

## Why Would Someone On Food Stamps Have an iPhone?

I can tell he's different the moment he walks in the coffee shop. It isn't his appearance. He looks presentable, if a little rough around the edges, clutching an iPhone to his barrel chest. It's how he moves: warily, shoulders hunched over, eyes darting. The body language would read as suspicious, if not for the flicker of fear and apprehension in his eyes — as if he's scared of being noticed, vigilant to his surroundings and desperately trying to blend in at the same time.

He orders a coffee, carefully counting out coins on the counter. He sits down at the table next to me and checks his phone, just like everyone else here. He punches in a few numbers and begins to talk in a low voice — discreet but urgent. I can't help but overhear his conversations.

Does someone have some cash jobs for him? Can he crash at a friend of a friend's place? Can he get a ride out to the soup kitchen? After a minute, it becomes clear: he's homeless. A homeless man with an iPhone.

Bert isn't unsheltered. He bounces between emergency shelters and friends' couches while he seeks temporary, cash-based day-laborer work. He refuses, in fact, to call himself homeless. "This is just a temporary condition," he tells me more than once, after we strike up a conversation. Over and over again, he says he'll get himself out of "this tight spot," though he's vague about how long he's been in it and how he got here.

He makes it clear: he hasn't given up.

It's not easy to engage him in conversation. When I ask how he liked his iPhone, he looks at me like I'm crazy. Later, he chalks up his guarded nature to the fact that he often doesn't have casual conversations anymore. Most people, he says, tend to avoid him once they realize he is poor and transient. "You can't hide it, being poor," he says.

He makes a joke about people acting as if poverty is an infectious disease. They give him a wide berth and pretend he's not there. "I can go whole days without people not even looking at me," he says. "And when they do, it often means they're sizing you up, wondering if they need to kick you out or something." The result, he adds, is a sense of exile, from any feeling of belonging you have to the human race.

His iPhone, then, functions as an important conduit. On the surface, it's his most important, practical tool. He can call places for work with it. He can call up shelters and other social services to see what's available. He calls public transportation to find out which bus lines are running and check out schedules.

Text is especially important. He can reach out to friends to see if he can crash with them for a night or two, especially if the weather is rough. But he has to be careful. "You don't want to impose," he says. "You can't exhaust your friends. Otherwise they'll get tired of helping you, thinking, 'Why are you still struggling?'" The hidden worry is that he'll never leave.

All this is easier to manage over text than calling. "You don't have to worry about sounding upbeat and

confident all the time,” he says. No one wants to help out the hopeless, and sometimes, it’s not really so easy to disguise the worry and anxiety from the voice.

Despite nearly everyone owning a phone, we think of them as luxuries, especially as data plans approach \$100 a month. The idea of a homeless man with an iPhone, but no job or roof over his head, is discomfiting, mostly because poverty is perhaps one of the last bastions of unexamined prejudice in the U.S. Few would argue that people of different races or genders shouldn’t own phones, but it’s still common to temper sympathy for the homeless or destitute if they have a phone.

Even the most progressive areas of the country can show a certain callousness to what poverty should look and feel like. In San Francisco, for example, city supervisor Malia Cohen sparked controversy when she posted a picture of a homeless man on Facebook, talking on a phone while huddled underneath a freeway overpass. “This kind of made me laugh,” she said, which led to an uproar and eventual removal of the picture. Ironically, California decided to expand its Lifeline program to give free phones and service to the homeless, recognizing the value of the devices for the disadvantaged.

The reality is homelessness is a simple term for a complex sociological condition, affected by a mosaic of factors that interact and affect one another in often unexpected ways. Large-scale trends like unemployment combust with local factors, such as lack of affordable housing or services easily accessible and open to those in need. Add in volatile personal situations — like addiction, family violence, financial instability or simply being far from family — you have a slippery slope to stand upon.

The homeless themselves range from the “unsheltered” living on the streets to doubled-up families living in single-occupancy homes. That includes those in transitory housing or emergency shelters, as well as a case of a student at NYU who attended school while sleeping at the library and showering at the gym.

About 20 out of every 10,000 people are homeless, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness. Anyone without enough personal or social capital can get caught in the cycle, and it’s not easy to pull out, when you consider the tremendous shame and judgment they experience within themselves and from the world at large. But there’s one effective tool that can help.

Yes — phones.

