

The Outsourcing of Online Dating: Investigating the Lived Experiences of Online Dating Assistants Working in the Contemporary Gig Economy

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Abstract

A small cottage industry emerging within the larger gig economy is *online dating assistant* (ODA) companies that allow paying clients to outsource the labor associated with online dating, including profile development, date selection and matching, and even interaction (i.e., ODAs assume their clients' identities to exchange messages with other [unsuspecting] daters to secure face-to-face dates). The newness of this industry presents an opportunity to investigate the lived experience of remote employees working in an up-and-coming virtual organization. Through interviews with six ODAs, we explored motivations, day-to-day workflow, and development of work identities. Analysis uncovered unique challenges ODAs faced when performing the “human-based” tasks of online dating, which differed starkly from other popular services being bought and sold in the gig economy (e.g., rideshare, food delivery). Findings also show how ODAs engage in pragmatic and critical sensemaking as they navigate the specific challenges associated with ODA labor, and those created by remote work and gig labor, more generally.

Keywords

online dating, gig economy, remote work, qualitative methods

Since 2013, the online and mobile dating industry in the United States has increased 11%, growing into a US\$3 billion industry (IBISWorld, 2019). In that short period of time, online dating has morphed from something sketchy into an absolute necessity for romantically single Americans. But today, platforms like OkCupid and Tinder have lost some of their novelty; seasoned daters have begun reported feeling “exhausted” (Sachar, 2017) and “tired” (Beck, 2016). A recent *Consumer Reports* survey of 9,600 daters who had used dating sites and apps within the last 2 years reported high levels of frustration: “They [active daters] gave online dating sites the lowest satisfaction scores *Consumer Reports* has ever seen for services rendered—lower even than for tech-support providers, notoriously poor performers in our ratings” (Meltzer, 2016).

Researchers speculating about “dating app fatigue” (Beck, 2016) have cited several reasons, including overabundance of choices (D’Angelo & Toma, 2017; Tong et al., 2019), overwhelming ghosting or rejection (LeFebvre et al., 2019), or the addictive dopamine rush of an online match followed by disappointing face-to-face dates (Purvis, 2017). People

report online and mobile dating feels like something they are obligated (rather than want) to do in an effort to combat the fear of being single (Spielmann et al., 2013), or fear of missing out on the most popular dating markets, which have moved online (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). These factors, combined with the unfulfilled promise of romance that sites and apps dangle in front of their users, can create fatigue and burnout, making online and mobile dating “feel like work, not play” (Emery, 2017).

The process of online and mobile dating can be broken down into stages that begins with *profile development*, followed by *selection and matching*, and *mutual interaction*

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and discovery in which daters learn more about each other (Markowitz et al., 2019). If the impressions formed during the discovery phase are positive, daters often move to a face-to-face date. The treatment of online and mobile dating as a form of labor makes sense once we consider the various tasks that daters need to accomplish at each stage, such as writing and curating one's profile content, reviewing and selecting others' profiles, initiating and replying to others' messages, and attending face-to-face dates. Performing these tasks can bring on fatigue in as little as 3 months of continuous use (Emery, 2017). But as with many kinds of labor, the work of online dating can now be outsourced—for a price.

Capitalizing on the gig economy that deploys digital platforms to manage and organize work (Scholz, 2016), outsourcing the tasks of online dating can be done by hiring an *online dating assistant* (ODA). The small cottage industry of ODA companies (at the time of this writing, see matchsmith.com, prodatingassistant.com, vidaselect.com, personaldatinassistants.com) keep track of their clients' dating "work portfolio" and complete tasks such as writing profiles, selecting photos, screening matches, managing message exchange, obtaining other daters' phone numbers, and scheduling face-to-face dates for their clients. Clients located across the world pay ODAs between US\$600 to US\$2000 per month for services.

ODAs are relatively new, but there are many gig workers in other, well-established service areas, such as transportation, carework, and food delivery. The rise of the gig economy launched consumers into a new relationship with workers that was mediated by online service platforms (see Gillespie, 2010). The notion that consumers could pay workers to perform services was not new; what was new was being "matched" by an online intermediary to obtain those services on demand. Despite the convenience for consumers and flexibility for employees, research has pointed out the unique problems created by the on-demand gig economy such as increased customer and worker surveillance, fluctuating wages, and worker exploitation. De Stefano (2015) points out that these problems arise because of the lack of personal communication that occurs during gig work: "Almost no human contact happens during most crowdsource transactions: this contributes to the creation of a new group of 'invisible workers'" (p. 477). The "invisibility" of gig work reflects the ways in which platforms like Uber, TaskRabbit, and Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) mandate gig workers' performance of tasks—efficiently, but invisibly (see also Irani, 2015; Van Doorn, 2017).

In response to these critiques, researchers have begun examining the lived experiences of workers in the gig economy. For example, Chan and Humphreys (2018) explored the ways that the Uber app shaped drivers' perceptions of their work, as well as their interactions with riders and the Uber company. Uber's rating mechanism ranks drivers and riders using a five-star continuum. These metrics are a way for the company to not only surveil drivers' performance, but

also regulate their continued employability through the platform (Chan & Humphreys, 2018). The Uber app also influenced how drivers interacted with riders—for example, in search of higher ratings, drivers felt pushed to self-present as "professional" and "sociable" service workers" and were often hesitant to pick up "troublesome" customers with ratings below 4.7 (p. 34).

