



## Full length article

## Meeting expectations: The effects of expectations on self-esteem following the construction of a dating profile



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## ABSTRACT

Online daters may be aware that online chat can extend their opportunities for making a desirable impression on potential dates in comparison to meeting a potential partner face-to-face. This anticipation of a subsequent interaction may already impact the impression individuals expect to make through an online profile initially, which in turn can impact self-esteem. We tested these hypotheses in an experiment. Ninety-two heterosexual women constructed a dating profile while anticipating that they would meet a date either face-to-face or through text-based chat. Participants who anticipated computer-mediated (as opposed to face-to-face) interaction expected that their profile would make a more desirable impression on a potential date. Furthermore, the anticipation of computer-mediated interaction increased romantic self-esteem through the increased expectation of making a desirable impression.

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Research showing a link between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and self-esteem has started to accumulate (e.g., Gross, 2009; Shaw & Gant, 2002; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006; Yang & Brown, 2016). For example, survey research shows that most adolescents' social network site profiles evoke positive responses from viewers, which, in turn, are positively related to self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2006). The current body of research (e.g., Gross, 2009; Shaw & Gant, 2002; Valkenburg et al., 2006; Yang & Brown, 2016) tells us much about how self-esteem is affected by online interaction when interaction partners have responded to each other. However, we currently know little about what determines self-esteem when no responses from interaction partners have been received yet, as is the case, for example, when individuals are still waiting for responses to their dating profile. When online daters have not yet received any responses from potential dates and no interaction has taken place yet, *expectations* about these responses and interactions may influence their self-esteem. The current experiment focuses on two types of expectations related to CMC that may impact self-esteem.

The first type of expectation involves the kind of reactions the dater anticipates. Research has shown that feedback in response to online profiles is related to self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2006).

However, before any feedback has been received, the *expected* feedback of potential viewers may already impact self-esteem. Although the idea that individuals' views of themselves are influenced by how they think other people will respond to them in the future is not new (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), it has not yet been applied extensively to asynchronous CMC. We thus do not know whether individuals' expectations about others' reactions to their online profiles impact their self-esteem. The current study therefore explores the relationship between online daters' expectations of how their profile will be perceived by potential dates and their own self-esteem.

A second type of expectations that may influence self-esteem involves the mode (i.e., face-to-face [FtF] or CMC) in which interactions will take place. In online dating, some couples choose to meet FtF (almost) immediately whereas others spend quite some time chatting to each other through CMC or even choose to never meet in person (Blackhart, Fitzpatrick, & Williamson, 2014; Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012; Lawson & Leck, 2006). Previous research indicates that both the anticipated and actual mode of relational communication can impact the impressions interaction partners form of each other (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; McLaughlin, Vitak, & Crouse, 2011; Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet, & Cole, 2015; Sprecher, 2014). However, most studies surveyed participants after they had exchanged messages with potential partners and/or had gone on dates (Gibbs et al.,

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2006; Ramirez et al., 2015). We thus do not know if anticipations of the mode of the subsequent interaction impact the impressions online daters expect to make through their online profile already before this profile is viewed by potential dates. Furthermore, we do not know if, potentially as a result of these effects on the impressions online daters expect to make, expectations about subsequent mode of interaction affect their self-esteem. The current study aims to determine which strategy is more beneficial to the self-esteem of online daters: planning to chat with a potential date online first or intending to meet FtF straight away. Furthermore, we test if these potential differences can be explained by differences in the impressions online daters expect to make on potential dates through their profile.

### 1. The two-component model of impression management

An impression management perspective is a useful approach to predict and explain online daters' expectations about the impressions they will make and their self-esteem. Impression management, or self-presentation (the two terms are generally used interchangeably), is the process through which individuals try to control the impression that others have of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Impression management plays a central role in most interpersonal interactions as the impressions people make on others determine how they will be seen and treated by these others (Baumeister, 1982). In online dating, interactions with potential partners are central and the impressions made on these potential partners are crucial for determining one's success in starting a romantic relationship, the general goal of online dating (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). It is therefore not surprising that academics who study online dating often take an impression management approach (e.g., Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010).