On another level, Bert says his phone connects him to less tangible, but still important, resources. He knows people can reach him, no matter where he sleeps at night. He gets daily e-mails from an online ministry, with inspirational messages and passages from the Bible. Those keep up his spirit and faith and keep him going. He can read news on the browser, too. He only gets a certain amount of time on the computer at the public library, so he often begins researching jobs and housing on his phone and makes a list of websites he wants to visit when he gets on a computer with a faster connection.

The iPhone also, in part, structures his day in an often chaotic life. He has an exhaustive list of places to charge his device, and he makes sure to hit them at some point during the day. He’s careful about his power and data use and carries a charger at all times, in one of the capacious pockets of his army jacket. “When I see a free outlet somewhere, I have to say, it feels like Christmas,” he adds. Free Wi-Fi inspires the same feeling; he can save his valuable data.

But the most valuable aspect about his iPhone is simply that it makes him look like everyone else. “You won’t believe it, but if I didn’t have my phone, I probably can’t just sit here and have my coffee and be talking to

you,” he tells me. “It gives me something I can do in public. It’s not loitering if I’m typing or talking on my phone.” Loitering, he says, is often a good excuse to kick the homeless out of a place. And a phone is a passport that lets him stay in places longer than he would otherwise.

“You have to realize about my situation, most people don’t look beyond appearances,” he says. And if there’s one thing that matters to the homeless, according to Bert, it’s appearances. The minute the facade cracks and reveals his struggle, no one wants to be around you. No one wants to see it. People kick you out of places; they can tell you don’t belong anywhere.

In talking with Bert about not just phones, but his life in general, I realize he’s someone with a clear-eyed inventory of his scant resources. And he maximizes them with an eye to maintain appearances. Within that ruthless calculus, an iPhone is more important than his car, which he sold after the winter and didn’t need to sleep in as a last resort. And besides, he says, cops are on the lookout for people sleeping in cars — it’s not as practical as you’d think.

He used the car money to save for his phone bill, as well as a cheap \$30 a month membership to a local 24-hour gym, which gives him regular access to a hot shower and a place he can go late at night if he needs. He knows that sounds ludicrous, but says nothing marks a homeless man more than pungent body odor and an unclean appearance.

You can have all the iPhones in the world with you, he tells me, but if you don’t have a regular way to staying clean, that’s the most dangerous thing of all. Nothing gets a homeless person kicked out faster, rejected from a job instantly or denied housing than looking dirty. He keeps repeating, “Dirty ain’t dignified.” It’s often that dignity that Bert fights so hard to maintain, even at the expense of other things — but definitely not at the cost of a phone.

His ability to stay afloat and even keep up his personal dignity sheds light not only on how central phones are to our lives — no matter how poor we are — but also the world’s poverty of generosity and compassion. For every example of someone helping another — such as a Reddit member who found a Chicago homeless man and delivered a care package to him — there are countless others who slip through the cracks, who walk in through doors of public places, face stares of cold evaluation and wonder if they’ll be kicked out.

Bert lives assuming that people’s generosity and compassion are limited to a certain point — and once you push past that point, you’re lost beyond all help. Despite his situation, he’s a proud man, but burdened with the “double consciousness” that marginalized people often have — able to see himself both through his eyes, and through the eyes of how others would judge him. And it’s clear the discrepancy between the two distresses him, and much of his survival strategy tries to bridge that gap.

I see Bert a few more times, but we never do talk as in-depth. Sometimes, he lets me buy him a coffee refill, though he wants to buy the first cup himself. Then, after a couple of months, Bert disappeared — I’m not really certain what happened to him.

Did he finally pull himself out of his “temporary condition,” as he called it? Or was he like countless others who slipped through the cracks into the shadowy netherworld of genuine destitution and poverty, becoming one of the “unsheltered”? I don’t know. Maybe he still has his iPhone, but he remains out of reach, lost somewhere in a world where social ties are tenuous connections, no matter how many gadgets we have.

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## **If Everyone Watched This Norwegian TV Show, Kim Kardashian Would Be Out of a Job.**

Marit watches a surprising amount of TV. She lives in Oslo, Norway, but prefers shows from Europe and the U.S., streamed video, cable or — shhh... — BitTorrent. Her favorites include the HBO crime drama “The Wire,” “Sherlock” starring the handsome Benedict Cumberbatch, oddball comedy “Arrested Development,” and both British and American versions of “The Office.” Her tastes are typical of today’s modern, cultured 30-something urbanite.

