, and upon their mother's return they avoided connection by turning away from their mother. The home observation study found that the mothers tended to be emotionally rigid and responded to their child with anger and rejection when they sought proximity.

Lastly, Main et al. (1985) described the disorganized attached child as having a heightened sensitivity to stress. When distressed, they respond with inconsistent, contradictory and unpredictable behavior. They can remain distressed for lengthy periods of time which makes

it challenging for the caregiver to soothe and comfort them. The internal working model oscillates between hyper-activation and emotional deactivation strategies to soothe their fears. Disorganized attachment has also been described as fearful avoidant because there is a fear of close connection/relationships (Drescher, 2024). The primary caregiver is regarded as a source of fear and comfort which is why the child oscillates between emotional hyper-activation and emotional deactivation (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Drescher, 2024).

Drescher (2024), a clinical psychologist and mental health writer for SimplyPsychology, explained that disorganized attachment did not stem from a single event but rather developed gradually throughout one's childhood in response to a pattern of caregiving that made the child feel frightened, confused, or unsafe. Certain parental behaviors can be frightening to a child such as threatening gestures or expressions, severe mood swings, mocking or humiliating a child, emotionally withdrawing from a child, leaning on the child for emotional support, conveying dissociative behavior, parental substance abuse, domestic violence, and physical and or sexual abuse of anyone in the home environment.

During the SSP, Main and colleague (1985) observed the child's behavior to be inconsistent, contradictory and unpredictable. During separation from the mother, the child laid face down on the floor without moving or would sit under a table and do nothing. When the mother returned, the child would approach the mother and then turn away, or suddenly freeze, or become fearful or disoriented. Home-based observations found that disorganized attached children had parents that responded with disorganized and unpredictable behavior and in some situations with maltreatment and/or neglect. It is possible that the parents may have unresolved losses or attachment-related traumas of their own that have impacted their ability to be a source of safety for their children (Hesse, 1999; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999). Not all abused children

develop a disorganized attachment style, and not all individuals with disorganized attachment experienced abuse (Drescher, 2024).

Bowlby (1988) argued that the four attachment styles (secure, anxious/ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized) continued into adulthood. When adults have not developed self-soothing abilities, they will respond to distress like the childhood patterns of attachment orientation. They will rely heavily on others for emotional regulation and seek out a best friend or partner as the primary attachment figure (Bowlby 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1979; Levine & Heller, 2010; Johnson et al., 2013; Heller, 2019; Menanno, 2024).

### ***Adult Attachment in Romantic Relationships***

Hazan and Shaver (1987) were the first researchers who applied attachment theory to adult romantic relationships. They argued that adults exhibit secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent attachment styles, and that these attachment behaviors influence their experience of love. A two-part study was conducted in 1985 in which part one was a self-report questionnaire published in a local newspaper. Participants who responded to the newspaper survey completed a 56 agree-disagree items questionnaire on their most important love relationship. The first 620 replies of the 1,200 responses were used for analysis because the first 100 replies showed consistent findings. Part 2 of the study, designed to counter the bias of self-selection in the newspaper study, consisted of 108 undergrad students enrolled in a course on understanding human conflict. The same questionnaire from the first study was used along with additional questionnaires designed to examine internal models, which were not included in the newspaper study.

The results (Hazen & Shaver, 1987) supported their predictions that adults formed the same affectional bonds with their romantic partner as was formed in childhood with their

primary caregiver. Each attachment style demonstrated different beliefs (internal working models) about the course of romantic love, the availability and trustworthiness of love partners, and their own love-worthiness. An additional finding was that persons with insecure attachment experienced loneliness more so than securely attached persons. Approximately 56% of the participants classified themselves as secure, approximately 24% as avoidant, and approximately 20% as anxious/ambivalent. It is important to note that the disorganized attachment style was not included in the study because it was first identified by Main and Solomon (1990) in 1986 but only formally published in 1990. Before 1990, adult attachment theory focused exclusively on secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent styles.

The study's limitations that may have influenced the results include the methodology of distributing the questionnaire via a newspaper, which introduced potential self-selection bias, limited demographic reach, and constrained the questionnaire's length. Recruiting students from a specific course further restricted the age range and socio-demographic diversity of participants. Additionally, the questionnaire's forced-choice format and focus on only one significant relationship limited its ability to accurately capture relational behaviors tied to specific attachment styles. Despite these limitations, the study was valuable in laying the groundwork for future research on adult attachment behavior and romantic relationships.

### **Attachment Behavior and Social Development**

To understand further how early attachment experiences influence emotional regulation and relationship quality in romantic couples, Simpson et al. (2007) designed a longitudinal study using a developmental model to track 78 participants at three key stages of social development (infancy/early childhood, early elementary school, and adolescence). Self-reported relationship

data was collected, and the couples were videotaped while resolving a relationship conflict as well as completing a task together.

The researchers concluded that early attachment experiences, particularly around 12 months of age, had long-term effects on how individuals manage and express emotions in romantic relationships. High levels of attachment security were found to be associated with greater harmony and more positive experiences whereas insecure attachment (anxious and avoidant combined) was found to be linked with increased negative emotions and decreased positive emotions. It was suggested that an individual's future relational path is flexible and can change based on the dynamic interplay between cognitive representations of past relationships and current social experiences -- offering hope that those with insecure attachment can experience transformation.

Strengths of this study include its effective integration of attachment theory with emotional development, providing insight into how early experiences shape adult emotional dynamics. The longitudinal design enhanced the reliability of the findings, and the use of multiple data sources—self-reports, peer reports, and observer ratings—offered a comprehensive perspective. However, the small sample size limited the diversity of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds represented. As understanding of attachment theory's influence on romantic relationships grows, these insights may help counselors better understand the behaviors of individuals using online dating to seek romantic connections.

### **Online Dating and Romantic Relationships**

“Romantic love is an attachment process, experienced somewhat differently by different people because of variations in their attachment histories” (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 511). Love is a biological and social process which brings people together, attaching them in an intimate

attachment bond with a significant other (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988, 2008). Whether it is children or adults, the presence of the secure base is necessary for one to feel safe in an intimate relationship and the feeling of safe and secure is based on trusting the consistency of that secure base (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Bowlby, 1988). The primary attachment figure in a romantic relationship would typically be the romantic partner or a best friend (Main et al., 1985).

The roles of self-disclosure, social intimacy, and trust in online dating were examined by Nayar and Koul (2021). The authors argued that trust mediated the relationship between social intimacy and the success of online dating. The survey was emailed to students and staff at a private university in India in which 225 participants, aged 18 to 30, completed the survey. A four-item scale measured self-disclosure, social intimacy was measured on three parameters (affective, possession and verbal), and trust was measured using a 26-item scale in the areas of dependability, predictability and faith between partners in a romantic relationship. The success of online dating was measured based on the probability of the couple entering a romantic relationship using an 18-item instrument to assess levels of happiness, satisfaction and an experience of success within the romantic relationship. A seven-point Likert scale was designed for each aspect of the survey and tested to be reliable.

Nayar and Koul (2021) found trust to be a mediator in a linear relationship model involving self-disclosure and social intimacy and the success of online dating. They concluded that trust is a vital component in building intimacy in an online romantic relationship. The findings suggested that the probability of success with a romantic relationship initiated through online dating will be higher when there is trust between the potential partners. It was recommended that social media platforms continue to incorporate features that promote trust and

facilitate meaningful self-disclosure which in turn enhance the quality of online romantic relationships.

Limitations of the study included a small sample size, an age range limited to participants under 30 years old, and a demographic restricted to India, which may not accurately represent online dating dynamics globally. A strength of the study is its valuable insight into the role of trust in online romantic relationships. This emphasis on trust aligns with the concept of relying on a secure base, which influences attachment orientation and behavior in romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Bowlby, 1988).

Atkins (2019) conducted a quantitative study using standardized attachment style inventories and relationship satisfaction scales to examine whether online dating was a viable option for singles to meet a romantic partner. Atkins applied attachment theory to compare the success rate of relationships that started with online dating versus traditional face-to-face meetings. Participants were recruited via Facebook, Craigslist, and snowball sampling to ensure diversity in background. They completed an online survey, and the data was analyzed using multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) to examine differences between online and offline dating experiences.

