



Full length article

Who uses dating apps? Exploring the relationships among trust, sensation-seeking, smartphone use, and the intent to use dating apps based on the Integrative Model



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 October 2016

Received in revised form

22 February 2017

Accepted 24 February 2017

Available online 27 February 2017

Keywords:

Casual sex

Dating app

Integrative Model of Behavioral Prediction

Romance

Sensation-seeking

Trust

ABSTRACT

Based on the Integrative Model of Behavioral Prediction, this research examined the relationships between trust toward people online, sensation-seeking, smartphone use for accessing the Internet, and the intent to use dating apps to look for romance and casual sex. Survey data of heterosexual men and women ($N = 257$) was analyzed by structural equation modeling. The results revealed that, regarding using dating apps to seek romance, people's attitude and perceived norm were predictive of such intent. The relationships between the three personal attributes and the intent were mediated. Furthermore, sensation-seeking and smartphone use had a direct relationship with intent. Regarding using dating apps for seeking sex, people's attitude and self-efficacy were predictive of such intent. Only smartphone use was indirectly related to this intent. Both sensation-seeking and smartphone use also had direct relationships with this intent. The study concludes by discussing the theoretical implications of the model and offering practical recommendations to app companies and public health practitioners.

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Dating apps have become increasingly popular in recent years. According to the Pew Research Center, 9% of US adults had ever used a dating app on their phones in 2015 (Smith, 2016). This is a threefold increase in the number of users since 2013, when only 3% of US adults reported ever using a dating app (Smith & Duggan, 2013). While dating apps constitute an attractive business opportunity (Wells, 2015), they are also considered a factor leading to the rapid spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Kelsey, 2015). From both commercial and public health standpoints, understanding the factors that determine dating app use is paramount. On the one hand, this insight allows app companies to tailor promotional efforts to expand and consolidate their user base. On the other hand, effective public health campaigns depend on understanding the psychology of current and potential dating app users. Yet to date, research in this area is limited.

One of the earliest scholarly foci of dating app studies was the risk of transmitting HIV/STIs from meeting sex partners on Grindr (e.g. Burrell et al., 2012; Landovitz et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2012). Communication scholars have also explored the use of gay-specific dating apps (Corriero & Tong, 2016; Gudelunas, 2012; Miller, 2015a;

Van de Wiele & Tong, 2014), pointing out that looking for casual sex is only one of many goals of using this technology. However, none of these studies investigated factors that predict the use of dating apps.

Past research found that personal attributes such as trust toward others, sensation-seeking, and use of the Internet were significant predictors of using online dating websites (Donn & Sherman, 2002; Kang & Hoffman, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). Will these personal attributes predict the intent to use dating apps? To provide a systematic understanding of the role played by these factors, this study employed the Integrative Model of Behavioral Prediction (IMBP, Fishbein, 2000) to assess the relationships among trust toward people online, sensation-seeking, smartphone use for accessing the Internet, and the intention to use dating apps to seek romance and casual sex. The IMBP suggests the relationships between these personal attributes and behavioral intent are mediated through corresponding attitudes, perceived norms, and self-efficacy. This study provides a theoretically-based investigation of how these personal attributes are related to the intention to use dating apps.

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1. Literature review

1.1. Uses and affordances of dating apps

Communication scholars have been interested in how people make use dating apps to fulfill their needs. Based on uses and gratification theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), Miller (2015a) identified seven gratifications that gay men derive from using dating apps. These include safety (i.e. ensuring everyone is gay), control (i.e. determining with whom one will interact), ease of use, accessibility (i.e. accessing a large pool of gay men), mobility (i.e. locating gay men nearby), connectivity (i.e. building a sense of community), and versatility (i.e. using the apps for various purposes). A recent study conducted by Timmermans and De Caluwé (2017) identified a total of 13 motives of using Tinder. Their sample was comprised of both heterosexual and homosexual respondents. The 13 motives include seeking social approval, looking for relationships, seeking sexual experience, improving flirting/social skills, preparing for travelling, getting over previous relationships, gaining belongingness, responding to peer pressure, socializing, meeting people with the same sexual orientation, passing time, distracting oneself from work or study, and fulfilling curiosity.