For Uber drivers who are dependent on customer ratings, increased scores come from projecting politeness and efficiency while remaining largely invisible to their passengers. Gridwise—a data-analytics company that tracks the ride-sharing industry—found that over half of their sample of 1,500 rideshare customers reported that they preferred their driver to stay silent during the ride (Lekach, 2019). Indeed, Uber recently launched a "quiet mode" for their Uber Black subscribers in which passengers can request that their drivers not talk for the duration of the ride (Constine, 2019). This quiet mode feature further reflects the invisibility or "erasure of contact between subscribers and service workers" that Van Doorn (2017, p. 905) argues exists in on-demand service industries.

As the gig economy took off, the outsourcing of more "personal" tasks was perhaps inevitable. Ticona and Mateescu's (2018) study examined changes to the domestic caretaking industry as online platforms like Care.com shifted toward a gig model. Traditionally performed by women, carework had typically operated "informally," with many workers securing employment through word-of-mouth recommendations and getting their salary paid to them "off the books." But the increase in gig caretaking formalized many of the industry's practices: Online platforms began structuring wages, billable hours, and income taxes. This formalization may have been helpful for consumers, but it created problems for the undocumented women who often worked as caretakers. Furthermore, because caretaking is so inherently personal, those who worked as caretakers in this study reported the need to cultivate a trustworthy, reliable image through their online social media profiles. This pressure to be "visible" differed from the invisibility of other gig services such as rideshare in Uber where the "platforms 'conceal' or make workers invisible to clients" (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018, p. 4399).

Somewhere in between Uber and Care.com sits the ODA industry. Similar to caretakers, ODAs are being entrusted to perform "human" tasks associated with romantic relationships such as impression management and interaction, but similar to Uber drivers, ODAs are expected to be courteous and efficient, but almost entirely invisible. So, while the outsourcing the personal tasks of romantic dating is in some ways perplexing, in other ways, it is simply a logical extension of on-demand gig economy.

The current study explores the ODA industry by examining the ways in which workers articulate the norms guiding their work and the interactions they have with the company, their clients, and peers. Media reports from the client's

Table 1. Sample Demographics.

Participant	Demographics	ODA role(s), length of employment, status during interview
P1	Female, USA and Europe	Account Manager and Matchmaker, 21 months, quit ODA job voluntarily
P2	Male, USA	Profile Writer and Closer, 24 months, currently employed
P3	Female, USA	Closer, 2 months, quit ODA job voluntarily
P4	Male, USA	Closer, 15 months, currently employed
P5	Female, Europe	Profile Writer and Closer, 15 months, currently employed
P6	Male, USA	Closer, 6 months, currently employed

ODA: online dating assistant.

Demographics include sex and country of residence during time of ODA employment.

perspective (Sanicome, 2014) and the worker's perspective (Stuart-Ulin, 2018) suggest that the ways in which ODAs work with their clients is unique and surprising. However, more research is needed into ODA work as a nascent phenomenon and how it compares to other on-demand companies, more generally. Using an exploratory phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of individuals who work as ODAs, we examine what motivates workers to enter (and exit) the ODA industry (Research Question 1 [RQ1]), how they establish their personal work identities amid a virtual office environment (Research Question 2 [RQ2]), what sensemaking practices they employ to interpret their work (Research Question 3 [RQ3]), and how they view their position within the larger socio-cultural practices of online and mobile dating (Research Question 4 [RQ4]).

Method

The ODA company *Virtual Match* (pseudonym), founded in 2009, was the selected site for this study. All respondents were over 18 and current or former ODA employees that specialized in work that reflected (at least one of) the different stages (e.g., profile, matching, discovery) of online and mobile dating. ODAs who worked as *Profile Writers* crafted eye-catching self-descriptions and helped select photos for clients' profiles. ODAs who worked as *Matchmakers* assisted clients by screening profiles and selecting partners based on their clients' preferences. By logging into their accounts, *Closers* embodied their clients' personas to initiate and reply to other daters' messages in an effort to obtain phone numbers and face-to-face dates. *Account managers* were one step above Profile-writers, Matchmakers, and Closers within the company hierarchy. They conducted the bulk of client relations and were also responsible for selling services and handling clients' requests.

The individuals interviewed for this study were all employed (or had been employed in the past) by Virtual Match for a minimum of 2 months to a maximum of 21 months. Like many ODA companies, Virtual Match advertised to both male and female daters equally, pitching their services as being tailorable to any client's individual needs. Therefore, the target customer was any adult who was

romantically single, interested in online or mobile dating, and was willing and able to pay for ODA services. Most respondents thought Virtual Match executives and account managers screened prospective clients to ensure that the prospective clients were not married. Finally, our respondents suggested that Virtual Match's client base was primarily heterosexual men and smaller numbers of heterosexual women; none of the ODAs we spoke to mentioned anything about clients seeking same-sex dates.¹

Considering the hard-to-reach nature of our population of interest (i.e., infeasible sampling frame due to a small population with networks that are difficult for outsiders to penetrate; Sudman & Kalton, 1986), participants were recruited through respondent-driven sampling (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). Recruitment began with one author who used her personal contacts to recruit participants, one of whom served as an important gatekeeper for the network. Subsequent recruitment was facilitated by that gatekeeper who forwarded the recruitment message to other eligible participants. Despite the difficulty in gaining access to this population, our sampling design still focused on selection of participants across diverse job roles, as well as time spent at Virtual Match. We also sampled across gender, race, and ethnicity, so as to capture as wide a variety of experience as possible of the phenomena under study (Tracy, 2013). Our final sample consisted of six ODAs from Virtual Match (see Table 1).

