Full length article

Taking it to the next level: The negligible role of trust when online dating goes offline

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ABSTRACT

According to the socioemotional selectivity theory, adults place greater emphasis on finding a life partner. As the traditional dating means and opportunities no longer suffice, online dating has become the perfect intermediary to start an offline relationship. This transition from the online to the offline dating sphere is called modality switching. Interestingly, researchers have not yet addressed the personal variables predicting this behavioral dating transition. From an online viewpoint, when purchasing online goods for offline use, online trust has proven to be crucial. From an offline perspective, general trust is key during initial offline encounters because it guides us in our assessment of another individual. However, the combination of these variables with age has not yet been investigated to explain online dating behavior or modality switching. A total sample of 645 individuals (*n* = 339 online daters) aged between 18 and 73 years completed an online questionnaire. They reported their levels of trust in general and online as well as their modality switching behavior. Results show that age was the overall and only predictor of online dating and continuing the online relationship offline. This research reveals that as individuals grow older, their inclination to switch modalities and date offline increases.

1. Introduction

An obvious goal of online dating is to find a potential partner and eventually meet offline to start a sexual or romantic relationship (Anderson, 2005; Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, & Deveau, 2009), yet it remains unclear why some online daters switch from the online to the offline dating sphere and others do not (Smith & Anderson, 2016). This transition from online to offline dating is labelled modality switching (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet, & Cole, 2015; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). In 2016, 15% of Americans used online dating sites or apps to pursue a romantic relationship, and about 1 in 20 married couples had met through online dating (Smith, 2016; Smith & Anderson, 2016). The number of online daters primarily increased among adults under the age of 25 and those in their mid-50s and early 60s (Smith & Anderson, 2016). While the growth of online dating among young adults is due to their extensive use of online dating applications (Smith & Anderson, 2016), the increase in the number of online daters in older age cohorts might be explained by the socioemotional selectivity theory, which states that as individuals grow older, they realize that life is finite and that they do not want to spend it alone (Carstensen, 1995; Stephure et al., 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Once individuals have the behavioral intention to pursue online dating, the platforms also function as an intermediate step toward having offline encounters.

Interestingly, research results indicate that one-third of online daters have never taken online dating offline, and only one-quarter of online daters have commenced a long-term relationship after meeting online (Smith & Anderson, 2016; Smith & Duggan, 2013). This modality switching has previously been studied from a communication perspective (Ramirez et al., 2015). However, the underlying personality traits predicting the inclination for this transition in the first place have not yet been addressed. The aim of this study was to investigate which underlying individual traits can predict why some online daters choose to continue their online dating offline and others do not, focusing on trust and age, because both factors have proven their relevance in the context of online dating (Cali, Coleman, & Campbell, 2013; Donn & Sherman, 2002; Stephure et al., 2009).

1.1. Modality switching in online dating

Online daters occasionally need to decide whether they want to transfer their interactions in computer-mediated communication environments to face-to-face communication (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Ramirez et al., 2015). This transitioning of interactions from one communication channel to another is labelled modality switching (Gibbs et al., 2006; Ramirez et al., 2015). One example of modality switching is when people who initially met online meet in an offline

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environment or, the other way around, when people who met offline continue their relationship via computer-mediated communication (McEwan & Zanolla, 2013). The current study investigated the online-to-offline transition; therefore, all references to modality switching in the remainder of this paper will mean the transfer from the online dating sphere to the offline dating sphere. The reason for modality switching in online dating can be driven by long-term or short-term relational goals (Gibbs et al., 2006). Online daters, for instance, can choose to go on an offline date, which is an important step in the online dating process, because it offers additional cues that could potentially be used to make assessments of whether a second date is favorable (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). Afterwards, they can decide whether they want to develop this date further into a sexual or romantic relationship (Anderson, 2005; Stephure et al., 2009). As the potential offline outcomes are offline dates and sexual or romantic relationships, this distinction is made when discussing online dating modality switching. When it comes to modality switching and taking online dating offline, other researchers have studied the communication between online partners entering offline environments (Ramirez et al., 2015). They found that when individuals met face-to-face fairly quickly after meeting in an online environment, they tended to benefit from this offline meeting and their relationship grew positively, whereas individuals who met offline after the passage of a considerable period of time noticed negative relational effects (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). However, it may require a certain level of trust to switch from the online to the offline context.