But her all-time favorite? A show about a six-day odyssey on a boat traveling through the Norwegian fjords. No, it’s not a European version of “The Love Boat,” or some sort of murder mystery, or a frothy comedy about girl friends who find love on a cruise. It’s simply a show that captures the real-time journey of a MS Nordnorge, which travels along the west coast of Norway.

Really.

In 2011, “Hurtigruten: Minutt for Minutt” broadcast all 134 hours of a voyage from Bergen to Kirkenes, past mist-filled valleys, scenic ports and gorgeous mountains. Marit isn’t the only Norwegian to tune in. Over three of the country’s five million citizens have turned in. In fact, its live five-day broadcast held, on average, about one-third of the viewing audience, according to Gallup.

How could such an odd TV show — a slow-moving, daringly mundane document of a boat traveling up a river, with absolutely no drama or histrionics — become so successful? It’s a stark contrast to the fast-pace, complex storylines, and adrenaline rush of visual stimulation that characterizes modern TV.

But the success of “Hurtigruten” — and further excursions into so-called “slow-TV” — hint at a new direction in our visual entertainment, one that soothes our brains in the midst of an avalanche of technology and stimulation. And it’s coming to the U.S. as early as summer of 2014.

“Hurtigruten” isn’t the first slow-TV show in Norway. It’s actually a follow-up of a similar show, from 2009, when Norwegian public broadcaster NRK broadcast all seven hours of a train ride, from Bergen to Oslo, to celebrate the centenary of its railway line.

Millions of viewers watched the train pass through miles of Norway’s natural beauty. While shots were long and sustained, and voiceovers were short and rare, the result was strangely mesmerizing. During dull moments, such as passing through long, dark tunnels, archival footage and interesting trivia was shown to give historical context.

The cruise show garnered even higher ratings, underscoring a growing public appetite for decidedly low-key, oddball programming. Now, NRK mixes in slow content — everything from salmon fishing to logs burning — with the usual fast-paced shows.

Marit’s new favorite, in fact, is “National Knitting Evening,” a program that features four hours of discussions about knitting, followed by nine hours of sheep-shearing, thread-spinning and needle-knitting. This “sheep-to-sweater” epic drew a million and a half viewers.

Slow-TV shows usually follow the same format: a long introduction with a lot of historical context, and then, an in-depth examination of the process, noted for its long stretches of time. There's no plot, very little dramatic incident, and no cues in the soundtrack or narration to tell you how to feel.

They're easy and cheap to produce and don't require a lot of post-production editing or work, making them a no-brainer for a network from a production standpoint.

But why are audiences gravitating to the slow-TV phenomenon? Part of it, according to Marit, can be explained by national character: Norwegians take pride in being different, even eccentric, she says. They know slow-TV is strange, but many see it as a national quirk.

Others simply love the subject, like to travel vicariously through the show, or find it as a nice way to pass the long, dark Scandinavian winters, which can force nature-loving Norwegians indoors for months at a time. But there's also a novelty factor, a change of pace from the usual fare. According to NRK producers, the ethos of slow-TV is a reaction against the frenetic pace of modern visual entertainment.

"Slow-TV is very different from the way everybody — including myself, to be honest — has always thought that TV should be made," Rune Moglebust, an NRK producer who programs most of the network's slow-TV shows, told Time. "TV has mostly been produced the same way everywhere with just changes in subjects and themes. This is a different way of telling a story. It is more strange. The more wrong it gets, the more right it is."

Moglebust has a point: turn on the television, or watch a movie, and count the number of shots and cuts in just one minute. Each shot is short, and chances are, you'll lose track because there are so many. On average, the shot length in today's feature films dropped to around four and a half seconds, from about 10 seconds in movies from the 1930s, according to "The Cutting Edge," a documentary on the magic of movie editing. In fact, today's 90- to 120-minute blockbusters have over 5,000 cuts.

The success of MTV, which assaulted the eye with jittery, caffeinated visuals, synchronized to music, was a marked contrast to the old-Hollywood code of "continuity" editing, which emphasized a smooth, uninterrupted experience of time and space.

The MTV method was made possible due to advances in video technologies, particularly in non-linear computer-based editing systems, such as Avid and Final Cut Pro, which made it easy to digitize and slice-and-dice footage, and then, revert back to earlier versions if the results weren't satisfying.