Atkins (2019) found that individuals with insecure attachment styles (avoidant and anxious) were more likely to use online dating due to its less direct, non-face-to-face nature. However, attachment style did not significantly predict relationship success in online dating, based on relationship length and satisfaction measurements. Secure attachment was linked to higher relationship satisfaction, while avoidant attachment had a negative impact and anxious attachment showed no significant effect. Though securely attached individuals tended to have longer relationships, this was not statistically significant. Overall, attachment orientation was not

a strong predictor of relationship success. Additionally, relationships that began offline were more successful, lasting longer and yielding greater satisfaction than those that began online. The findings suggested that individuals with insecure attachment (both avoidant and anxious) gravitated towards online dating simply because it was an easier way to initiate romantic relationships in a non-face-to-face approach. Attachment style was not found to have a significant predictive effect of relationship success in online dating, as measured by the parameters of length of duration and relationship satisfaction.

The study by Atkins (2019) had several limitations, including a restricted age range (20–50), English-only surveys that limited inclusivity, and reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce bias. The sample lacked diversity, being predominantly heterosexual (90%) and female (87.8%), with only 22.7% having met their partners online, raising concerns about generalizability and reliability. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into attachment theory and online dating within romantic relationships. Atkins' study can assist counselors working with online dating clients—not as a deterrent—but by highlighting that secure attachment positively correlates with online dating success. Counselors can use interventions to help clients develop new internal working models that support personal growth toward secure attachment.

Coffey et al. (2022) also compared online and offline dating with a different focus than Atkins. The study examined the relationship between attachment styles and how participants emotionally processed the sexual experiences of dating considering that online dating offers anonymity, quick feedback on attraction, abundant alternatives, and subtle rejection cues. The study consisted of 247 single American adults, self-identified as straight or bisexual, between the ages of 18 and 35 years of age. After consenting online, data was collected using a 30-minute

online survey asking participants to report on all if any online dating/ dating app and offline dating. The survey questions included attachment style, sexual attitudes, attitudes towards Tinder, attitudes and experiences with online dating sites, offline dating and demographic information. The findings indicated that individuals with secure attachment had positive experiences with online dating. Individuals with attachment anxiety were found to have a significant association with increased usage of online dating apps whereas attachment avoidance had no association with dating app use. The researchers identified a potential conflict in the study design that could affect results for avoidantly attached participants. Individuals with avoidant attachment tend to minimize emotional intimacy and may avoid online dating altogether. However, the same avoidant strategies might also drive some individuals to use dating platforms for noncommittal sexual encounters. If this were the case, the study's findings could be misleading. As a result, the researchers recommended further studies to explore this issue.

Further findings by Coffey et al. (2022) were that neither attachment anxiety nor avoidance were significantly related to using online dating for a sexual experience. When online dating did involve a sexual experience, persons with anxious attachment reported feeling a loss of respect, less satisfaction and guilt following the encounter. The researchers suggested the negative emotions might be related to negative self-image internal working models. The findings regarding avoidant attachment and feelings following sexual experiences in online dating were inconclusive. Limitations of the study which may influence the findings were the use of self-reported measures which has potential for a response bias, the cross-sectional design of the study limited the ability to make causal conclusions between attachment styles and dating experiences and the socio-economic demographics was not a generalized sample of online dating. A strength of the study, much like the other studies, was the insight into online dating, attachment theory

and the psychological component experienced by the online dating users. Further research on interventions aimed at improving emotional well-being in online dating users would be helpful.

Another study regarding the emotional experience of insecurely attached adults using online dating was conducted by Chin et al. (2019). An online survey regarding attachment style and dating app usage. was completed by 303 single adults between the ages of 18-65 (no demographic restriction). There were seven categories for reasons to use dating apps (meet others, convenience, social, fun, sex, bored and personal anxiety) and six categories for not using dating apps (lack of trust, prefer to meet in person, dating apps are for sex, do not know how to use, no time, and no desire to meet others). Age was not found to correlate with online dating use, and although women scored higher than men in both anxious and avoidant attachment, there was no significant relationship between gender and the use of online dating platforms. Logistic regression analyses revealed people with high anxious attachment were more inclined to use dating apps than people with low levels of anxious attachment. It was speculated that frequent use of dating apps may be a strategy to increase the odds of finding a partner by accepting everyone who expressed an interest.

In contrast, people with high levels of avoidant attachment were less inclined to use dating apps compared to people with low levels of avoidance. Avoidantly attached individuals may avoid online dating due to their preference for emotional distance, fear of commitment, and expectation of failure in romantic interactions. When they did use dating apps, it was typically to seek long-term relationships rather than casual sex. There was no significant connection found between an individual's stated reasons for using dating apps and their online dating behavior.

Overall, the most common reason for using dating apps was to meet others, while the main reason for not using them was a lack of trust in online users. The dating apps most use by

anxiously attached individuals were Tinder and Plenty of Fish, while avoidant individuals preferred OkCupid and avoided Tinder. OkCupid has a reputation for serious relationships and Tinder for casual sex (Sprecher, 2013).

The correlational design of Chin and colleagues' (2019) study limited their ability to make a causal conclusion as to whether attachment orientation caused people to use online dating to meet a romantic partner. Self-reported data introduced biases which affect the validity of the findings. The researchers recommended further studies to better understand the attitudes of avoidant attached people towards the use of dating apps because of their inconsistent behavior.

Timmermans and Alexopoulos (2020) examined the influence of anxious and avoidant attachment orientation on a person's motive for using dating apps and the outcomes of the online interactions. The first hypothesis (H1) was that anxious individuals would use dating apps for seeking a relationship (socializing) and to have a sexual experience whereas avoidant individuals would use dating apps to pass time (entertainment and curiosity) and to have a sexual experience. The second hypothesis (H2) was that anxious individuals would want to meet face-to-face with other dating app users and report more romantic relationships from dating app use whereas avoidant individuals would not be interested in a face-to-face meeting and were more interested in non-committed relationships.

The survey was completed by 395 active dating app users recruited from MTurk and an east coast university. Most of the participants were Tinder users (89.1%), male (55.9%), heterosexual (80.5 %) and single (60.5%). A variety of regression analyses were conducted which found H1 was supported with the finding that attachment anxiety was positively associated with using dating apps for seeking a relationship, a sexual experience and flirting and partial support of H2.

Opposite of what was expected, Timmermans and Alexopoulos (2020) found that high anxious attachment had a decreased likelihood of meeting dating app matches face-to face, possibly due to their fear of rejection, abandonment, or a need for constant reassurance. Even though attachment anxiety was not significantly associated with meeting face-to-face with other dating app users, the study results showed that when people with anxious attachment decided to meet with other dating app users, they reported an increased number of romantic relationships, casual sexual encounters, friendships, and increased number of casual sexual encounters while in a committed relationship which did support H2.

Timmermans and Alexopoulos' (2020) findings pertaining to avoidant attachment contradicted both H1 and H2. Individuals with avoidant attachment were not significantly associated with using dating apps for casual sex, nor did they report increased number of casual sexual partners met through dating apps. Avoidant persons were found to be more likely using dating apps while traveling likely because any relationship encounters were less likely to become committed relationships. Additionally, individuals with avoidant attachment were found to be less likely to use dating apps for passing time/entertainment purposes. It was speculated that choosing to watch television for entertainment would be less stressful than spending time on a dating app. The rationale was that using a dating app would lead to dating matches and chat messages which would cause stress for the avoidant attached person.

Timmermans and Alexopoulos (2020) concluded that anxious attachment strongly predicts dating app use, driven by a desire for validation, connection, and intimacy, even if in-person meetings are less likely. Avoidantly attached individuals showed no consistent pattern with some avoiding dating apps entirely to escape intimacy, while others use them but avoid emotional commitment. The authors recommended further research into avoidant attachment and

online dating behavior (as did Chin and colleagues, 2019). Limitations of the study included the use of self-reported data which has a potential bias, the sample group was limited in representing the online dating population and a limited scope by using specific dating apps which excluded the full range of online dating experiences. Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into the relationship between attachment orientation and dating app usage.