1.2. How general and online trust can be related to online dating

The fact that online daters can choose how much personal information they want to self-disclose and to whom has generated consensus amongst many researchers that online dating raises trust issues (Donn & Sherman, 2002; Norcie, Cristofaro, & Bellotti, 2013; Toma, 2010). Quoting Blau (1964), Beldad, de Jong, and Steehouder (2010) stated that trust is a key ingredient in the initiation and maintenance of social relationships. In online dating, it is the uncertainty or lack of partner knowledge that will bring forward a particular type of trust—namely, general trust, which is applied when the referent is not defined, such as with strangers (Siegrist, Gutscher, & Earle, 2005). "General trust is a belief in the benevolence of human nature in general, [and] plays a role when sufficient knowledge of partners is lacking" (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994, p. 139). It can be seen as the assumption that other people are reliable, and due to individuals' urge to reduce social uncertainty and the problems this brings, general trust is also often seen as a solution to these issues (Siegrist et al., 2005; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Moreover, general trust does not solely influence situations where partner knowledge is absent but can also influence the perception of risk (Siegrist et al., 2005). While online dating platforms are often recognized as environments containing potential risks (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Couch, Liamputtong, & Pitts, 2012), researchers have suggested that risky situations demand trust (Deutsch, 1958; Luo, 2005).

Kang and Hoffman (2011) studied the relationship between general trust and the usage of online dating websites. They found that individuals who generally trusted other people more were less likely to use an online dating site. While the authors proposed that online daters who are high trustees might lack the need to control online information and are therefore less likely to date online, their reasoning was not thoroughly grounded in theory.

Considering the growing recognition of the role of general trust today (Siegrist et al., 2005), the fact that all individuals have different trust levels (Beldad et al., 2010; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994), and, most importantly, the key role of general trust in initial offline interactions (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994), this study was aimed at further investigating its role in modality switching, such as in initial face-to-face encounters after having met online.

RQ1. Is general trust in people associated with modality switching in online dating (i.e., offline dates, offline sexual relationships, and offline romantic relationships)?

A key difference between mediated and traditional matchmaking and relationships is the fact that the former happen in an online environment while the latter occur in offline settings. In online environments, where services (e.g., shopping, e-business, taxes, auctions) are provided, the role of online trust is indisputable and has been extensively studied (e.g., Awad & Ragowsky, 2008; Ba, Whinston, & Zhang, 2003; Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005; Beldad et al., 2010; Bock, Lee, Kuan, & Kim, 2012; Chang, Cheung, & Tang, 2013; Clemons et al., 2016). Instead of dealing with platforms whose service is to arrange goods or offers online, online dating's service is to provide relationship-seekers with potential partners. Even though online trust has proven to be relevant for other online platforms offering services (Belanger, Hiller, & Smith, 2002; Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002), its role in online dating and online dating platforms has not yet been investigated.

In other online environments, such as online shopping, a significant amount of online trust must be present to reduce information complexity and perceived transaction risk, and to facilitate successful transaction-oriented e-commerce (Belanger et al., 2002; Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002). Online trust can be defined as "an attitude of confident expectation in an online situation of risk that one's vulnerabilities will not be exploited" (Corritore, Kracher, & Wiedenbeck, 2003, p. 740). This differs from offline trust because the object of online trust is the Internet (Bart et al., 2005). Moreover, trust has been assumed to be a key factor in individuals' adoption of electronic services (Beldad et al., 2010). Previous research has suggested that online trust can occur in various trustor–trustee relationships (Corritore et al., 2003), such as between the Internet customer and the online shop, or the online buyer and the online auction environment, or the online dater and the online dating platform.

To investigate online trust, the website trust model (Corritore et al., 2003) was developed to study an individual's trust in a specific website. This model states that there are different components of online trust, such as external factors and perceived factors. While the external factors include aspects of the environment that enclose a specific online trust situation, the perceived factors include perception of credibility, ease of use, and risk (Corritore et al., 2003; Corritore, Marble, Wiedenbeck, Kracher, & Chandran, 2005). Perceived credibility is composed of four elements—namely, honesty, expertise, predictability, and reputation (Corritore et al., 2003). Perceived ease of use is related to the simplicity of using a certain website (Corritore et al., 2003) or an Internet-based dating environment. Perception of risk is the perceived likelihood that an outcome will be undesirable (Corritore et al., 2003). The final step in the model is where these three perceived factors influence, or are related to, the online trust attitude. This trust model is applicable to larger, more complex models where trust is one among several research components (Corritore et al., 2003), but to our knowledge, it has not yet been applied in the online dating context.

Thus, Internet customers rely on online trust to engage in online behaviors, such as online shopping and auctioning, and receiving the goods offline, yet the question remains whether online trust is also needed to commence online dating and, more interestingly, whether online trust is needed to switch modalities and take online dating toward the offline dating sphere.

RQ2. Is online trust associated with modality switching in online dating (i.e., offline dates, offline sexual relationships, and offline romantic relationships)?

While online trust has proven to be relevant for various online platforms offering services and goods (Belanger et al., 2002; Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002), other individual differences, such as age, might also play a key role. The adoption of online shopping, for instance, has increased among older individuals (Lian & Yen, 2014), and the same