It was a faster, and more convenient, change from analog systems, such as the Steenbeck editing desk, which required editors to actually cut celluloid, tape or glue segments together, and then, run it all through a projector to see if it worked. To fix a mistake, they would have to take apart the segments, re-organize the footage, and then, re-tape everything back together — overall, a laborious, time-consuming process.

Slow-TV is, in some ways, a return to this old-fashioned pace of entertainment. "All other TV is just speeding up, and we want to break with that," Lise-May Spisoy, who produced the knitting project, told Deutsche Welle. "We want to allow people to finish their sentences."

The slowdown goes back to the reason we often turn to entertainment: to wind down from a busy day. “Slow-TV is a chance for people to sit down, relax and contemplate,” Arve Hjelseth, a sociologist at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, told the AFP.

Besides increasing in pace, entertainment is often more visceral in its depictions of violence and sex, and storylines are more complex and challenging to follow. While it can make for some truly great shows, sometimes it’s nice to watch something at a slower pace.

The reasons to crave slower content, though, touch on deeper reasons than change of pace and relaxation. We’ve reached a saturation point, and need a break from information and stimulation. Of the 400 billion bits of information our brain can process each second, we’re only aware of about 2,000 bits. In terms of visuals, we can only absorb about one percent of the information the eye takes in, since neurons selectively filter out unimportant details so as not to overwhelm us.

Said in another way, on average, Americans take in about 122,000-gigabytes of information a second, which sounds like a lot, except the constant barrage of media, either through the Internet or television, is stretching our capacity thin. According to the New York Times, we consume three times more information each day, in 2008, than we did in 1960. While our brains simply filter out most of it, the fatigue still sets in.

Slow-TV is a corrective to that barrage. It’s no mistake that the subject is meditative and contemplative. Watching the shows — whether it’s the scenery passing through a train window, or the yarn weaving in and out of need to form a fabric — forces us to slow down, take in smaller details and really absorb the images and sounds.

The snail pace, and lack of visual and aural assault, is hard to watch at first, because it feels so anathema to what we’re used to. But once you settle in, the shows feel hypnotic — it’s easy to become absorbed in even the smallest nuances.

I watched a bit of the train-program, and found it soothing, in a strangely immersive, yet relaxing, way. The natural beauty kept me interested, while the slow pace allowed me to really take it all in. When I finished, I felt genuinely relaxed, and I found I could remember more details.

Marit said it even feels a bit like meditation, which, of course, can benefit our health by reducing stress, lowering heart rates and refreshing our minds. Long-term meditation, if done consistently over time, has even been shown to rewire our brains. While no one is saying slow-TV will do the same, it seems to calm and soothe us in a similar way as contemplative practices, such as yoga, meditation or even making art.

Slow-TV sounds like a novelty peculiar to Norway, but some believe it has a transatlantic appeal, too. In fact, U.S. distributor LMNO Productions plans to adapt the original, epic seven-hour train ride on Norway’s Bergen line for the U.S.

“In a world where everything moves so fast, it was refreshing to find something so captivating that you did not want to look away from it,” Lori Rothschild Ansaldi, LMNO Productions senior vice-president of development, told Hollywood Reporter. “LMNO is constantly looking for very loud, distinctive formats and characters and we believe we have found just that with the Slow-TV concept.”

But will slow-TV succeed in the U.S.? After all, we’re the country that launched MTV. Our most popular programs often involve glitzy, glossy reality-TV shows whose “real” storylines are manipulated through

clever editing, fast pacing, loud music and often inane talking-heads commentary. We like “Keeping Up With the Kardashians,” not “Knitting With Kim, Kourtney and Khloe.”

Significant business hurdles also need to be cleared. Norwegians broadcast their slow-TV shows without commercial interruption, but it’s unthinkable for U.S. channels to give up seven hours of potential commercial sales on such a risky experiment. Slow-TV programs would also be difficult to resell or syndicate.

Slow-TV experiments, in the U.S., have mostly been confined to the artistic avant-garde. For example, in 1963, Andy Warhol once filmed poet John Giomo sleeping for six uninterrupted hours with no cuts, commentary or soundtrack. Distribution was limited to art galleries and museums. Video artist Douglas Gordon also experimented with slowing down footage to extremes, such as stretching Alfred Hitchcock’s “Psycho” to a 24-hour running time.