Closer to home, Qian (2022) used an intersectional perspective to examine the influence of nativity and gender on online dating experiences amongst heterosexual Canadians. A computer assisted telephone survey was conducted in December 2018, collecting data from 1,700 participants (18 years or older). The interview was offered in five languages (English, French, Mandarin, Cantonese, or Punjabi). The interview collected information regarding immigration status, socio-demographics and online dating experiences; exclusion criteria reduced the sample size to 1,373 participants. All instruments used were regarded as reliable and valid. Logistic regression models were used to estimate the likelihoods of online dating usage, asking someone out for a first date (online-to-offline transition) and entering a long-term relationship (online dating outcome).

The findings indicated immigrants (IM) were more likely than native-born Canadians (NBC), 38% to 16%, to use online dating platforms. Supplementary analyses revealed that IM men had a significant association with online dating use whereas the others did not; IM men (0.28), IM women (0.19), NBC men (0.16) and the least likely NBC women (0.15). Possible reasons for the higher usage by IM included being younger, more educated, never married, and the lack of a social network/support system. Qian highlighted the need for supporting immigrants using online dating (dating apps already exist for niche markets) and recommended that online dating services direct attention to better supporting the immigrant market. After the first analysis

was completed, the analytical sample was reduced to 346 online dating users which limited the study as the sample became smaller and would not be general enough to accurately represent online dating experiences.

In terms of the transition from online to a first face-to face date dating, Qian (2022) found it was gendered influenced: IM men (81%), NBC men (78%), NBC women (53%) and IM women (45%). Both NBC and IM followed traditional gender norms of dating, with men typically initiating first dates. Qian suggested that rather than challenging existing norms, online dating may reinforce traditional gender roles and reproduce inequalities based on both gender and nativity in the context of heterosexual relationships.

Furthermore, Qian (2022) found that despite IM men being proactive in using online dating and initiating the first date, they were least likely to form a romantic relationship through online dating platforms. Qian suggested that gender difference in online dating may be more pronounced amongst IM than NBC highlighting the importance of Canada's settlement services role in facilitating the integration and well-being of single immigrant adults. Qian recommended development of a social service infrastructure that facilitated digital integration, community building and relationship development for immigrants.

The study had several limitations, including the use of a small sample consisting solely of Canadian heterosexual participants, which excluded other populations and limited the generalizability of the findings to broader online dating experiences. Additionally, the inclusion of Canadian immigrants introduced multiple variables—such as language proficiency, cultural beliefs, economic status, and digital literacy—that were not differentiated but could significantly influence dating outcomes. The reliance on self-reported data also introduced potential bias, affecting the accuracy of the results. Despite these limitations, the study was valuable in

highlighting the potential reinforcement of social inequalities within online dating platforms. Future research is needed to explore the role of nativity and its impact on online dating experiences.

Kao and Joyner's (2018) sociological research offers a possible explanation for Qian's findings by examining how racial and gender stereotypes influence the romantic and sexual desirability of Asian American men (including but not limited to Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Indian), despite their socioeconomic success. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, which tracked romantic patterns among 90,000 students from grades 7–12 into adulthood, the authors found evidence of a gendered racial hierarchy in the American dating market. Asian men and Black women ranked lowest in desirability. The study concluded that Asian American men experienced disadvantages in the dating market during adolescence and early adulthood due to stereotypes that portrayed them as less masculine or less desirable, regardless of their education or income.

Referring to the study by Qian (2022), Canadian immigrant women and native-born Canadian men using online dating were found to have greater success in finding a long-term partner compared to immigrant men. This trend was shaped by factors such as gender, stereotypical beliefs about immigrants, economic inequality, and social acceptance of women marrying to elevate their status. Qian (2022) emphasized that such disparities can negatively affect minority groups' sense of belonging and hinder their social integration, with detrimental effects on both physical and mental well-being. Similarly, Kao and Joyner (2018) challenged the assumption that upward mobility automatically guarantees success across all life domains, including romantic relationships, by illustrating how race and gender intersect to shape romantic

desirability. Together, these studies (Kao & Joyner, 2018; Qian, 2022) contribute valuable insights into the racial and gendered dynamics that influence romantic opportunities.

The scope of Kao and Joyner's study (2018) was limited by only highlighting racial hierarchies and media stereotyping of the American dating market. An analysis of the emotional impact and the dating behaviors in response to the biases could have helped provide more qualitative insights on the dating dynamics in the Asian American dating market and possibly for other marginalized populations world-wide. Future research that includes the role of online dating and/or how the attachment orientation of marginalized populations impacts romantic relationships would further inform counsellors of how to support individuals navigate online dating, in seek of a romantic relationship.

The literature reviewed thus far suggests that attachment orientation influences individuals' behaviors and experiences when seeking romantic relationships through online dating platforms. A counselor working with a client who is using online dating can draw on this research to gain a broader understanding of how attachment styles impact romantic relationships and online dating dynamics. This insight may help clarify the issues that brought the client to therapy and guide the selection of appropriate interventions aligned with the client's therapeutic goals. The following section will review the four attachment orientations in the context of online dating.

### **Secure Attachment and Online Dating**

Adults with secure attachment typically have an established secure base in their attachment figure, often a best friend or romantic partner (Main et al., 1985). Their internal working models function effectively when seeking proximity and emotional connection with their partner (Ainsworth et al., 1979). Individuals with secure attachment are more likely to have

positive dating experiences (Coffey et al., 2022) due to their positive self-image, emotional availability, and sense of being lovable, valuable, and capable within relationships (Simpson et al., 2007). Compared to those with insecure attachment styles, securely attached individuals tend to experience happier, longer-lasting relationships and are more accepting of their partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson et al., 2007; Atkins, 2019). They are also better able to coherently express their needs and emotions to those they consider important (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017).

A secure-based romantic relationship is characterized by a reliable emotional bond, where each partner trusts the other to offer comfort and support when needed. When this support is mutual—as is often the case—partners can seek emotional closeness in a healthy, secure manner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Furthermore, individuals with secure attachment who met their partners online were found to experience higher relationship satisfaction and longer relationship duration compared to those with insecure attachment styles (Atkins, 2019).

### **Anxious Attachment and Online Dating**

People with anxious attachment have consistently been identified as being frequent users of online dating (Chin et al., 2019; Timmermans & Alexopoulos, 2020; Coffey et al., 2022). They enjoy flirting and have a need for social connection, social approval, and expect frequent assurances back from the partner as confirmation of commitment to the relationship (Timmermans & Alexopoulos, 2020). The overreliance on others for emotional support may stem from having low self-esteem and/or having a negative self-image (Ainsworth et al., 1979). Furthermore, an anxiously attached person wants and enjoys physical intimacy but is guarded and ambivalent about the relationship because of past uncertainty experienced regarding receiving emotional support or intimacy from attachment figures (Ali, 2022). When a person

with anxious attachment is distressed, their internal model will become hyperactivated. The distress will elicit an attachment strategy of distress-evoking stimuli such as being alert for signs of abandonment, increased expressions of distress and negative thoughts while continually seeking connection with their partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

### **Avoidant Attachment and Online Dating**

In contrast, Timmermans and Alexopoulos (2020) found that individuals with avoidant attachment were not significantly active users of dating apps. Avoidantly attached individuals tend to avoid emotional closeness as a strategy to manage distressing thoughts and attachment-related feelings (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). Having learned early in life not to rely on others for emotional support, they often avoid forming deep emotional connections (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Ali, 2022). While this tendency may lead them to avoid online dating platforms altogether, those with higher sexual desires may still use these platforms for noncommittal sexual encounters (Rochat et al., 2019).

Adults with avoidant attachment have an internal working model of attachment-system deactivation in which the strategy of avoidance is protection from feeling vulnerable and experiencing emotional pain (Ainsworth et al., 1979). The deactivating strategy reduces the need for closeness and emotional intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In a romantic relationship, they have an overreliance on themselves to regulate their emotions, resist commitment and refrain from reaching out to their significant others for support (Hazen & Shaver, 1987). Although they want to be close, they often feel intruded on by their partner which creates distress. The distress is managed by suppressing their emotions and presenting themselves as a capable and independent adult (Levine & Heller, 2010; Heller, 2019).