Scholars have extensively studied self-presentation in its offline form and developed models explaining and predicting self-presentation behavior and effects (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). In particular, the two-component model of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) offers nuanced theoretical propositions describing why and when people will engage in impression management and factors that promote, limit, and/or shape individuals' self-presentation strategies. This model has also been successfully applied to impression management in online dating (Toma & Hancock, 2010). The two-component model also describes how and why impression management can impact self-esteem (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). We therefore considered the two-component model to be a useful framework for studying factors that impact individuals' self-esteem during online dating.

The two-component model describes two distinct components of impression management: *impression motivation* and *impression construction* (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). *Impression motivation* is the degree to which people wish to control the impression others have of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). *Impression construction* comes into play once individuals are motivated to control the impression they make on others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). During impression construction individuals decide which self-presentational strategies to employ in order to affect others' impressions of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). When online daters construct a dating profile, they are likely motivated to control the impressions they will make through this profile, as it will affect their chances to attract a desirable romantic partner (Toma & Hancock, 2010). We therefore assumed that singles engage in impression construction when they construct an online dating profile (Toma & Hancock, 2010).

### 2. Impression management and self-esteem

According to the two-component model, impression management is not only important for relationships and social interaction but also crucial for individuals' self-esteem (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Leary and Kowalski (1990) describe two ways in which impression management impacts self-esteem. First, when one is effective at making a positive impression on others, this can evoke praise and compliments and prevent criticism and rejection from others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Receiving positive feedback can raise individuals' self-esteem whereas receiving negative feedback can be detrimental to self-esteem (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Second, self-esteem is affected by how people think they performed in their self-presentation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). When people think that they have made a positive impression on others this raises their self-esteem (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

Presenting the self to one or more others can thus affect self-esteem even in the absence of actual feedback, merely through *imagined reactions* from others. In the context of self-presentation through an online profile not only the reactions of others can be imagined but these others themselves can also be imagined (boyd, 2010; Litt, 2012). In computer-mediated communication sender and receiver are separated in time and space (Walther, 1996). Individuals therefore generally do not know exactly who will see their profile. This is especially true in online dating where a profile is constructed before any contacts or matches have been identified. However, when people construct a profile they do have an audience in mind that they expect or would like to reach (boyd, 2010; Litt, 2012). In the case of online dating this imagined audience most likely consists of the romantic partners that the individual aims to attract. Based on the two-component model (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) it is conceivable that online daters imagine how their audience, potential romantic partners, will respond to their profile. Furthermore, the two-component model (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) predicts that these imagined reactions will influence the self-esteem of the individual constructing the profile. Individuals may thus adapt their self-esteem in the direction of the impression they expect to make on others through their profile: the more positive the impression is that they expect to make, the more positive their self-esteem will be.

Self-esteem is a broad term and general self-esteem is made up of an individual's self-esteem in different subdomains (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Larsen McClarty, 2007). When investigating determinants of self-esteem it is most fruitful to focus on self-esteem specifically in the domain that is most relevant to the context and most likely to be influenced by the factors under study (Swann et al., 2007). In the current context of online dating, the degree to which the individual sees the self as a desirable romantic partner, that is, romantic self-esteem (Harter, 1988), is of particular relevance. Based on the preceding discussion and the two-component model, romantic self-esteem of online daters is expected to depend at least partly on the degree to which they believe that potential dates will see them as a desirable date or romantic partner. In the current study, we test if this prediction holds when there is an imagined online audience who individuals have not yet interacted with. We hypothesize:

**H1.** Romantic self-esteem is higher among online daters who expect that their profile will make a desirable impression on potential dates.

### 3. Impression management in computer-mediated communication

According to the hyperpersonal model of CMC (Walther, 1996, 2007), interaction partners who get to know each other online

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