On a less highbrow note, on Christmas Eve in 1966, New York-based WPIX broadcast footage of wood logs burning in a fireplace, with classic Christmas songs playing in the background, as a televised holiday gift for urbanites that live in homes without a fireplace. The “Yule Log,” which also allowed station employees to spend time with their families during the holidays, became an instant hit and a broadcast staple for over the next 20 years.

Last February, Marit and her friends gathered in her tiny Oslo apartment to watch a Yule Log of their own. Everyone brought a bottle of wine, and together, they settled in and watched “National Woodfire Night,” a 12-hour exploration of firewood, featuring four hours of information on chopping logs, and then, eight hours showing a live burning fireplace.

Marit said guests would wander in and out during the broadcast to check Facebook or Twitter, but those who settled in to watch found it strangely comforting during the long, dark Scandinavian winter night.

Slow-TV shows no signs of slowing down for Norwegians. As odd as it sounds, the phenomenon shows a craving for slower, more contemplative experiences we can savor. It may be at odds with the fast pace of our media and technology, but maybe that’s the point. As the world speeds up around us, we might end up turning to slower forms of entertainment as an escape.

More slow programming is coming, including a proposed show on “A Day in the Life of a Snail.” For Marit, and others, these odd, hypnotic shows just can’t come fast enough.

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## **Ever Fall in Love With the ‘Wrong’ Person? Here’s Why It Happens, And What You Can Do About It.**

Alex is a real catch. Lean and lanky, he cuts a fine figure in a Savile Row suit or hoodie and jeans. He has a sort of genial magnetism that draws you in, and a certain charisma that lets him to move with ease in any social situation. But beyond his style and demeanor, he’s generous and friendly, and an extraordinarily good listener. I know because he still remembers stories I’ve casually told him over a decade ago.

Not only is he handsome, intelligent and witty, but he's wealthy, too. It seems the world is at his feet, but while he has a strong career in the international art world, lovely homes in several countries and a wide circle of friends, he has yet to find his match in love and life.

"Maybe I should give up," he tells me, in an uncharacteristically forlorn and pessimistic mood. Then, that wit kicks in and he jokes that he's ready to embrace permanent bachelor status.

He has no problem attracting women, but he is, at heart, a true romantic, with a deep yearning to find someone who truly accepts and loves him. But with each breakup, his hopes and expectations grow for the next person, which more often than not, ends in a deeper pain when it fails to work out.

No matter the age, gender or astrology sign, finding true love is never easy. But lonely hearts, like Alex, shouldn't give up looking for companionship. Help is coming from an unlikely source, as algorithms evolve to take dating to the next level.

Like most, Alex spent his 20s in a dating frenzy, not particularly eager to settle down. But then, one day, he told me he was ready to find the "One." He radiated confidence as he painted a picture of his near future: he'd find her within two years, and get married in a ceremony held at his family vineyard, just shy of his 30th birthday.

With a plan in place, he set out to meet women on his own. But before long, he became frustrated with the passive nature of dating, waiting for fate to put the right person in his path. So he canvassed friends to set him up on blind dates. When those didn't pan out, he ventured into upscale matchmaking, paying thousands for high-end services that yielded few enduring relationships.

Finally, after much resistance, he tried what millions had already discovered: online dating.

"I know a lot of people who found great relationships through sites like eHarmony and the like," he tells me. "But I still feel like 'ugh' at the thought of doing online dating myself." After I slightly prod him, he admits to being embarrassed.

"What would I tell our kids? That their mother and I met online? That doesn't sound as good of a story as telling them we met at a game, or a bookstore, or something like that," he says. "It's hard to let go of that wish for a 'meet cute' scenario you see in a million movies or hear about from your friends."

That sentiment is shared by millions, but it hasn't stopped millions more from storming these sites. According to Census data, of the more 100 million people who are single in the U.S, in 2011, 40 million have tried online dating in 2012, Mashable reported.

It's a big business: in 2012, revenues totaled short of \$2 billion, making online dating the top source of paid content on the Internet. In fact, these millions of people will, on average, spend about \$240 a year on sites, and today, Match and eHarmony take credit for about one-in-five marriages.

Of course, dating services have existed well before the Internet. When modern newspapers appeared in the late 17th century, "matrimonial agencies" began to place advertisements on behalf of men who paid them to

find them wives, according to H.G. Cocks, a professor and lecturer at University of Nottingham, and author of the book “Classified: The Secret History of the Personal Column.”

