

## Feminists Don't Online Date

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### Abstract

The article interrogates the sexist presumptions at work in online dating sites and questions whether a middle-aged, heterosexual feminist is able to use these sites as a means of finding love.

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Let's make it perfectly clear: Not only am I a feminist, I'm an ardent, hardline, poke you in the eye kind of feminist. I've marched, cried, cajoled, begged, written, picketed, and fought for the rights of women since before I was given the Jane Fonda award for outstanding displays of feminism in grade 12. If you happen to be counting, that was twenty-nine years ago. I may be a feminist but I'm also a horny, heterosexual, overage PhD student who hasn't had a date in...well, let's not go there. A person might think that studying at university would provide infinite opportunities for romantic encounters but most of my fellow students are half my age or married and dating your professors is highly frowned upon. Given the fact that the closest I've come to sex in recent memory is having my nose nestled between the dry (but oh so sexy) pages of a Sam Sheppard play, I'm in a difficult and dateless predicament that has me considering online dating.

Let's make some other things perfectly clear: Feminists don't wear Daisy Duke shorts, enter wet t-shirt contests, or bat their eyes pretending to be baffled by existential musings about Nietzsche. In my little world, feminists don't online date because it seems pathetically akin to wearing a tiger skin skirt and plunging halter top to a job interview hoping to get noticed for intellectual prowess. Online dating smacks of desperately seeking male attention and feminists aren't desperate. In fact, feminists don't need a man. I should feel perfectly whole and complete celebrating who I am as an independent, successful and confident woman in my own right, marching to the beat of my own spirited soul. I shouldn't wistfully hope to be sexualized by a male gaze while I sit huddled in the bowels of the university library.

My younger classmates, who grew up on cyber relationships, are confused by my incalculable combination of online dating, desperation and feminism. They say that Internet dating is about making myself available for new opportunities to meet eligible men. They say it is about exposure to the width and breadth of dating prospects to which one wouldn't normally be

privileged. Being old school, I don't see it and I don't buy it. I sit alone on my balcony, stare at the lights of Calgary, and wonder if I'll live out the rest of my days alone collecting scented candles. Three glasses of Chardonnay later I pocket any feminist hesitations. I cautiously choose my online name: Scholar. I'm determined not to post the cyber equivalent of hiking up my skirt on my profile to attract a man's attention. I find a picture of myself wearing teacher glasses and I write a tag line: Let's Grow Together. A fourth glass of wine and I find the fortitude to post my ad: *Seeking someone interested in literature, theatre, learning, personal growth, and commitment.* With the flick of the enter button, this old school dater bursts into the twenty-first century and the prospect of cyber love.

Feminists don't believe in frogs that turn into broad-shouldered men with a kiss or wealthy princes who ride white stallions into a woman's life to save her from the drudgery of candidacy exams. And I don't either. But if it happened, I wouldn't be opposed to it. For days I desperately and feverishly log in and out of my online dating account hoping for a picture of a man holding a glass slipper that will slide perfectly onto my size 8 feet. I imagine staring into his ocean eyes as he effortlessly scoops me into his brawny arms, whisks me out of the library basement and off to a steak supper at a restaurant I can't afford. Praying for a message from a potential suitor feels pathetically like I'm 12 years old again and lined up along the back wall of the school gym hoping that a boy, any boy, will muster up the courage to ask me to dance. The only message I receive is from a twenty-one year old who outlines, in colourful detail, his librarian fantasies, sans white stallion.

Undaunted, I know that destiny could only be a cyber click away so I take fate into my own hands and decide to make the first move. I don't have to wait to be picked; I'm not 12 anymore. I peruse the men's profiles. AgoodSimpleMan's tag line: Looking for someone who is not a liar. Pass. LuckyU69's tag line: whiskey for two. Pass. NewlySingle's profile: "Blah blah blah you won't read this anyway 'cause women only care about a man's pay check." Eek. Pass. ClassyLadyWhereAreYou? posts a shirtless picture of himself tickling his fingers through his bathroom mat-like chest hair. Double pass. I grit my teeth and try to be patient. Looking for love the old fashion way was easier when all I had to do was sit longingly by the telephone and hope the handsome man I met at my friend's party would call. TheSlickLane says he's: "Looking for a real woman." What the fuck is a real woman? Pass. IgiveUpOnU must be an extraordinarily lonely guy. I think about emailing him just to compare stories as I'm feeling online weariness myself.

I confide my frustration and disappointment in a male friend who asks to see my profile. He says it has no sex appeal: "You need a cleavage shot. Men want women who are sexy, fun, flirty," he says. "And mentioning commitment before the first date would make any man run." Sexing up my profile is the cyber equivalent of wearing leopard skin spandex, donning red pumps and batting false eyelashes. I promised my feminist self that I wouldn't play the sex sells game to meet a man. However, after three desperate and lonely months of online dating and the only attention my profile garners is from a married man who seeks a third for intimate encounters, I cave. Once again I pocket my feminist ideologies. I write a profile with sex appeal. My new online name: Fun&Flirty. Tag line: Shaken and stirred martini lover. Profile: Seeking adventurous man to share life's good times. I post a picture of myself dancing at a New Year's Eve party: hips a sway, hair wild, breasts perky. I keep my PhD scholarly ambitions to myself. With the flick of the enter button, I become part of the sexist, gendered, clichéd mania that has plagued love relationships between men and women since the dawn of time. I remember the multitudes of essays and lectures I've written about how gender stereotypes devastate and disempower women. I feel like a traitor who's trying to look sexy at a Take Back the Night rally.

I would have stayed profoundly and passionately disappointed in myself had my inbox not filled with messages from potential and handsome suitors. I am no longer the 12-year-old hoping to be noticed. My dance card is full. My social life skyrockets. I go on two or three dates a week and the university librarians wonder where I am. I meet accountants and bald men, chiropractors with fat fingers, a chef with a glass eye, a farmer whose profile says he's 6' 3" who couldn't possibly be over 5' 2". I have drinks with a crane operator who brags about how much money he makes and then expects me to pay for his glass of wine. A dentist arrives at Starbucks dressed as a cowboy complete with a five gallon Stetson and a purple square dancing shirt with tassels. A nurse spends the entire date explaining that there isn't anything feminine about a man being a nurse and then stands up in the middle of the pub to flex his biceps. I'm overwhelmed by a high school chemistry teacher who wants me to convert to Christianity so we can date basked in the love and approval of Jesus. I don't have the time to mention being a graduate student as my dates are desperately intent on regaling me with stories about their new convertibles, six-digit salaries, and evil ex-wives.

I bet you're hoping I waded through the liars, exaggerators, and crazies to find a relatively normal man who rescued me from nights staring at my bedroom ceiling wondering why I didn't just pick up fresh batteries. Everyone wants love to end in a castle, even feminists like me. We want to believe that our soul mate is out there, somewhere, and if I just click on enough profiles, lose a couple of pounds, and put highlights in my hair, he would emerge from the internet like a phoenix to complete me. Love doesn't work that way. It never has. Even on the Internet. In fact, cyber dating has nothing new on old school daters like me. Feminist or not, women still succumb to insecurities about thigh fat, crow's feet around the eyes and drooping breasts. And men still succumb to defining themselves in terms of what they drive and the size of their dicks. Being a feminist in the dating world is crazy hard. It's tough to shake my booty and carry a "Votes for Women" banner at the same time. Very little has changed since the dawn of the millennium in terms of love between the sexes. So much for Darwin and evolution of the species.