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed with questions that covered three broad categories. Under *motivations*, participants were asked about their motives for applying for a job within the ODA industry, the length of employment, their motivations to continue working as ODAs, and (if applicable) their motivations to resign. Under *processes*, participants were asked to describe their experiences, including the details of ODA-client workflow, the number of clients they served, and the technology used on the job. They were also asked about their interactions with other ODAs, clients, and clients' romantic matches. Finally, we asked participants about their *thoughts and feelings* about the work they do and how they perceived its place within the larger online dating industry. While

consistency of data collection was observed, we took note of the individual nuances during each interview and explored emerging issues accordingly. Interviews were conducted over Skype, lasted approximately 60 min, were recorded with consent, transcribed, and checked for consistency.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using iterative qualitative thematic analysis (Tracy, 2013). Line-by-line coding was facilitated by NVivo 12, in a two-cycle process to identify thematic categories related to ODAs' work and experiences (Saldaña, 2016). Two authors independently reviewed the transcribed data to establish patterns of categories and themes during the first analysis cycle. These included *process codes*, or labeling conceptual action in the data, *descriptive codes*, or summarizing the data into words or short phrases, and *in-vivo codes*, or categorizing data using phrases or terms from participants' own language. At the end of this cycle, the researchers convened to collectively discuss emerging categories and themes and to compare analytical memos, to separate and merge similar cases together into broader categories of meaning.

During the second analysis cycle, patterns of codes were established where the data were further condensed into a smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts to get at the "bigger picture" configuration (Miles et al., 2020, p. 79). This iterative process helped establish a final validated set of themes which was used to analyze the entire corpus of data. To evaluate credibility, member checks were conducted with one respondent, who reviewed sections of her interview transcript and the initial findings. This inductive approach was supplemented by other sources, such as past research on online dating and the gig economy, as well as media reports on the ODA industry, which provided further contextualization to emerging findings.

Findings

RQ1: Motivations for ODA Work

RQ1 asked what motivated respondents to initially seek out ODA work, what continued to motivate them on the job, and (among former employees) what pushed them to leave their jobs. Consistent with the larger gig economy where businesses use the internet to promote job opportunities (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018), many ODAs said they responded to advertisements for openings posted on various websites. Most respondents were motivated by practical reasons, such as seeking additional income. Only one respondent reported his ODA work as his sole source of income; the rest of our sample described their ODA job as a "side gig" where they could earn "bonus income" that "covers some extra little expenses and stuff" (P4). While remote work has increasingly become the main income source for many people across the globe (Churchill & Craig, 2019), our findings

appear to be consistent with current estimates of digital workforce in the United States at the national level, where only 1% of American workers (compared with 9% in both the United Kingdom and Germany and 22% in Italy) reported involvement in the gig economy (Hunt & Samman, 2019, p. 11).

Overall, respondents' descriptions of ODA work reflected a lack of permanency, but some also cited the aspects of remote employment as what initially enticed them to apply for and continue working as ODAs; P6 noted, "I wanted a job that I can work online [. . .] the reasons I decided to do it—the reasons I continue doing it—like the flexibility which you can work from home or anywhere within time zones—is pretty cool." P2 was also motivated by the advantages of gig work: "It's good work, I can work from home, the hours are flexible . . . for me, it's a lot better than being in an office." Emphasis on remote employment as a key motivation for ODA work aligns with reports from the International Labor Organization, where 32% of remote workers indicated that they do so as a way to "complement pay from other jobs," while 22% said they "prefer to work from home" (Berg et al., 2018, p. 37). Respondents appear to be drawn to ODA work for the dual motivations of supplemental income and flexible work environments.

Nevertheless, while P1 found the portability, flexible hours, and easy commutes to a "virtual office" to be motivating initially, they eventually became draining. She noted how she was happy to leave the gig lifestyle behind:

I can't even express in words how happy I am having a regular office job again and just never having anything like this [ODA job] again . . . Like, I connect that whole time [working as an ODA] to a different mindspace really, like constantly being zoned into your email or living from call to call.

Studies have demonstrated that behind the autonomous, flexible, and income-generating charms of digital work lies the demand for an "always-on" or constant "on call" mode of gig labor (Berg et al., 2018; Lehdonvirta, 2018). As Petriglieri et al. (2019) note, the identities of those involved in gig industries is highly dependent on workers' self-discipline, the opportunity to continue working, and pressure to continuously perform—issues that we examine in greater detail, below.

RQ2: Work Identity in a Virtual Organization

RQ2 examines how respondents formed their *work identity*, through three themes: (1) understanding of their role within the larger company, (2) company's shared values, and (3) interactions with other employees.

Understanding of Job Roles and Company Structure. During interviews, respondents were asked about the general process involved in working with clients and what their role in

that process was. Many ODAs recounted that they forged their work identity by comparing their own roles to that of others within the company as outlined in Virtual Match's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool. Almost all respondents indicated that for new clients, *Account Managers* took the first step, in which they would "talk to clients and they conduct the whole interview; [get] their life stories" (P2). P3 described Account Managers as "the point person between the client and the company . . . they would be doing all the intake interviews." P3 also noted that Account Managers were tasked to do "some approximation of a background check" on clients during these intakes. P1 mentioned that while she was employed as an Account Manager, there were approximately 10 other Account Managers, each responsible for an average of six, but as many as 30, clients.