## **Disorganized Attachment and Online Dating**

Disorganized attachment was notably excluded from all the studies reviewed on online dating and attachment theory, revealing a significant gap in the literature. Drescher (2024) provided an in-depth description of disorganized attachment in adults, a style that is less common and often referred to as fearful avoidant. This attachment style is characterized by an internal working model that fluctuates between hyperactivation and emotional deactivation strategies in an attempt to manage fear. The attachment figure is simultaneously perceived as a source of both comfort and threat, resulting in conflicting emotional responses. Individuals with disorganized attachment often struggle with trust, viewing intimate relationships as both desirable and dangerous. This inner conflict—wanting love and connection while being afraid of it—prevents emotional closeness and fails to relieve distress. These symptoms may persist over time, creating significant challenges for both the individual and their attachment figure (Heller, 2019; Drescher, 2024).

Drescher (2024) described the dating behavior of adults with disorganized attachment as marked by suspicion toward their partner's intentions, often accompanied by jealousy over friendships and social media interactions. This behavior stems from a learned mistrust of attachment figures, leading them to remain constantly alert for signs of deception. Such dynamics can be confusing and challenging for both partners. The disorganized adult's behavior is unpredictable, following a pattern of "approach and avoid"—when their partner comes close, they may push them away or emotionally shut down. They frequently expect to be hurt, disappointed, or rejected, which heightens their sensitivity to any signs of abandonment. Often lacking strong personal boundaries, they may also expect their partner to have none. Heller (2019) and Drescher (2024) note that these individuals can experience extreme mood swings,

shifting rapidly from happiness and affection to anger, anxiety, and withdrawal. Sudden hostile outbursts can strain new romantic relationships unless the partner understands these mood fluctuations and knows how to respond effectively. Disorganized individuals typically struggle to regulate their emotions and clearly express their feelings and needs. Although disorganized attachment has been largely excluded from online dating research, understanding these offline behaviors can offer valuable insight into their potential impact within online dating contexts.

### **Mental Health and Wellness**

While online dating offers solutions to traditional dating challenges, it may also contribute to psychological distress and an increased risk of mental health issues that may require therapeutic support (Zhang et al., 2022). Zhang and colleagues (2022) examined the link between adult attachment and mental health by conducting a quantitative meta-analysis of 224 research studies. By combining effect sizes of diverse populations and cultures, the analysis provided a more accurate estimate of the true strength of this association with a combined sample size of 79,722 participants from 245 samples. The study also examined potential moderating factors, including participants' gender, age, ethnicity, relationship status, source of participants (study type (cross-sectional vs. longitudinal), and the type of attachment measure used. To ensure coding accuracy, two authors independently coded all studies included in the meta-analysis. The researchers predicted that attachment anxiety and avoidance would be linked to poorer mental health with attachment anxiety having a stronger association.

Findings by Zhang et al. (2022) showed that attachment anxiety and avoidance were positively associated with negative emotions—such as depression, anxiety, sadness, and distress—but not with loneliness. Moderating variables had no significant influence on the relationship between attachment styles and negative emotions. A t-test revealed that individuals

with anxious attachment experienced significantly higher levels of negative affect than those with avoidant attachment, and these results were not attributable to chance. The researchers also speculated on the role of gender in the relationship between avoidant attachment and depression. Women with avoidant attachment tended to exhibit fearful avoidance (high anxiety and high avoidance), characterized by a desire for closeness coupled with fear of trusting or depending on others. In contrast, avoidant men were more likely to show dismissive avoidance (low anxiety and high avoidance), presenting as self-reliant and emotionally distant. The authors suggested that although depression was reported in both men and women, avoidant men might conceal depressive symptoms, potentially influencing the accuracy of the results.

Zhang et al. (2022) found that both anxious and avoidant attachment styles were moderately associated with increased negative mental health outcomes (e.g., distress) and decreased positive mental health indicators (e.g., life satisfaction and self-esteem). Although race and age moderated these relationships, the associations remained statistically significant for both attachment styles. The study concluded that adult insecure attachment is strongly linked to mental health challenges; individuals with a fear of rejection or discomfort with emotional closeness are less likely to experience life satisfaction, personal growth, or emotional well-being.

The findings were limited by several factors. First, the cross-sectional design of most included studies made it difficult to establish cause-and-effect relationships. Second, inconsistencies in how attachment and mental health were measured across samples may have affected the reliability of the results. Third, the potential exclusion of studies with null results could have introduced publication bias, influencing the overall conclusions. Despite these limitations, the study had several notable strengths. With a large sample of over 79,000 participants, the findings were more generalizable to a broader population. By examining both

positive and negative aspects of mental health, the study offered a comprehensive view of how attachment styles relate to psychological well-being. The use of advanced analytical techniques—such as robust variance estimation and structural equation modeling—further enhanced the rigor and credibility of the findings. This research provides a strong foundation for future studies exploring the interplay between attachment theory, mental health, and the experiences of individuals using online dating to seek romantic relationships.

Thomas and colleagues (2023) identified the potential health concern of addiction when using online dating. The most distinctive feature of dating apps regarded as potentially addictive is the mechanism of swiping which is highly engaging; the more you swipe the more you are rewarded with more potential matches, thus it can be hard to disengage from it. To sustain the feeling of a positive reward, one needs to keep swiping right (Wang & Lee, 2020; Thomas et al., 2023).

According to Yale Medicine (2022), dating app swiping can become addictive by hijacking the brain's natural reward system. The repeated dopamine release from the satisfaction of swiping creates a cycle where the brain begins to crave more stimulation. Over time, the brain develops a tolerance, requiring more swipes to achieve the same dopamine "high." This overstimulation can lead to addiction, affecting brain areas related to focus, memory, learning, and decision-making.

Vera Cruz et al. (2024) investigated predictors of problematic Tinder use (PTU) using machine learning on 1,387 users aged 18–74. User engagement—such as number of matches, online contacts, and offline dates—was the strongest predictor of PTU, while depressive mood and loneliness were moderate predictors. Motivations like reducing boredom, improving mood, and seeking connections also influenced PTU. Although signs of addictive-like behavior were

present, the average PTU scores were low, indicating that overall app use among participants was not classified as addictive.

In another study on PTU, Orosz and colleagues (2018) explored PTU and the impact of motivation, personality traits and basic psychological need-relatedness individually as well as their influence on each other. Four motivational factors were identified as predictors of PTU which were seeking for true love, casual sex partners, self-esteem enhancement and relief from boredom. Participants were 414 Hungarians between the ages of 18-43 years old. The personality traits of extraversion, openness, conscientiousness and neuroticism bore no significance to PTU nor to influencing the motivating factors. Frustration was found to be a significant predictor of PTU and having a direct influence on the use of online dating apps. The sample size being small, with a demographics restricted by location and age limit the scope of the study and lack generalization to consider the results as a representation of the results.

Mental health and wellness in online dating is clearly an ongoing concern. Strubel and Petrie (2017) found that Tinder users, regardless of gender, reported lower satisfaction with their appearance (both face and body) and higher levels of body shame, surveillance, and internalization of appearance ideals compared to non-users. Male Tinder users had significantly lower self-esteem than both male and female non-users. Their study suggested that using Tinder contributes to increased body-related pressures, negative self-perceptions, and a greater tendency to internalize societal beauty standards and compare oneself to others.

The downsides of online dating, such as being deceived, manipulated, ghosted, scammed, breadcrumb, sexually harassed, rejected and betrayed can lead to users developing feelings of depression, anxiety, loneliness, emotion regulation difficulty, low self-esteem, negative body

image and disappointment (Ali & Wibowo, 2011; Holmes et al., 2021; Nayar & Koul, 2021; Forness, 2022; Lilly & Buehler, 2023; Gao et al., 2024).

As noted at the beginning of this Capstone, "online dating is here to stay." The psychological challenges faced by online dating users may lead them to seek support in the counseling room. A counselor who understands the complexities of online dating—including its potential impact on mental health and the role of attachment orientation—may feel more equipped to support clients pursuing romantic relationships through digital platforms. Ongoing research will be essential in helping counselors stay informed, particularly as digital technology and dating norms continue to evolve.

