



Development and validation of a measure of online deception and intimacy[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We aimed to establish the personality and psychopathology correlates of (1) misrepresenting oneself or deceiving others online and (2) seeking meaningful companionship through online relationships. In Study 1 ($N = 300$; community sample), we sought to determine (1) if we could differentiate these two dimensions and (2) whether they showed distinct correlates. Study 2 served as an opportunity to refine our assessment of these dimensions and to explicate their correlates in another community sample ($N = 294$). In Study 2, we created two scales, one which we labeled *Online Deception* (e.g., self-misrepresentation to others online) and the other *Online Intimacy* (e.g., turning to the internet for meaningful social interaction); we collectively titled these scales the Measures of Online Deception and Intimacy (MODI). Although Online Intimacy related weakly to most personality and psychopathology measures, Online Deception showed notable negative associations with conscientiousness and agreeableness and positive associations with neuroticism. Furthermore, it associated positively with both externalizing and internalizing symptoms. Our findings represent a first step toward understanding how individual differences in personality and psychopathology can be used to predict online deception and intimacy, and we hope that future research will explore the correlates of these dimensions further.

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1. Introduction

The internet serves as a tool for facilitating positive social interaction, but also provides an avenue for victimization (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012). One particular type of victimization occurs through “online romance scams,” in which “criminals pretend to initiate a relationship through online dating sites then defraud their victims of large sums of money” (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012, p. 181). Whitty and Buchanan (2012) describe how victims of this scam are hit with a “double-whammy”: not only do they lose money, but also a romantic relationship.

As seen in the popular media, there also are cases in which individuals misrepresent themselves online in romantic relationships without any intention of conning others for financial gain. In these cases, individuals in online relationships often misrepresent their identities to others (e.g., use pictures of others to represent themselves, use a different name online). Unlike the “double-whammy” described by Whitty and Buchanan (2012), many individuals who are deceived in online relationships are not scammed for money, but still experience tremendous emotional hurt.

Most research to date has focused on the “double-whammy” in which financial loss is involved; in contrast, very little attention has been given to misrepresentation online or through social media that does not involve any intention of scamming for financial gain. Similarly, the vast majority of research on online victimization also has focused on studying the psychological characteristics of those who misrepresent themselves, with less attention given to those seeking meaningful online interaction. That being said, it should not be assumed that (1) misrepresenting oneself online and (2) turning to the internet for meaningful social interaction are independent dimensions, as it is possible that those who seek genuine online companionship may also misrepresent themselves in an effort to appear more desirable to others (Seidman, 2013). Consequently, it is important that research clarify the degree to which these behaviors overlap.

1.1. Personality and online behavior

Basic individual differences have been shown to be related to online behaviors and provide a starting point for clarifying the motives underlying online misrepresentation and seeking online relationships. More specifically, individual differences in personality and psychopathology can serve as a useful framework for predicting online behavior. For instance, in their review of the literature, Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) concluded that extraversion was associated positively with Facebook use. Research since the publication of that review supports their conclusion and indicates that neuroticism is associated positively with

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tendencies to present an “ideal” version of one's self on Facebook and to share self-aspects that individuals would not otherwise be comfortable presenting to others offline (Seidman, 2013).

McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) found that individuals who seek relationships online may have elevated levels of social anxiety and may find it easier to communicate with others online than in person; thus, we would not expect such individuals to report being extraverted. Similarly, Knox, Daniels, Sturdivant, and Zusman (2001) found that nearly half of the participants in their sample reported feeling more comfortable interacting with others online than face-to-face, although the vast majority of their participants also indicated that they were not using online social media to start romantic relationships. Taken together, this small body of research indicates that additional inquiry focusing on individual differences can be a potentially useful tool in explaining the new social phenomenon of victimization in online relationships.

1.2. The current study

Given that this area of research is relatively new, our goal is to establish the personality and psychopathology correlates of (1) misrepresenting oneself to deceive others online and (2) seeking meaningful and lasting companionship through online relationships. In addressing this goal, we also sought to create scales to measure these constructs, as such measures currently are not available. Note that this study has a somewhat different focus than previous research focusing on victimization in which financial loss is implicated, as we aim to inform future research by identifying the characteristics of individuals who turn to the internet for companionship and/or who misrepresent themselves online, without necessarily doing so for financial gain. For convenience, we refer to misrepresenting oneself or misleading others online as *online deception*, and to using the internet to maintain meaningful relationships with no face-to-face interaction and without having ever met the other party as *online intimacy*. As stated, it should not be assumed that these dimensions are independent, and we sought to determine the extent to which they overlap.