After Account Managers, respondents noted that *Profile Writers* (or "Writers") would step in and use the information gathered from clients' intake interviews to craft a profile narrative. P5 noted that part of her daily tasks included looking at the CRM to "check to see whether I have any profiles [to create] and when they're due." She added that through the client's interview transcript, she was able to "get a feel for their communication styles, what type of person they are [. . .] then that gives me an idea of what style to go with them." As a Profile Writer, P5's busiest days typically involved having to create three to four dating profiles a day, with each profile taking approximately 45 min to 2 hr to complete. P5 explained that these are "really personalized profiles" requiring her to email a first draft of a client's profile to the Matchmaker and Account Managers for feedback before forwarding the profile to the client.

Matchmakers (and Matchmakers' Assistants) were responsible for screening profiles on a daily basis to look for romantic potentials who met clients' preferred criteria. As P2 described,

When they are setting up their accounts, they're interviewed about the persons they're attracted to. . . maybe blonde or brunette, maybe have kids, um, or do you want somebody who has no kids? And then that information is forwarded on to matchmakers in the company who go on those accounts and using that criteria just start swiping to get the matches based on who they're interested in.

In addition, it is important to note that some ODAs balanced multiple roles: "There's kind of a few roles . . . There's the Closers—I think about 10 of us, maybe 15—and Profile Writers . . . Some people do both [profile writing and closing] and some people are just one or the other" (P2). P2 elaborated on his involvement as a Closer, such as messaging potential matches on the clients' behalf, trying to either get a phone number and/or set up dates. Closers who came in toward the end of the process were (as P6 put it) the ones who "get the results." Phone numbers would then be forwarded to the Account Managers for clients' confirmation: "[. . .] if

somebody's like, 'Yeah, let's go for a date. How about 7 o'clock on Friday?'—I forward that info to the Account Manager to send back to clients to confirm their dates."

While Profile Writers, Matchmakers, and Closers all worked hard to complete various tasks for their clients' dating accounts, none of them were allowed to directly interact with clients. Instead, all client communications were handled by the Account Managers, who served as middlemen between ODAs and clients. This setup resonates with the idea of gig worker "invisibility" (De Stefano, 2015; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018) and provides an extreme example of invisibility. Aside from the Account Manager, all other ODAs were expected to perform their work efficiently but quietly, remaining invisible to both the client and other (unsuspecting) daters.

All of our respondents had a clear sense of the different roles existing within the organization, the various tasks each kind of employee would perform, and the company's hierarchy. Although respondents were able to clearly differentiate job duties, most ODAs we talked to were unable to confidently or accurately report on the company's size or number of employees. This was perhaps due to the virtual work environment; since they never gathered together in a physical location, ODAs could not view the entire scope of the Virtual Match organization. Nevertheless, respondents often reflected on their own role and identity by comparing themselves with their colleagues, even if they did not always have a clear picture of the actual makeup of the company.

Our analysis also highlights the critical role that assignment distribution plays in helping ODA workers ensure the consistency of clients' voice across online dating platforms. With so many ODAs potentially working on a single account, a key part of ODAs' work routine at Virtual Match was checking the CRM for new assignments and updates. In addition, ODAs were expected to routinely check each client's account(s) and review previous message exchanges before continuing with any interaction on the platform. Maintaining consistency of clients' identities is largely facilitated by Account Managers who collect clients' personal information during their intake: ". . . a lot of time we have a client interview that gives us enough information to answer [a potential match's inquiry] appropriately on their behalf" (P4). P6 added that rarely do Closers have to consult others when messaging: "I have a lot of information about the client [. . .] I don't have to reach out. If I need an answer to a specific question, I have to reach out [to the Account Manager] and then I have to wait to get a response." As noted above, Profile Writers, Matchmakers, and Closers collaborate through the CRM to ensure that their actions are consistent across clients' dating accounts; all of this coordination is done without any direct consultation with the client, likely so that ODAs can maintain their invisibility.

Promoting and Practicing Shared Company Values. Respondents mentioned that Virtual Match tried to promote shared values through a monthly newsletter that is emailed to

employees. The newsletter often shared stories of clients who wrote back to thank the company for their assistance in finding a relationship. As P5 described, “We have monthly newsletters, so if someone—a client—is getting married to one of the matches or something like that, they’ll announce it in the newsletter.” These client testimonials seemed to reinforced ideals of “success”—even though, notably, these clients’ long-term relationships translated into a loss of overall revenue for Virtual Match.

Some communication of shared company values appeared to also take place during the new employee onboarding process, which could last from 2 to 6 months. Respondents reported relatively positive experiences with their trainers who provided work-related peer support. Reflecting on her own experience with her trainer, P1 said, “You could literally text her any hour of the day, she would answer [. . .] She would give super frank advice.” P3 recalled that her trainer emphasized how the potentially deceptive nature of the work could take a toll on Closers:

They were very candid with me about the fact that it was a moral gray area and that people struggled to frequently live with that . . . the turnover at this company is very high for Closers. Especially new Closers—the majority of the time they get people dropping out during the training period.

It appeared to both P1 and P3 that others tried to openly and honestly communicate with them early and often—even about the more difficult aspects unique to ODA work. Akin to the “always on” nature of remote work mentioned above, the frequent exchange of informational support seemed to be a shared practice among ODAs.

Interactions with Other ODAs: Channels and Topics. Prior research indicates that one of the ways individuals develop their work identity is through frequent interactions with other employees (Fay, 2011). A significant part of that interaction for ODAs at Virtual Match happened through the CRM system. Consistent with past research, the digital platforms for shared information retrieval were not only key for dispensing ODA assignments, but also as a space where workers produce and cultivate their organizational identities and relationships (Chan & Humphreys, 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019). ODAs also noted other channels they used for interaction including video-conferencing: “weekly meetings are on, like, Skype. So, we all talk, but it’s all remote” (P2). Email was especially important for ODAs—primarily for those working across different time zones, such as across Europe or the Philippines. Almost all respondents noted email as a main communication channel: “It’s all pretty much entirely through email. So, I personally don’t interact with anyone; like, face-to-face” (P2). P4 noted that emails were often used to “send a screenshot of some bizarre conversation . . . or you know, we have a question about so-and-so, and we need advice [. . .] we can, um, talk to each other about that . . . have discussions about that.”