### **How Does Attachment Theory Help Online Dating Clients?**

Heller (2019) argued that everyone is biologically programmed for secure attachment and our life experiences influence whether we remain secure or become insecure. Everyone's healing journey is to learn how to restore those secure tendencies regardless of one's past. The healing process occurs when we become aware of our attachment style and recognize the triggers in our relationships. As our nervous system becomes regulated, we reconnect with our innate secure base and experience love, compassion, and connection with others (Heller, 2019). Bowlby (1988) argued that changes in emotion regulation tendencies may serve as a key process underlying shifts in attachment orientation and attachment theory has increasingly been conceptualized as a theory of emotion regulation. Given that attachment orientation has a significant influence on mental health, facilitating changes of attachment orientation has become an important clinical goal.

Bar-sella and colleagues (2024) were the first to examine the therapeutic importance of shifting the individual's emotion regulation tendency. They used a conceptual model with a

computational approach to examine whether shifts in emotion regulation tendencies were associated with reductions in insecure attachment and enhancements in the therapeutic alliance.

The sample comprised 52 patients aged 18 to 60 years, all diagnosed with major depressive disorder (MDD) and fluent in Hebrew. Participants were self-referred in response to an advertisement offering free treatment at a psychotherapy research clinic in central Israel. A well-established instrument was used to measure the fundamental frequency (FO) of voice in both patients and therapists during therapy sessions. FO, the lowest harmonic frequency produced by vocal cord vibrations during speech, serves as a reliable indicator of vocally encoded emotional arousal and reflects moment-to-moment intrapersonal and interpersonal emotion regulation. Patients underwent weekly 50-minute sessions of psychodynamic therapy tailored for depression, over a 16-week period. Seven therapists delivered one of two therapy modalities: supportive-expressive or supportive-focused techniques. Therapeutic alliance and attachment orientation were assessed using self-report questionnaires.

To retain patient confidentiality, the study was approved by the institutional internal review board and participants provided informed consent which included all data would be kept confidential and would not be shared. The researchers publicly recorded the study's design and analysis plan before collecting data.

Bar-sella and colleagues (2024) found that individuals who experienced a greater shift of emotion regulation tendency from intrapersonal to interpersonal or vice versa experienced greater strengthening of the therapeutic alliance over the course of their therapy. When the emotion regulation shift was from intrapersonal to interpersonal, it was associated with greater reduction in attachment avoidance over the course of their therapy whereas, when the shift of regulation tendency was from interpersonal to intrapersonal, it was not associated with a

decrease in the level of attachment anxiety throughout the course of therapy. The researchers speculated that attachment anxiety may still reduce because of shifting regulation tendencies and the reason why their study had null results was due to the possibility that the design of the study was not able to measure the process of change. Another possibility was that the mechanism of change could be different from the one being measured in the present study. Future studies examining their post hoc explanations would be useful. Overall, it was concluded that a beneficial therapeutic process would be for a client to shift their emotion regulation tendency to the opposite of the one they had at the beginning of therapy, thus shifting their attachment orientation and enhance the therapeutic alliance.

The study had several limitations. The sample size was relatively small ( $N = 52$ ) and drawn from a specific socioeconomic and cultural context—Hebrew-speaking individuals located in central Israel—which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the small number of trained and experienced therapists further reduced the diversity of the sample. The reliance on self-report questionnaires introduced potential bias, particularly given the limited number of patients and therapists involved. Nonetheless, the study's use of fundamental frequency (FO) measurements during therapy sessions is a notable strength, as it allowed for the analysis of thousands of talk turns, thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings. Moreover, assessing FO at different stages of therapy offers valuable insights into the timing of therapeutic change and may inform more targeted interventions.

The following two studies do not focus on online dating specifically but are included due to their clinical relevance in understanding changes in adult interpersonal relationships through the lens of attachment theory.

Godwin (2023) conducted a quantitative correlational study to examine the relationship between participation in therapy and changes in attachment style and internal working models in adult romantic interpersonal relationships in which at least one member had a history of childhood trauma. An online survey was posted to specific pages within Facebook and LinkedIn designed for sharing research surveys. Inclusion criteria consisted of a history of childhood trauma, in a romantic relationship for at least three months, and having interpersonal challenges within the romantic relationship and 215 adults (18-65 years old) living in the United States were recruited. The aim of the study was to determine whether participation in therapy led to shifts in attachment orientation and improved relationship dynamics. Data was collected and a multivariate regression analysis on demographics, attachment, interpersonal relationships, and childhood trauma was used to determine the findings.

Godwin (2023) found a significant correlation between participation in therapy and changes in attachment style among adults with childhood trauma and found decreased anxiety and ambivalence within the romantic relationships. Therapy enhanced the emotional support and intimacy between the partners. Additionally, the findings revealed a significant correlation between relationship between participation in therapy and changes in the internal working model of attachment for adult romantic relationships among individuals who have experienced childhood trauma. Therapy reduced the anxiety-provoking interactions and promoted healthier interpersonal functioning within the romantic relationship.

The study had limitations such as the lack of a control group making it difficult to determine the validity of the cause of change in the relationships. The use of self-reported measures potentially introduce bias which may affect the accuracy of the findings. Lastly, the

sample size and demographics limited the diversity of the study sample which may reflect Americans in general, but not a generalized representation of romantic relationships worldwide. The study's greatest strength is that it was the first to examine the correlation between therapy and attachment theory (includes internal working models) in adult romantic relationships where there is a history of childhood trauma. Furthermore, the study informs therapeutic practice by emphasizing the importance of addressing attachment issues in the context of romantic relationships which may result in relationship satisfaction and overall emotional well-being

Van Nieuwenhove and colleagues (2020) presented a detailed single-case study examining the therapeutic process of a woman with a history of childhood trauma undergoing supportive-expressive psychodynamic therapy. The aim of the study was to bring greater understanding of the nature of interpersonal patterns (associated with childhood trauma) throughout the therapeutic process. At the onset of therapy, the patient struggled with self-expression due to her belief that people were critical and rejecting towards her. It was already established that the relationship pattern was linked to childhood trauma and the pattern was repeated in her adult relationships. The therapeutic process helped the woman become more assertive and self-confident but the negative perception of people's reactions towards her persisted. The therapeutic process consisted of providing the client with a new relational experience to foster change on an interpersonal level. The process of the therapist responding to the client with support, unconditional positive regard, validation, and autonomy facilitated change within the client.

Van Nieuwenhove et al., (2020) argued that to effectively address a client's interpersonal difficulties, it is essential for the therapist to recognize the client's dominant interpersonal patterns and understand their dynamics within the broader context of the client's history and

experiences. Limitations identified were the single-case design preventing generalizability of the findings thus may not represent other individuals with childhood trauma. The application of therapist-reported measures may introduce observer bias which can influence the interpretation of the therapeutic intervention. Despite the limitations, the research was clinically relevant by illustrating how psychodynamic therapy can address complex interpersonal issues rooted in early trauma, highlighting the importance of how a new relational experience can contribute to improved interpersonal functioning.

Although the previous two studies were not about online dating, the findings may be relevant to how counsellors can help online dating users have a positive experience while seeking a romantic relationship. The findings supported the application of a psychodynamic therapeutic process to bring about a positive change in interpersonal relationships. The shifting of interpersonal behavioral patterns and beliefs developed during childhood supports attachment theory as an intervention for change of internal working models (Bowlby, 1988). The researchers' argument regarding the essentialness for the therapist to "recognize the client's dominant interpersonal patterns and understand their dynamics within the broader context of the client's history and experiences" can be applied to counsellors using an attachment lens to help online dating users participating in therapy while they are seeking for a romantic relationship. Before Chapter 2 concludes, next is a brief overview of a trending occurring in North America that pertains to online dating use.

### **Concluding Paragraphs**

Dating apps have become one of the most common methods of pursuing a romantic or sexual partner (Timmermans & Alexopoulos, 2020). The research has shown clearly that adults seeking romantic relationships, which includes adults using online dating platforms, will respond

to new relationships with behavior that is associated with their attachment orientation be it secure, anxious, avoidant or disorganized (Bowlby 1973, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1979; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson et al., 2007; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, 2017).

Attachment orientation refers to the behavioral patterns shaped by internal working models (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Internal working models are mental representations of the self and others that influence one's expectations of reliability and trust in relationships (Bowlby, 1988, 2008). These models guide how individuals interpret and respond to social interactions throughout one's lifespan (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Bowlby 1988; Davidson 2007). The secret to feeling safe in a relationship is in having a secure base (Blatz, 1944). A secure base is formed in childhood (Bowlby, 1988) and without it, one may struggle with confidence and healthy relationships in adulthood (Blatz, 1944). A securely attached person can provide a secure base for a potential romantic partner (Main et al., 1985). When reciprocation occurs this could potentially lead to a long lasting harmonious romantic relationship (Coffey et al., 2022, Simpson et al., 2007).