And according to the New Yorker, when Lewis Altfest, an accountant from Queens, ran across a supercomputer at the 1964 World’s Fair, he believed the questionnaire it used to match people to foreign pen pals could be adapted to do the same for dating. So he called his friend, Robert Ross, then a programmer at IBM, to alter the system, and a year later, they launched “Project TACT,” short for “Technical Automated Compatibility Testing,” to become New York’s first computer dating service.

The Internet took the ideas of classifieds and TACT to cast a wider-reaching and more efficient net. The first generation of dating sites, like Matchmaker.com, created in 1986, were merely bulletin boards where lonely hearts posted advertisements that described what they were looking for. They were similar to classifieds, but easier to sift through, so browsing through hundreds or thousands of results became more convenient.

Then, dating sites shifted to sortable databases. With thousands of potential mates to sort and sift through, matches could be winnowed and drilled down by preferences. Looking for a non-smoker? Dating only men six feet or taller? Looking for a blonde under the age of 34? It was easy to “customize” a date to any heart’s liking.

But as people flocked online, combing through the matches became overwhelming, prompting sites to add layers of innovation to make sorting more efficient and targeting more accurate. Some sites, like JDate.com and ChristianMingle.com, specialized in matching like-minded people who sought cultural or religious preferences, while others leaned on algorithms and formulas that promised a more scientific and precise method to make matchmaking. OkCupid, for example, famously used an algorithm to calculate and “match” the likelihood two people would have a successful relationship.

Alex thought the plethora of options would yield some success, but he tells me the opposite was true — some of his worst matches came from dating sites. He tried them all, from OkCupid to eHarmony to even JDate — there was always something “off” in online dating, he says. “It’s just not working, and I’ve tried everything.”

The problem with online dating is that it relies on the assumption that we’re open and honest about whom we purport to be and what we want — but that simply isn’t the case. According to the University of Wisconsin, four-in-five online daters admit to lying on profiles. Whether they add an extra inch to their height, shave off 10 pounds on their weight, post an old picture from a decade ago, or subtract a year off their age, people routinely fudge even basic facts.

Of course, there’s a reason we lie: online dating is extremely brutal, showing our ugliest biases. When Quartz analyzed data from Facebook dating app, “Are You Interested,” for example, it found that black men and women received the lowest response rate on the service, while white men and Asian women garnered the most, revealing entrenched stereotypes and fetishes in the idea of a “color-blind” society.

Now, in his late-30s, Alex has given up on online dating. “I’ve come close. I’ve dated beautiful, accomplished women, and I’ve even had real relationships with some of them,” he says. “And yet... nothing. Either I don’t feel it, or she doesn’t, or something is missing. What am I doing wrong?”

The problem may not be bad luck or unresolved issues, but the methodology of online dating itself. According to Scientific American, many scientists believe online dating, ultimately, fails to produce long-lasting relationships because the algorithms used fail to account for some important factors.

For example, psychological studies often report the strongest predictors of solid relationships are based on how a couple interacts with one another, and how they handle stress together — factors a formula can't predict until people actually meet. While sites can gather fun data on personality, attitudes and habits, those traits are rarely the signposts of a successful relationship.

As my mother used to say, nothing shows more about a relationship than taking a trip together to an unfamiliar place.

But the problem isn't merely in algorithms, according scientists at Boston University, Harvard and MIT, the very model of online dating itself is flawed. When researchers analyzed dissatisfied online daters, they found experience was, too often, like online shopping.

You compile a list of desired attributes in a mate, and then, click search to browse through a variety of matches. It's like scanning boxes of cereal on a store shelf. The problem is that, too often, we begin to form a picture of a prospective date before we even meet them — and then, when we do, the reality simply doesn't live up to the vivid pictures in our head.

The shopping model has limitations, too. While we know whether we want a toaster with two or four slots, it turns out we're not especially good at gauging what we want in relationships. "With people, even when we have well-articulated stories about the kind of person we want to meet, we're often wrong," Michael Norton, who worked on the study at Harvard, noted. Social psychologists have long known that what we say, and what we actually do, are often two very different things — and nowhere is that truer than in love.