P3 noted how email was occasionally used for personal interactions: “There would be long emails—every time it was someone’s birthday—like a big, big email chain would be going around of like ‘happy birthdays’ of, like, different emojis and GIFs and things like that.” Several respondents mentioned a WhatsApp group used (as P2 put it) “to socialize a bit,” but even those messages tended to focus on the job, such as “when something funny happens, or memes related to the job.” P5 agreed, noting that the writers would often “share content” about “funny things they saw” adding that ODAs “have a lot of laughs about other people’s bad profiles.” Face-to-face interactions between employees were seldom, and if they did occur, were seen as strange: “If they [employee] are close to somebody else, they’ll meet up just—I guess because it’s like that. It’s kind of weird that you see your coworkers or whatever. I don’t know why they [would] do it” (P4).

Analysis indicated that while formal and informal interactions reinforced various aspects of ODAs’ jobs, they did not seem to help cultivate a sense of belonging to the company as part of their work identity. Interestingly, although there seemed to be a culture of free and direct (mediated) communication among ODAs, it seemed tacitly understood that conversations would be focused on job-related topics: “If I wanted to reach out to other team members, I wouldn’t feel like that was discouraged. But it’s definitely not as easy or straightforward, as you know, you walk by this person’s desk every day in the morning and ask them about their family or anything like that” (P5). The remote nature of their work and the mediated environment it was performed in implied that work identities were shaped by frequent asynchronous conversations that revolved around specific professional—as opposed to personal—topics.

RQ3: Personal Understandings of ODA Labor

RQ3 asked how ODA employees came to understand the labor that they performed. Analysis pointed to (1) pragmatic and (2) critical explanations, and we elaborate on both themes below.

Pragmatic Sensemaking

Helping Clients Fulfill Romantic Goals. ODA’s pragmatic sensemaking was reflected in the way they described themselves as *people who helped their clients*. P1, for example, described how some of her clients were “the kind of guys who really just need, like, uh, a wing woman, you know? Somebody to help them out, like really just need a friend . . . a really expensive friend, I guess [laughs].” P5’s description of profile writing also reflected this theme “[writing is] helping people present themselves in the best light possible.” The helping theme was especially prominent for ODAs working with specific types of clients they perceived as needing extra assistance with dating, such as older clients. P1 noted,

I had a lot of clients [. . .] I had maybe a small handful really meet a long-term partner and maybe one that got married—and the widowers; it was always especially nice when they met someone they were still seeing—every once in a while they would write back and say, “I’m so and so, you guys did a great job.”

P3 also highlighted how “rewarding” her work felt specifically when working with mature clients who had found long-term partners through ODA services:

I would say the only positive outcome that I was privy to are the much older clients who are in their late 50s or 60s [. . .] those clients who were matching people with the same age and who really were matching with a very small pool of people and then were—from my perspective—almost certainly following up with those [. . .] so potentially those were good outcomes, you know. It’s nicer to help them with that situation.

Interestingly, ODAs’ feelings of gratification stemmed not only from helping their clients, but also from being “successful” at their job. Aside from the company views of “success,” each ODA developed their own definitions of success dependent upon their role and their clients’ goals. P4, a Closer, explained, “Well, success is really clear from my perspective. If I get the matches from a(nother dater’s) number, or set the date up for them.” Some ODAs noted that success was driven by “results”—as P6 noted, “Well he (the client) got a lot of phone numbers, more than he was really interested in. He just got exactly what he wanted—and more.” Analysis revealed that for most ODAs, personal and professional successes were often intertwined, but both helped them make sense of the work they did on a daily basis.

ODA Work as “Screening” Not Dating. Another form of pragmatic sensemaking that emerged was ODA workers’ framing of their work as “screening” or “filtering” clients’ matches, not necessarily dating. P4 stated, “I’m, like, going through that screening process. So, the conversations I have are very short.” This theme also resonated in P2’s response:

Online dating is a bit of a misnomer because it’s more like a screening process, the way most people treat it. Before you actually start dating and you meet in person, you need to know what that person’s like. So, what I’m really doing—the way I see it—is half of like filtering people that I think my client would be interested in.

Most ODAs viewed their services as a basic first stage in the longer trajectory of relational development—and practically speaking, this was a stage that need not be performed by the clients, themselves. This pragmatic sensemaking also spotlights ODAs’ views of the larger online and mobile dating culture as a space where romantic singles were introduced to one another—a theme we return to in RQ4.

Comparisons to Copywriting, Sales, and Service Industries. ODA workers were similarly pragmatic when asked to explain the basic processes and tasks they performed. For example, P4 framed each messaging assignment he took on as a form of copywriting: “I have to use the client’s voice per se and take on a little bit of their personality. So, in that respect, it’s definitely a copy that challenges.” P6 highlighted how he has “a marketing background,” so he’s “always looking at it through that lens” before adding that “it’s kind of like a little sales and marketing challenge with every new client, so I enjoy it.” This kind of pragmatic sensemaking allowed some respondents to approach their work as a form of advertising or sales—just that in this case, the copywriting was dating profiles and text messages, and the products they were selling were people.