Anxiously attached individuals tend to use online dating more than the other attachment orientations (Chin et al., 2019; Timmermans & Alexopoulos, 2020; Coffey et al., 2022) and tend to have a high need for social approval and emotional connection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). They typically present as flirtatious and engaging and have an underlying attachment strategy of a fear of abandonment. In contrast, avoidant attached individuals are inclined to avoid online dating even though they desire connection. They typically present as confident and self-reliant and have an attachment strategy of discomfort with emotional connection (Timmermans & Alexopoulos, 2020).

Although online dating has positive features, it also has negative features which have put online dating users at risk of developing mental health issues that may require therapeutic support (Zhang et al., 2022). Online dating users have reported many negative experiences which have impacted their social, psychological, professional and personal lives (Ali & Wibowo, 2011; Kao & Joyner, 2018; Holmes et al., 2021; Nayar & Koul, 2021; Forness, 2022; Qian, 2022; Lilly & Buehler, 2023; Thomas et al., 2023). Both attachment anxiety and avoidance were linked to higher levels of negative emotions and poorer mental health, including increased distress, lower life satisfaction and self-esteem which were identified as potential risks for online dating users (Zhang et al., 2022).

The ideal partner is a person with secure attachment (Levine & Heller, 2010) and the likelihood of a successful outcome from online dating would be to find someone that is securely attached (Menanno, 2024). Understanding the influence of attachment theory on romantic relationships may be helpful for both the counsellor and the client as therapy was found to be effective in changing attachment styles and internal working models in adults active in romantic relationships (Van Nieuwenhove et al., 2020, Godwin, 2023). A therapist acting as a secure base for the client may shift insecure attachment toward secure attachment by using the therapeutic relationship as an instrument for change (Burke, 2016). Furthermore, a therapist providing a client an oppositional relational experience to that of the client's dominant interpersonal pattern may shift the client's attachment orientation towards secure attachment (Van Nieuwenhove et al., 2020).

Attachment theory is an effective framework for helping clients navigate online dating in a manner that makes them feel safe within and confident to make healthy connections. A counsellor that is knowledgeable about attachment theory is better able to understand the

dynamics of romantic relationships, how conflict occurs, and have a means to help the client(s) navigate online dating with confidence. At present there is no research on the correlations between attachment theory, therapy participation and online dating users seeking romantic relationships. The application of the existing research findings may lead to positive experiences with online dating. More research is needed to better understand how we as counsellors can use attachment theory to help clients seeking a romantic relationship through online dating. There are no indications that online dating will disappear which means online dating is here to stay!

The research findings and their relevance identified in Chapter 2 will be discussed in Chapter 3. Additionally, the literature review findings will be used to answer the research questions presented in Chapter 1. I will also highlight how the study findings can be applied to practice which includes how I intend to use it in my professional practice. The gaps in the literature were identified thru out Chapter 2 thus will not be part of Chapter 3. Recommendations for future research will be mentioned and then finish with final concluding paragraphs.

### **Chapter 3: Discussion and Applied Practices**

#### **Introduction**

Approximately 350 million people worldwide use online dating platforms in search of human connection (Business of Apps, 2025). Attachment theory has been increasingly applied to adult romantic relationships and sexual behaviors, both among single individuals those in committed relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). Attachment theory provides a foundational framework work in modern mental health by explaining how early relational experiences shape emotional development and influence psychological well-being later in life. The theory also informs therapeutic practices by helping clinicians identify the underlying causes of emotional distress, enabling more targeted and effective interventions (Bowlby, 1988).

Hazen and Shaver (1987) applied attachment theory to adult romantic relationships and found that an adult's experience of love was influenced by their attachment patterns (secure, avoidant or anxious/ambivalent) formed in early childhood. The patterns shaped internal working models, which are mental representations of self and others in relationships. Attachment style refers to the observable behavioral patterns that emerge from the internal models, such as how individuals seek closeness, manage conflict, or respond to emotional needs in romantic contexts. The purpose of this Capstone is to explore the question: How can attachment theory help support adults seeking a romantic relationship through online dating?

To better understand the challenges faced by online dating users and how to effectively support them, the themes of this literature review include the history of online dating, the advantage and disadvantages, attachment theory, adult attachment theory, adult attachment in romantic relationships, attachment orientations and their associated behaviors in online dating, and the role of therapy in addressing interpersonal and relationship issues.

### **Discussion**

People of all ages are turning to online dating platforms; however, there is a growing sense of frustration and disappointment among users, many of whom report feeling burnt out and demoralized (Ali & Wibowo, 2011; Forness, 2022; Edwards, 2024). This raises a critical question for mental health professionals: How can we support client's navigate love and relationships in a digital world? The findings emerging from the literature review will be discussed in relation to addressing the guiding questions presented in Chapter 1.

Attachment theory offers a compelling framework for understanding patterns in adult romantic relationships. The foundation is based on the emotional bond between infants and their primary caregivers, these early bonds were categorized into three primary attachment

orientations: secure, anxious, avoidant. Disorganized attachment was formally recognized in 1990 (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970, Bowlby, 1973, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1979; Main et al., 1980; Main & Solomon 1990). The attachment patterns of secure, anxious and avoidant were found to replicated in adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Main et al., 1985; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). Much like how the children in the SSP sought proximity from their primary caregiver, adults in romantic relationships seek proximity from their partner. When a couple can provide a secure base for each other, the ensuing relationship is based on trust, thus stable and supportive, allowing the couple to pursue personal and shared goals (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Main et al., 1985; Bowlby, 1988; Simpson et al., 2007; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014; Nayar & Koul, 2021).

Each attachment style has relational strategies that influence how individuals emotionally connect in a romantic relationship which is relevant for individuals seeking romantic connections through online dating. Individuals with a secure attachment have a stable internal working model and a strong sense of emotional security (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). They communicate openly, have a positive self-image, and can emotionally connect in a romantic relationship (Simpson et al., 2007; Levine & Heller, 2010). Although they are regarded as the ideal online dating love match (Levine & Heller, 2010), they are not frequent users of online dating, preferring the traditional face-to-face dating approach (Atkins, 2019).

Individuals with an anxious attachment style have a heightened sensitivity to rejection/abandonment thus experience emotional distress and seek constant reassurance from their romantic partners (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Brennan et al., 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). They are frequent users of online dating, typically are engaging and attract many matches

but can be hesitant to progressing the relationship (Levine & Heller, 2010; Ali, 2022; Atkins, 2019; Chin et al., 2019; Timmermans & Alexopoulos, 2020; Coffey et al., 2022).

Individuals with an avoidant attachment style have a deactivating strategy that downplay their emotional needs and favor independence to avoid attachment-related distress (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Levine & Heller, 2019). They typically present as independent and self-sufficient and avoid online dating or engage with it superficially (Atkins, 2019; Chin et al., 2019; Timmermans & Alexopoulos, 2020; Coffey et al., 2022).

Disorganized attachment is characterized by intense emotions and have an attachment strategy that is inconsistent resulting in unpredictable relational behaviors. Disorganized attachment develops when an attachment figure is perceived as both a source of comfort and fear, resulting in deep mistrust. (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Main et al., 1985). In romantic relationships, it manifests as mistrust, jealousy, and heightened suspicion of a partner's intentions (Main et al., 1985; Heller, 2019; Drescher, 2024).

The attachment patterns are shaped by the individual's internal working model, which influences how new relationships are perceived (Bowlby, 1988). A secure internal working model arises from having a reliable attachment figure and can be cultivated through a supportive therapeutic relationship (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In contrast, a negative model reinforces distrust and emotional distance, making it more difficult to form healthy romantic bonds (Bowlby, 1988).