However, these gratifications or motives do not seem to be unique to dating apps. A way to differentiate dating apps from dating websites is to consider their affordances. Affordances refer to the subjective perceptions of artifacts that are based on their objective qualities (Gibson, 1979). Five affordances—mobility, proximity, immediacy, authenticity, and visual dominance—differentiate dating apps from dating websites. First of all, in a traditional setting, people log onto dating websites from their computers. Because dating apps run on smartphones, users can use dating apps anywhere at any time—similar to making a phone call (Ling, 2004). Second, dating websites usually connect people who are in the same broad region, but dating apps connect people who are in the immediate vicinity. Third, Liccoppe, Rivière, and Morel (2016) also found that Grindr users believe that the app provides them with “fast sexual encounters” (p. 2545). Fourth, some dating apps offer a certain level of authenticity as they require users to register with an existing Facebook account. Finally, dating apps are more visually driven than dating websites as the image takes up the whole screen of the phone. Fitzpatrick, Birnholtz, and Brubaker (2015) regarded face-pics on dating apps as personal disclosure because a face is unique enough to differentiate people.

Leveraging on these affordances, app users seek various relationships on dating apps. Although, in public discourse, some apps (such as Tinder) are considered more often as hookup apps than other apps, this study does not make such distinction. App users can have various relational goals at the same time when they use an app. For example, in their study of Grindr users, Landovitz et al. (2013) found that 67.2% of their respondents reported using the app for dating and 62.1% reported using the app for seeking casual sex, suggesting that some users used Grindr for both relationships simultaneously. The notion of “interpretive flexibility” from science and technology studies suggests that users have some agency in deciding how to use or approach a technological artifact (Kline & Pinch, 1996). In short, the actual use of dating apps results from the interplay between the agency of the users and the affordances of the artifacts. Accordingly, the current study regarded all dating apps as having some potential for their users to look for a romantic relationship or a casual sexual relationship.

1.2. Romantic relationship and casual sexual relationship

This study considered looking for romantic partners and looking

for casual sexual partners as two distinct behaviors. A romantic relationship is defined as “a relationship that is serious, meaningful, and long-term oriented” and a casual sexual relationship is defined as “a purely sexual encounter that is not intended to be a serious, meaningful, and long-term relationship.” These definitions are based on prior scholarship. A casual sexual relationship is largely about and driven by sexual desire; it tends to be a one-time, impersonal encounter (Corriero & Tong, 2016). For a romantic relationship, the framework of Robert Sternberg (1986) is adopted. Sternberg defines a romantic relationship as a combination of intimacy and passion. Romantic partners bond emotionally as well as physically. Because intimacy and passion often develop into commitment, a romantic relationship usually aims at marriage or other kinds of long-term arrangements.

Relationship rules theory suggests that relationships are held together by observing certain rules (Shimanoff, 1980). However, it should be acknowledged that these rules and definitions are evolving. Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, and Ward (2009) and Weaver, MacKeigan, and MacDonald (2011) explored how young adults perceive and negotiate the idea of commitment in a relationship. In contemporary societies, people can enter into multiple yet serious romantic relationships simultaneously. Casual sexual relationships can be a one-night-stand with a complete stranger or repetitive sexual encounters with the same person. So-called “friends with benefits” seem to have both intimacy and passion but are conceptually different from romantic partners.

Following the definition of romantic relationships defined in this study, a love relationship that is “serious, meaningful, and long-term oriented” is considered a romantic relationship, irrespective of its degree of exclusivity. In addition, this study regarded one-off sexual encounters, repetitive sexual encounters, or sexual relationships with “friends” as casual sexual relationships.

1.3. Integrative Model of Behavioral Prediction

The Integrative Model of Behavioral Prediction (IMBP) (Fishbein, 2000) was developed from the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1994). The model theorizes that any behavior is a result of the intent to carry out that behavior. The intent, in turn, is determined by three types of beliefs about the behavior: attitudes, perceived norms, and self-efficacy, where the attitude is one's overall evaluation of a behavior; the perceived norm is the pressure one feels to perform the behavior; and the self-efficacy is one's perceived ability to perform the behavior. The model hypothesizes a more favorable attitude toward a particular action, a stronger perceived norm about a particular action, or a greater self-efficacy of a particular action will lead to a stronger intent to perform that action. The effects of various person-specific background variables, including demographics, attitudes toward the target, personality traits, and other individual differences, on the behavioral intent are mediated through the three belief variables.

Many scholars have applied the IMBP to health issues. For example, Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, and Jordan (2011) employed the model to predict adolescent sexual behaviors, finding that all three belief variables significantly predicted the intention to engage in sexual intercourse. Tsochasa, Lazarasb, and Barkoukis (2013) found that attitudes and norms, not self-efficacy, predicted the intention to use nutritional supplements. Moran, Murphy, Chatterjee, Amezola-Herrera, and Baezconde-Garbanati (2014) and Robbins and Niederdeppe (2015), respectively, used the model to design an interview protocol to study HPV vaccination and messages to promote healthy sleeping behaviors. The model was also used outside the health domain. Wang (2013) found that all three belief variables were significant predictors of using social

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