ODA workers’ sensemaking also involved drawing parallels to other customer service industries. This also led them to speculate about the nature of their customer base. Many acknowledged that as ODAs, they provided a “luxury service” that could be afforded only by “exclusive” clientele; as P6 explained, “this a luxury service, a luxury product. I guess you could say it’s a hired service—not totally necessary, it’s not like basic survival needs.” P1 also noted that “there’s a very specific niche who can afford it.” As P2 explained, clients were “mostly guys who are old enough to be kind of established—sort of on the wealthier side of things to afford the service, but at the same time, young enough to be the kind of people to be on Tinder.” P4 described his clients as “men in technology, finance, and real estate”—essentially “people that [. . .] just have money, don’t have time, or are just overwhelmed by the [online dating] process.” The rather exclusive nature of ODA services and the wealthy clientele—and possibly the stereotypes ODAs may have generated about certain professionals—appear to facilitate ODA workers’ sensemaking. Many reflected on their work as just another set of services that they provided for any customer who could pay for them.

Critical Sensemaking

Reflections on the (Dis)Honesty of ODA Work. ODAs in our sample engaged in critical sensemaking by reflecting on the deceptive nature of their jobs. While some used terms like “deception” or “manipulation,” others used less extreme language to describe their work as “disingenuous” or “surreal.” Views of deliberate deception were offered by Closers who were tasked with messaging on clients’ behalf. For example, P3 described how her early on-the-job training and daily work pushed her to critically reflect on her work as a Closer:

I’d gone through all of this training beforehand. Like how to talk online and how to appear like a man and how to be—you know . . . how to seduce women as a man—which was gross and weird. And, I felt, not accurate at the time.

P1’s discussion of message exchange tasks also highlighted deception: “I kinda felt like I was just going through

the motions. I mean, we were sending out message templates . . . So, I think it's because I knew that it wasn't real, you know? . . . it was just so fake." Others' critical sensemaking also reflected themes of (dis)honesty but framed in less extreme terms than outright deception. In contrast to P1 and P3, P5 described her work as follows: "Conversations with people [other daters] are, uh, a bit more surreal in the messaging aspect. Um, well, because we're emailing or messaging someone, (and) they don't know that you are not the person that you are messaging on behalf of." Though to P5, her work did not rise to the level of deliberate deception, her description of messaging work as "surreal" also reflects that she did not view it as completely genuine either. Finally, some respondents referenced deception when describing some of their day-to-day tasks, such as the use of GPS masking that was required to assume clients' identities: "Yeah, but it was incredibly, like, stupidly easy just to put on a fake GPS and run your GPS as though you're living in the same town as the client and then Tinder doesn't flag it" (P3).

In addition to sensemaking involving interactions with other (unsuspecting) daters, ODAs worked to interpret less-than-honest interactions with clients. P1 explained how she felt "so disingenuous" when she interacted with clients in her role as an Account Manager: "put[ting] on that face all the time was really difficult. You always had to sound so excited and super positive about everybody's account even when you (know) you are being shitty." In some ways, P1's response might reflect any high-pressure sales job, or even an Uber driver who felt obligated to make pleasant conversations with passengers. But P1's sensemaking reflected that feeling "shitty" was attributable to the unique challenges that ODAs faced. For example, she discussed a case in which one client was "really focused on, like, putting his best, authentic self up there . . . Just like really laid down what his expectations were on the table," but his forceful online self-presentation created "response issues" where the client did not receive much interest from other daters online. P1 noted that balancing her responsibility to drum up romantic interest for her client with his personal expectations and self-presentation desires created an unusual kind of conflict:

It's like, my desire to do my job and my desire to let you live your life so I don't have to feel like a bad human are at odds here. Do I want you to get dates, or do I want you to have a healthy mind?

Overall, ODAs made sense of their work by critically reflecting on their interactions with other daters and their clients. This kind of sensemaking obviously took some cognitive and emotional effort, which most ODAs seemed to accept as simply part of the job.

Considering Outsiders' Perceptions of ODA Work. While ODAs acknowledged the challenges of their jobs, some also engaged in critical sensemaking by considering how others

outside of the industry perceived the work they did. Respondents would discuss their jobs with friends and family and later reflect on those discussions as a way to understand their own feelings toward their work. P4, a male Closer, said that his wife found his ODA work "a little creepy" and though "she has seen enough (client) conversations to understand it, you know, she's not a big fan of it." P2 elaborated,

. . . one of the hardest parts is describing to people [my work] without them thinking we're pick-up artists. I don't know about you, but I'm really not a fan of that culture, it's sleazy. We're [ODAs] not, really; I'm kind of more like for people who are like outsourcing the labor of going on Match, like writing a profile, and doing all the messaging.

P2's reflection on others' views helped him forge his own understanding about what his job was and how it differed from "sleazy" pick-up artists. Both responses exemplify how respondents interpreted others' assessments of their job and the ODA industry, and then used those assessments to make sense of their own work.

RQ4: ODA Workers and the Culture of Online and Mobile Dating

Our analysis indicated two themes regarding respondents' views of the broader culture of online and mobile dating—their work gave them the unique ability to (1) evaluate dating applications and websites, and gain perspective about the kinds of (2) people and (3) processes involved in online and mobile dating.