The disadvantages of online dating were found to cause psychological distress and increase one's risk of mental health issues (Holmes et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Lilly & Buehler, 2023). The common negative experiences identified were: deception, catfishing,

ghosting, breadcrumbing, and love bombing (Lee, 2017; Anderson et al., 2020; Shearing & Lavinia, 2023; Bush, 2024; Edwards, 2024; Orchard, 2024), gender and racial hierarchy (Kao & Joyner, 2018; Qian, 2022), body image pressure (Strubel & Petrie, 2017), rejection, fear of being alone (Pronk & Denissen, 2020; Thomas et al, 2023; Gao et al., 2024), sexual harassment and abuse (Holmes et al., 2021). Additionally, the compulsive use of dating apps, in particular the act of swiping posed the risk of becoming an addiction (Thomas et al., 2023). Abbasi (2019) found the online availability of romantic alternatives created an environment in which emotional or sexual affairs were more likely to happen. The emotional challenges associated with online dating included but not limited to were: emotional burnout, rejection sensitivity, and low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, loneliness, emotion regulation difficulty, low self-esteem, negative body image, shame, and disappointment (Ali & Wibowo, 2011; Strubel & Petrie, 2017; Holmes et al., 2021; Nayar & Koul, 2021; Forness, 2022; Lilly & Buehler, 2023; Bar-sella et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2024). Sechi and Vismara (2023) expressed the need for interventions that could improve a person's attachment style which would lead to improving self-esteem and thus more likely to have a healthier approach to online dating.

The research associating any therapeutic process with individuals using online dating is a significant gap in the literature. Another significant gap is the exclusion of disorganized attachment in all the literature linking attachment theory with online dating. However, there were studies on attachment theory as a therapeutic process addressing interpersonal relationships in adults seeking and/or involved in a romantic relationship. Participation in therapy was found to be significantly associated with positive changes in attachment style and internal working models (Godwin, 2023). Therapy reduced anxiety and ambivalence in romantic relationships, enhanced emotional support and intimacy between partners, and promoted healthier interpersonal

functioning (Mallinckrodt et al., 2015; Johnson, 2017; Van Nieuwenhove et al., 2020; Godwin, 2023; Bar-Sella et al., 2024). Relational therapy can enhance the online dating experience and foster a long-lasting and fulfilling love within oneself and /or with a partner (Heller, n.d.; Bowlby, 1988; Johnson, 2017, 2019; Van Nieuwenhove et al., 2020; Godwin, 2023; Menanno, 2024).

Educating clients on their own attachment style and internal working model has effectively shifted insecure attachment styles toward secure attachment (Heller, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Menanno, 2024). Additionally, understanding one's own attachment patterns fosters internal harmony whether an individual is single, in a struggling relationship, recently out of one, or somewhere in between (Levine & Heller, 2010; Heller, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Tatkins, 2024; Menanno, 2024).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

My first recommendation is for counsellor to be aware that a strong therapeutic alliance is central to effective therapy, particularly for clients with insecure attachment, and establish the alliance within the first two sessions. Acting as a surrogate attachment figure, the counsellor provides a secure base by attuning to the client with empathy, validation and positive regard (Johnson, 2019). The client can then explore difficult emotions and relational patterns without fear of rejection. The sense of safety fosters emotional regulation, reduces insecurity, and promotes healing and personal growth; as the negative messaging shifts, a new perspective develops (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Johnson, 2017, 2019). Regardless of attachment style, a strong therapeutic alliance can help shift internal working models of insecure attachment toward secure attachment (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Mallinckrodt et al., 2015; Burke, 2016; Johnson, 2017, 2019; Heller, 2019; Godwin, 2023; Bar-sella et al.,

2024). This suggests the therapeutic relationship may be an instrument for change for online daters having emotional issues.

The second recommendation is for counsellors to take courses on attachment theory and its therapeutic application. In addition, become knowledgeable about online dating, digital hygiene, and associated safety issues to keep clients physically and emotionally safe. Van Nieuwenhove and colleagues (2020) posited that to effectively address a client's interpersonal difficulties, it is essential for the therapist to recognize the client's dominant interpersonal patterns and understand their dynamics within the broader context of the client's history and experiences. A positive change may occur when the therapeutic process offers the online dater a relational experience that contradicts the internal working model formed in childhood. This oppositional relational experience served as the catalyst for change.

My last recommendation is to organize a therapy support group for individuals seeking a romantic connection using online dating. Educate each participant about their own attachment style and use the group platform for practicing new communication skills which foster interpersonal connections. The group's purpose is to support each other, learn to be a safe base for each other, develop self-confidence to navigate and enjoy online dating experiences, and have a healthy romantic relationship. I plan to organize this group once I am a registered clinical counsellor, and I will abide by the regulatory body for counsellors.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Online dating is a complex, modern reality that can deeply affect a client's emotional, relational, and psychological wellbeing. As clients increasingly engage in online dating platforms, registered clinical counsellors have an ethical responsibility to empower clients to engage with online dating platforms in a manner that is safe, authentic, and aligned with their

values and mental health goals. This includes increasing clients' awareness of the potential disadvantages of online dating and the negative effects these may have on emotional well-being. Clients need to be informed about common risks such as cyberdating abuse, sexual harassment, catfishing, emotional manipulation, exploitation, addiction, and financial scams. Counsellors can also support clients in developing healthy digital habits—or digital hygiene—by helping them set boundaries around app use, manage emotional responses, and reflect on their intentions and expectations in the online dating space. Therapy can provide a space to explore these concerns and guide clients toward more secure and intentional romantic engagement. Additionally, a counsellor must maintain professional boundaries and avoid dual relationships, be aware of transference and countertransference, and any personal biases which may affect the therapeutic process. Take the time to become trauma and culturally informed.

These ethical responsibilities align with the professional standards expected of Registered Clinical Counsellors (RCCs), including the duty to support client autonomy, informed decision-making, and psychological well-being.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research that includes disorganized attachment would inform the helping profession about this attachment style that has been completely excluded from the research. Any findings pertaining to disorganized attachment and any of online dating, attachment theory, therapeutic process, or even romantic relationships would be helpful.

All the studies reviewed in this Capstone which examined online dating behavior and attachment style behavior used self-report questionnaires. While this method is easy to use, it limits the studies by introducing a bias which can affect the accuracy of the findings. Answers can vary based on the participants recall, interpretation of the question, subjective opinion, or

may not understand their own experiences. Future research using additional methods, such as behavioral observations, or real-time tracking tools, would be more accurate in identifying how attachment styles show up in online dating. Using different types of data could give a more complete and realistic view of how people form romantic relationships online.

Future longitudinal studies are recommended regarding participation in therapy, the use of therapeutic alliance as an instrument of change and the therapeutic process using opposite relational experience to bring change of the internal working model. The studies (Van Nieuwenhove et al., 2020; Godwin, 2023; Bar-Sella et al., 2024) had findings which are relevant to the counselling profession. Each study could be replicated and extended with follow ups over a certain period to determine if the changes were long lasting. The validity of the research findings would bring hope to many, especially for individuals using online dating who are experiencing so many negative emotions from online dating. Replicating the three studies with all the participants being online dating users is recommended as well, considering this is a gap in the research. At present, there is no research that can confirm that online dating is not detrimental to the users, nor is there research that confirms that even though there are many disadvantages of online dating, there are solutions to mitigate the negative experiences.

Because the three studies had such significant findings in terms of changing attachment styles from insecure to secure, future studies addressing the other limitations of the three studies is also recommended. The sample size of each study was small and lacked participant diversity. The group of 1 participant (Van Nieuwenhove et al., 2020) limits the generalizability of the findings. The group of 215 Americans (Godwin, 2023) focused on a specific sample of adults with a history of childhood trauma also limits the generalizability. Lastly, the group of 52 (Bar-

Sella et al., 2024) lived in Central Israel and the survey was conducted in Hebrew. Another focused sample that limits the generalizability.

Despite all the limitations in the studies reviewed, the findings provided valuable insights into the relationship between attachment orientation and dating app usage. Future research is recommended in this very under researched problem to address these limitations and to further understand the complexities of online dating behaviors. Future research would inform counsellors of how-to best support client's seeking romantic connections through online dating.

### **Conclusions**

The desire for human connection is biological which means despite the negative aspects of online dating, there will be singles who will continue swiping in hopes that the next swipe will be the love match they have been seeking. Based on the literature reviewed in this Capstone, it has been shown that attachment theory can influence romantic relationship behavior and that online dating use and dater behavior may be influenced by one's attachment orientation. It has also been shown that the disadvantages of online dating are problematic for the online dating users because they pose a risk for developing physical and mental health issues (Zhang et al., 2022).