According to Northwestern University, while men and women tend to say they look for certain qualities in a potential mate — men emphasize looks, and women say money — in an actual setting, like speed dating, they often choose differently. What participants said they wanted beforehand, and what they actually said they liked, afterwards, had little in common, because desired traits — like socioeconomic status, income level or height — were often superseded by qualities that are actually important to us — like rapport, a sense of humor, or sexual compatibility.

Are they kind, a good listener, responsive? Do they have a nice laugh and seem easy to please? These factors aren't easily measured by a questionnaire, and yet they're crucial to building chemistry, and that undefinable "spark," that makes us want to get together.

But if online dating emphasizes "compatibility" over ineffable, immeasurable factors like chemistry and interaction, a number of dating apps are going in the opposite direction. Instead of lengthy questionnaires to analyze compatibility, software like "Are You Interested" and "Tinder" rely on social networks to spark an interest, often based on just a short bio and a photo.

With Tinder, you simply swipe through photos of people nearby, and then message the ones you like. From there, it's up to you to decide if there's a connection, much less any compatibility. Other looks-centered services, like FaceMate, are gaining headlines, too, underscoring a "back to the drawing board" approach in dating, mating or simply hooking up.

Alex tried Tinder, but he hated it. “It might have been fun in my 20s, when dating was more of an adventure,” he says. “But now I show up to coffee and discover it’s with a 30-year-old with the sophistication of a ’80s Valley Girl, and I feel like I wasted an hour of my life.”

Sometimes, I think his exhaustion with dating stems from high expectations, but it mirrors a changing picture of marriage in the 20th century. Until recently, marriage was often seen as a social and economic arrangement, benefiting two partners and their families, so it was helpful to share similar goals and outlooks on life — or, at least, get along.

Then, marriage evolved to a companion-based model — someone to share our interests, raise a family with, and experience life together as we get older. In a sense, online dating, with its emphasis on shared outlooks and desired traits, reflects that picture: we look for someone who wants a similar lifestyle, and who we get along with.

But someone like Alex longs for something else entirely — a communion that comes from a deep emotional and even spiritual connection. A soul mate. But when each person has a different, deeply personal definition of what a soul mate is, one that’s not easily articulated, a tidy algorithm can’t possibly quantify it.

Not that scientists aren’t trying. They’re evolving a generation of algorithms to approach the science of human attraction and chemistry. Dating sites will soon take cues from Netflix and Amazon, which determine what we like and serve us similar items. Sites like Netflix or Amazon don’t make us sit down and fill out questionnaires — instead, their algorithms “learn” from what we watch, click on and browse, to recommend options based on our tastes.

We could tell Netflix we’re interested in arthouse dramas, but if we end up watching or renting the entire Meg Ryan canon through the site, it’ll recommend the cheesy romantic comedies our actions say we actually prefer.

Kang Zhao, an assistant professor of management sciences at University of Iowa, believes dating sites can do the same thing, and his team is creating an algorithm that learns from a person’s clicks and contact history to recommend dates of interest. The assumption is that our real behavior is a better sign of what we actually want, despite what we say or think we want.

By developing a model to combine our tastes and what we find attractive, Zhao’s algorithm improved the paltry 25 percent reciprocation rate in an unnamed popular dating service to 44 percent.

“Those combinations of taste and attractiveness do a better job of predicting successful connections than relying on information that clients enter into their profile, because what people put in their profile may not always be what they’re really interested in,” Zhao told Forbes. “They could be intentionally misleading, or may not know themselves well enough to know their own tastes in the opposite sex.”

There are signs, though, that Alex may be off the market by the time a “Netflix of dating” emerges to capture a piece of the online dating pie. Recently, he met someone he likely would’ve never met through an online site. For one thing, she’s older than he was looking for, and she’s a single mom, in a non-glamorous profession — someone he describes as “pretty in a girl-next-door way,” but not a stunning beauty.

They met in the gluten-free aisle at Whole Foods, where Alex had stopped by after the gym, both looking sweaty and dressed in ratty gym clothes. And yet, he liked her smile and her calm voice, and they both made one another laugh easily. He got her number and they met for coffee, which led to a first date, and a second date, and then more.

After dating for some time, he discovered things about her that he never would have thought to put in a profile, or check off on a questionnaire: her easy self-acceptance and confidence, her humor, kindness, adventurous sense of fun, as well as the ability to be totally himself around her.

That's the funny thing about love: when it works, you don't always get what you want, but you discover what you truly need, and perhaps that's the type of knowledge that no algorithm can really replace.

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