Dating Platform Expertise. Many respondents noted that while clients' preferences for specific dating sites and applications are taken into consideration during the intake process, Account Managers' assessment of clients' needs eventually determines how many dating platforms each client is represented on. P1, an Account Manager, said, "Basically, it depends on the client type. If it's a client that we predict who's going to struggle a lot—in the words of my former team lead—'put them on everything', like Tinder, Bumble, OKCupid, Match . . . everything." According to P4, "everything" most likely referred to "Match, Plenty of Fish, Tinder, Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel, Hinge." P1 added that occasionally, certain clients were put on "specialty sites, like Millionaire Match, which is literally just for people looking for rich men." P4 noted that platforms could also be determined by the level of services a client paid for: "if somebody has a higher [level of] service, they're usually on more platforms." Clearly, ODAs were aware of the trends in the online dating industry and differentiated industry leaders like OkCupid and Tinder, from more niche platforms like Millionaire Match and The League. Their knowledge also helped them make professional recommendations for their client and navigate them toward more "successful" outcomes.

Gaining a New Perspective. Some respondents had personal experience in using dating platforms and said that working as ODAs allowed them to gain new insights into the broader culture of online and mobile dating. In particular, ODA work allowed them to better understand the experiences of other daters who were unlike themselves. P1, a female Account Manager, admitted that working as an ODA gave her perspective regarding “how difficult it is for men on online dating sites”:

I go on Tinder and I have like hundreds of open matches and a bunch of different conversations, sometimes thousands depending on the city and it's like, “Oh, this is easy, I just take my pick.” And if you're a guy, you're lucky to get two people answer on like ten matches you get, and you're freaking hot. So, it's like, “Wow, this is mind-blowing.”

Similarly, P6, a male Closer, discussed how his work with female clients helped him sympathize with the challenges they face:

Um; well, we have both male and female clients. But I don't really want to work for female clients anymore, just 'cuz, to be honest, the messages they get. The guys are just rude, you know? [. . .] Like basically talking to all these guys online—and [for] the women, um, it is really annoying, which unfortunately is the case for a lot of women.

All of our respondents gave examples of how working with clients of different genders, ethnicities, or ages allowed them to experience online dating in a way that they would otherwise not have been able to do. Client interactions opened a window into other, unknown dynamics of online dating, and ODAs mentioned they gained awareness, if not empathy. Because ODAs get to know their clients' personal preferences and behaviors so well, their work allowed them to develop a different perspective on the process of online and mobile dating and the people who use these platforms.

Perceptions on the Culture of Online and Mobile Dating. In general, ODAs emphasized how meeting people through internet-mediated platforms has become common, even expected. As P2 explained, “I don't think it's this stigmatized anymore. It's becoming normal for people to say, ‘I met my girlfriend on Match.com’ [. . .] we do everything else online, like e-commerce and stuff, so why not try to meet people the same way?” Surprisingly, most respondents' descriptions of the overall culture of online dating were quite similar—most described it as an impersonal, decision-driven process, motivated less by users' romantic goals and more by their needs for time-saving and efficiency. As seen in RQ2, respondents also noted that even the term “online dating” is a misnomer since (according to them) it functions less like dating and more like screening. P2 acknowledged how the commoditization of people through sites and apps may foster the impersonal culture of online dating:

When you match on Tinder, it's not a contract. People swipe right and back all the time [. . .] Some people just never had any intention of ever meeting them. That's the thing about that. There's a ton of casual use on all these things . . . people on Tinder basically kind of screen for a potential date, like weeding out people you're not interested in dating. People don't go there to have meaningful interactions.

Some respondents suggested that certain platform features (particularly visually dominant ones like Tinder) further pushed the “efficiency” quotient of online dating—especially when juxtaposed against the process of trying to meet people in FtF context: “A lot of people don't want to just depend on the bar scene [. . .] or their current lifestyle is—they're extra busy [. . .] so, I think it's super-efficient in that regard” (P4). P5 further elaborated on the “time-consuming” nature of online dating, which was especially problematic “if you're not successful [. . .] you could be sitting there having this conversation for an hour or something. Who has time for that, you know?” As Sharma (2014) suggested in her work on the cultural politics of temporality where time is seen as a resource to be managed and monetized, it appears that ODAs have conceptualized online dating as something that is time-consuming rather than time well spent, and so view their work as a service that can significantly enhance the efficiency of time expenditures.

Discussion

Within organizational communication research more broadly, researchers have called for investigation into the experiences of workers (Weiss & Rupp, 2011), especially those in gig economies (Ravenelle, 2019). The rising ODA industry presented a unique opportunity to address that call by examining the outsourcing of online dating as a distinct form of remote work within the gig economy. The current gig economy is singular in its reliance on digital platforms to advertise, negotiate, and manage work and labor (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). The gig economy can also be observed in the shift toward virtual workspaces that employ independent contract workers who perform tasks remotely, during non-standard work hours with limited supervision (Kalleberg, 2018). Considering how online dating outsourcing consists of work that is performed entirely online from start to finish at a fixed price per task, it qualifies as digital (as opposed to physical) work (Wood et al., 2019). We found that the (1) nature of ODA labor and (2) the structure of Virtual Match company as a virtual organization reflect rising trends of the larger gig economy that broadly hinges on workers' self-directed management of tasks and time.

As employees working in a virtual organization, all ODAs in this study fulfilled their duties and completed the required work, but did so independently and remotely, without going to a physical office (Staples et al., 1999). ODAs' employment reflected current trends of gig work, in which the tasks of online dating

were “transacted via platforms but delivered locally” (Wood et al., 2019). In this way, the ODA labor investigated here shares elements of “work-on-demand via apps” or “online freelancing” in which “the execution of traditional working activities [. . .] is channeled through apps managed by firms that also intervene in setting minimum quality standards of service and in the selection and management of the workforce” (De Stefano, 2015). Like many on-demand employees, we found most of our sample treated their ODA work as a “side gig” and were motivated by the perceived advantages of remote work and supplemental income. Our analysis thus replicated past research; however, we also saw how our respondents’ sense of professional identity and personal sensemaking was altered by the unique challenges posed by ODA labor.