We present data from two community samples to explicate the nature of online deception and intimacy. In Study 1, we examined the structure of an initial item pool used to assess these constructs, and we examined how these behaviors related to both personality and psychopathology. Study 2 provided us with an opportunity to improve upon our assessment of online deception and intimacy based on the results of Study 1, and it included a more thorough assessment of both dimensions.

Across studies, we assessed psychopathology using a battery of scales assessing internalizing (e.g., depression), externalizing (e.g., deceitfulness), manic (e.g., euphoric mood) and schizotypal/psychotic (e.g., unusual beliefs) symptoms; personality was assessed using the influential five-factor model. Most research examining online behaviors has not assessed personality beyond the general domain level; consequently, it is unclear how more specific facets of broader traits are related to online behavior. Facet-level analyses are valuable in identifying relations that may be weakened or masked altogether at the general factor level (Watson, Stasik, Ellickson-Larew, & Stanton, 2015); the current studies address this gap by conducting analyses at both the domain and facet levels of personality.

1.2.1. Hypotheses

We did not make specific predictions for online intimacy, as the personality and psychopathology associations for this dimension were unclear based on previous research. However, we made predictions for online deception based on our conceptualization of this dimension. First, we predicted that online deception would associate positively with neuroticism, in accord with Seidman's (2013) findings that neuroticism related positively to presenting an “idealized self” online. Because we predicted deception to relate positively to neuroticism (e.g., feeling

depressed, anxious, angry), we also hypothesized that it would show positive associations with psychopathology. We expected deception to associate especially strongly with externalizing psychopathology (e.g., being manipulative, deceitful) given that we also anticipated it would associate negatively with agreeableness; this specific prediction for agreeableness was made because we would not expect individuals who intentionally misrepresent themselves to others to also report being honest and caring.

As discussed, some research suggests that extraverts are more likely to use social interaction online to facilitate face-to-face interaction, whereas other work suggests that introverted, socially anxious individuals turn to online relationships as a source of nonthreatening interaction (McKenna et al., 2002). Thus, we made formal no predictions regarding extraversion. We also did not make any specific predictions for openness and conscientiousness, as little data were available to suggest how these traits relate to online behavior.

2. Study 1 method

2.1. Participants

Data from this study examining personality and psychopathology relations were collected in three phases. Participants ($N = 410$) completed the first and second study phases roughly three weeks apart (mean interval = 20.3 days), and they completed the third phase ($N = 300$; although sample sizes for specific analyses vary slightly due to missing data) approximately 9 months on average after the second. The first two study phases were intended to provide comprehensive assessment of personality and psychopathology, whereas the third phase was conducted to supplement these earlier phases. It included assessment of a range of constructs (e.g., online behavior, musical preferences) that we were interested in relating to personality on a more exploratory basis.

We recruited participants from the South Bend, IN metropolitan area who had provided their contact information from previous studies (see Watson et al., 2015). Many of the participants in this sample were outpatients recruited from various sources, such as the local community mental health center. Consequently, this sample is characterized by relatively high levels of psychopathology, with nearly half of the sample ($N = 127$, 42.6%; data were missing for two participants) answering “yes” to one or more of these three questions: “Are you currently receiving psychological counseling/therapy for mental health issues?” “Have you received psychological counseling/therapy for mental health issues in the past?” “Are you currently taking medications to treat a mental illness?” Additionally, only half (49.8%) of the sample was employed. Participant mean age was 46.5 years ($SD = 13.1$); 71.6% of the sample was female. The large majority of the participants identified themselves as either Black/African-American (48.3%) or as Caucasian (46.6%), with small percentages of other minority groups represented.

2.2. Measures

Participants completed more than 250 scales over the three study phases; this battery is too extensive to examine in its entirety here. Across the three phases, all participants completed these scales in the same order. To address our goals, we used scales from the Computerized Adaptive Test of Personality Disorder Static Form (CAT-PD-SF; Simms et al., 2011) and the Expanded Version of the Inventory of Depression and Anxiety Symptoms (IDAS-II; Watson, O'Hara, Naragon-Gainey, Koffel, & Chmielewski, 2012) to assess a broad range of psychological symptoms. We used the NEO Personality Inventory-3 (NEO-PI-3; McCrae, Costa, & Martin, 2005) to model personality, which allowed us to examine the relations between online behavior and both personality domains and facets. With the exception of the NEO-PI-3, all measures described were completed at the final phase of the study.

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