Trust was found to be a vital component to progressing a relationship which was started online. A person's ability to trust another adult is based on their attachment orientation which roots from early childhood. Although research regarding online dating success is lacking there is sufficient research that supports attachment theory as an effective framework for understanding romantic relationships offline. There are three attachment orientations used in the research pertaining to romantic relationships – secure, insecure-anxious and insecure-avoidant (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Main et al., 1985; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007) which provides an insight to

possible causes of the problems online dating users are experiencing. Attachment styles continue throughout one's life span and influence how adults experience love. This is relevant information for online daters seeking a romantic relationship.

Despite the limited research, there were promising findings regarding therapy and attachment theory which may help with mitigating the negative problems of online dating. Participating in therapy facilitates secure attachment (Van Nieuwenhove et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022) and secure attachment has an overall positive effect on romantic relationships (Atkins, 2019). A counsellor can act as a surrogate and be a secure base for adults participating in therapy which can also facilitate a change of one's internal working model (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). A strong therapeutic alliance is regarded as the key to successful therapy (Bar-Sella et al., 2024). Psychodynamic therapy was found to help change the negative thought processes (internal working models), such that romantic interrelations improved. This is promising for everyone seeking a love because the ideal partner is a securely attached one (Levine & Heller, 2010)!

Future research is needed to continue exploring how attachment theory can support individuals seeking a romantic relationship through online dating.

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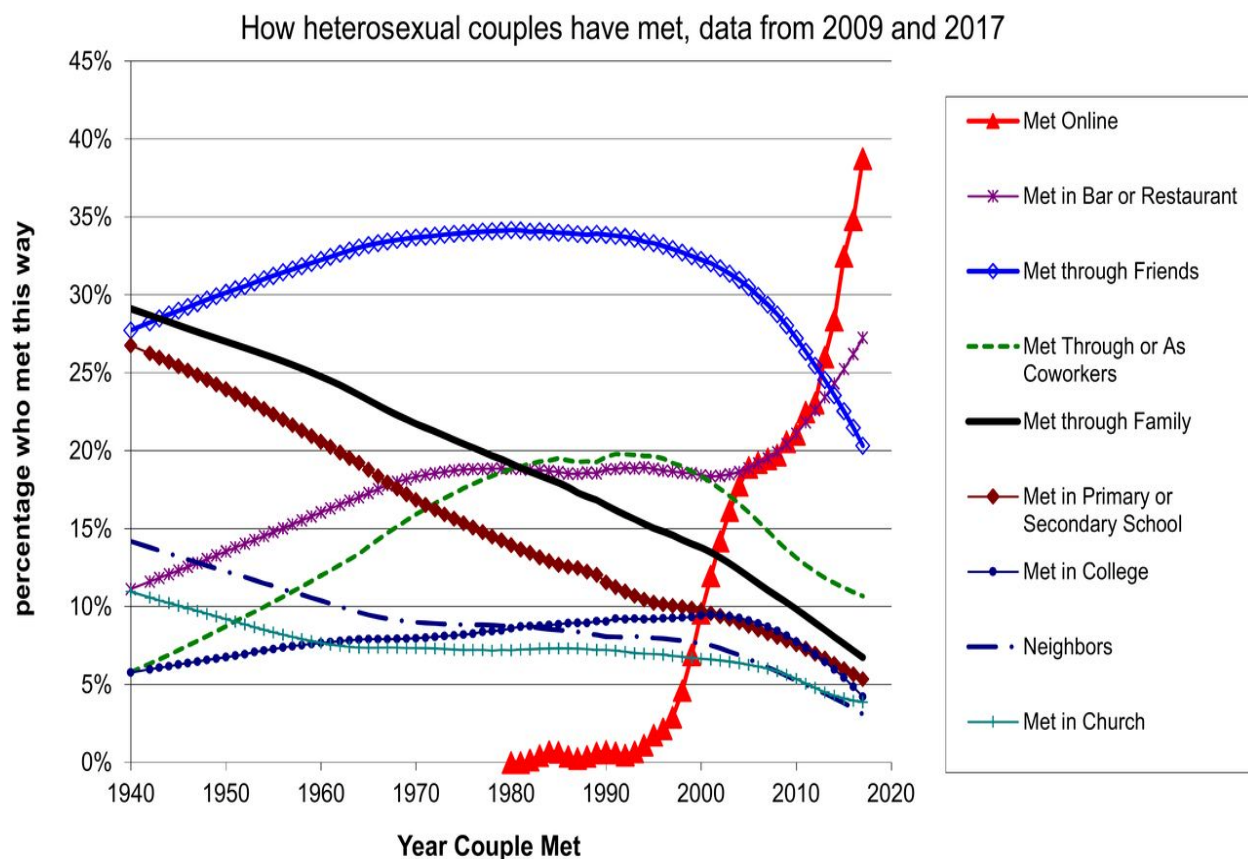
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## Appendix A

### How Couples Have Met Online

Appendix A shows that the rise of meeting online and the decline of meeting through friends among heterosexual couples in the United States were both highly significant trends. Online dating had a significant rise around 1995 when Match.com surpassed Web Personals, and again another significant rise between 2009 - 2012 when Grindr, Tinder and Hinge were launched (Rosenfeld et al., 2019, p. 17755).



## Appendix B

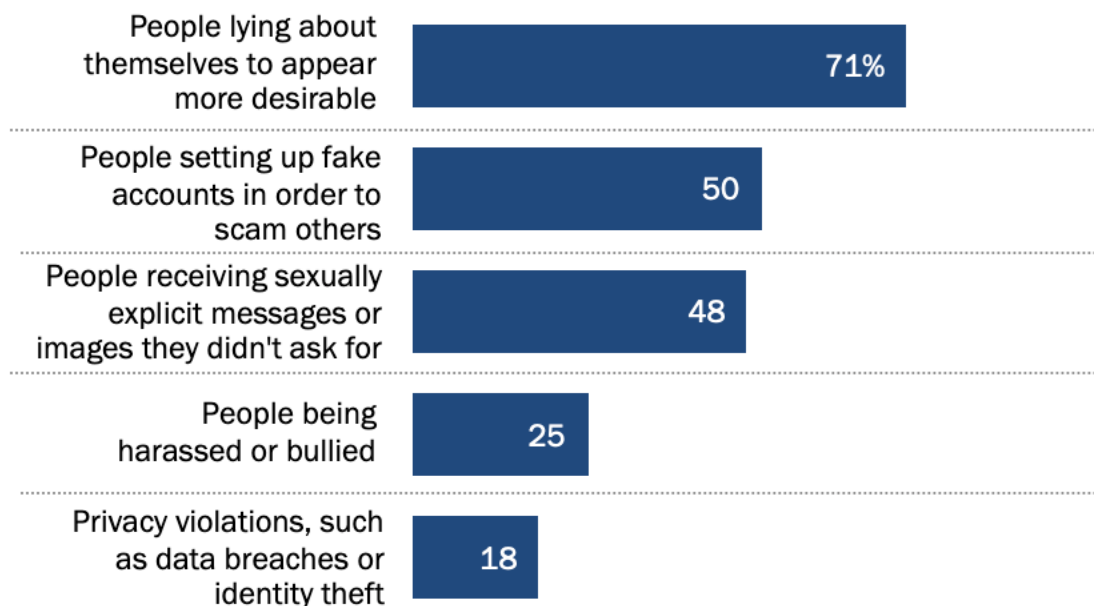
### Downsides of Online Dating

Online daters widely believe that dishonesty is a pervasive issue on these platforms. Lying to appear more desirable is very common at 71%, 25 % as somewhat common, and 3% as not common at all. Mostly younger women reported being the target of rude or harassing behavior (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 9).

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### A majority of online daters think it is very common for users to lie to appear more desirable

*% of online dating users who say \_\_\_ on dating sites and apps is **very common***



Note: Online dating users refers to respondents who say they have ever used an online dating site or app. Those who did not give an answer or who gave other responses are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 16-28, 2019.  
 "The Virtues and Downsides of Online Dating"

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