Establishing a Work Identity as an ODA

Research has shown that employees tend to develop a strong work identity when they are able to instantiate an organization’s values, interact frequently with their colleagues, and connect themselves into established organizational networks (Bartel et al., 2012; Petriglieri et al., 2019). A strong work identity is important for employees because it provides a sense of belonging, self-respect, and acceptance within the company, which then often translates into increased productivity, better work performance, and more positive overall experiences (Porfeli et al., 2011). Yet most virtual organizations that promote online freelancing through remote work arrangements “pose a challenge to creating a strong sense of organizational membership as a result of the way that employees’ social interactions are affected” (Bartel et al., 2012, p. 120).

Our interviews suggested that ODAs developed their work identity in both formal and informal ways. Almost all respondents were able to clearly distinguish their own roles within the larger organization by comparing their specific job duties to others in the company. Other formal routes included dissemination of shared company values (such as customer “success”) and informational support which were communicated through Virtual Match’s monthly newsletters, the CRM, and email. While ODAs mentioned the use of WhatsApp chats and email for informal peer interaction, we found that almost all interactions were relegated to professional topics; face-to-face meetings were infrequent, and when they did occur were judged as irregular and strange.

The rise of remote gig work implies that the important factors needed to help employees establish strong work identities—for example, stable office settings, colleague interactions—are often weaker among online freelance workers, compared with those in more traditional environments. Research has shown that compared with employees who work in physical locations, the lack of these stabilizing factors can produce “precarious” work identities and “emotional tensions” for remote employees, who often report greater levels of fulfillment with their work, but also increased stress and anxiety (Armstrong & Cole, 2002; Petriglieri et al.,

2019). Our findings resonate with past research, as most respondents did not seem to have a strong work identity associated with Virtual Match. This (in combination with the fleeting nature of gig work itself) may have contributed to the high ODA turnover rates mentioned by respondents.

Making Sense of ODA Work and the Online Dating Process

Despite the lack of a strong work identity, respondents detailed creative ways through which they tried to make sense of their work. Like other forms of on-demand gig labor where customers contract workers for discrete services like transportation (Uber, Lyft) or delivery (DoorDash, Grubhub), the services proffered by ODAs implied that daters were willing to pay someone else to complete “human-based” tasks of impression management, mate selection, and interaction. Overall, we found that ODAs functioned similarly to these “efficient-but-invisible” service industries. However, the personal nature of ODA labor implied a need for greater sensemaking among the workers themselves. Through their own reflections and discussions with others, the respondents in our sample evaluated their work both pragmatically and critically. They not only got a “macro” perspective on the industry in terms of larger user trends within popular and niche dating platforms, their unique position in working with clients who differed from themselves (in terms of gender, age, race, etc.) gave them an opportunity to view the “micro” dynamics of online and mobile dating that they would not have otherwise been privy to. Female ODAs learned the challenges that male daters face, and male ODAs came to better understand the kind of (unwanted/rude) interactions that female daters often receive; ODAs who worked with older clients were able to reflect on the role of romance at different points in the life cycle. Such contemplation seemed unavoidable—all of our respondents reported some kind of perspective-taking as a result of their work.

The invisibility of the ODAs in most roles (except Account Managers) also influenced how they perceived themselves in terms of honesty. Unlike many other gig workers and their relationship to invisibility (De Stefano, 2015; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018), the ODA’s cloak of invisibility also demanded pretending to be someone else, or at least adopting another’s identity and image. As respondents noted, being so invisible that they needed to pretend to be someone else was difficult and could sometimes feel inauthentic.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was intended as an introductory investigation into the lived experiences of ODA workers. With only six participants who all worked for the same company, we cannot draw more generalized conclusions about the ODA experience; future research might examine a bigger sample of workers as the ODA industry grows and compare them with workers in the larger gig economy. Future work might also examine different

ODA companies: Our results reflect Virtual Match's specific company ethos, but how might other companies that cater to female daters, or daters of different sexualities, differ in their approach? Future work could explore how gender and sexuality—of both ODAs and clients—affect sensemaking and behaviors. Researchers might also pay more attention to clients—what motivates them to outsource online dating? How do they perceive ODAs? Do clients disclose their use of ODAs to romantic partners?

Conclusion

Our interviews with ODA workers reflect much of the broader trends in the gig economy and its implications for workplace communication. This study offered an in-depth examination into the nature of gig work in the distinctly personal context of dating, as well as its ensuing impact on relational formation dynamics. Situated between the “invisibility” of on-demand transportation and food delivery services and the “visibility” of on-demand domestic caretaking, ODA workers' lived experiences further expand our understanding of the phenomenon of gig labor by expounding on the nuances of on-demand work and its effects on workers. We found that while ODAs function similarly to the “efficient-but-invisible” workers in platform-mediated service industries, the unique personal nature of dating led to more sensemaking among ODA workers. As popularity of online dating outsourcing continues to grow, we expect that ODA labor will develop as well, eventually solidifying its role in contemporary online and mobile dating culture and in the larger gig economy.

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Note

1. Notably, this description of Virtual Match's target customer base is based on our respondents' perceptions. We were unable to obtain company data to verify these perceptions regarding the specific demographics of Virtual Match's clientele. Thus, these statements should be interpreted cautiously.

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