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How gender role stereotypes affect attraction in an online dating scenario



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ABSTRACT

Today, it is not uncommon to meet someone and begin a romantic relationship online. Meeting on a dating website differs from meeting in person because a dating profile is created first that allows others to review potential romantic partners. Few studies have examined romantic attraction within an online dating context, and even fewer have examined how gender roles may influence attraction. The current study¹ (N = 447, 49.4% female) examined the effects of gender role congruence and physical attractiveness on romantic interest in college students. Participants viewed online dating profiles that varied in their physical attractiveness and adherence to gender role norms. Results indicated that both men and women preferred attractive and gender role incongruent dating partners over average looking and gender role congruent. Contrary to previous research, women differentiated more between profiles based on physical attractiveness than the men, especially for gender role congruent profiles. Men were especially interested in attractive, gender role incongruent profiles. After physical attractiveness, gender role incongruence was the greatest factor that determined interest in a profile. Future research may need to consider how the potential seriousness of a relationship, as defined by the expected length of the relationship, influences how online profile characteristics affect attraction and interest.

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1. Introduction

In an online dating profile, the picture and accompanying narrative are critical to generating romantic interest. When the image and narrative are incongruent with gender role stereotypes, there is potential for negative reactions, even if each element in isolation is a positive trait. For example, Isis Wenger, an attractive, young engineer at OneLogin was asked to participate in a photo ad campaign promoting the company as having smart and creative team members. The public's responses to her ad shocked her—she was deemed too beautiful to be a real engineer (Svrluga, 2015).

The backlash to the initial advertisement was likely due to the perceived incongruity between feminine ideals of beauty and masculine skills and interests. Although there is a great deal of research supporting the adage, “what is beautiful is good,” perhaps this comes with a caveat that “good” may not crossover into talents

stereotyped for the opposite sex. For example, Shaffer and Johnson (1980) found that women and men who have traits that are incongruent with gender stereotypes are viewed as less competent and as less desirable partners. Previous research has rarely looked at the intersection of beauty and social roles, and this study fills this void by examining physical attractiveness and gender roles in the context of an online dating scenario. Although gender role congruence and physical attractiveness might be factors that affect attraction in face-to-face dating, interests and personality that are associated with gender role stereotypes are revealed more slowly face-to-face than in an online setting where the information is potentially available immediately in the dating profile. Thus, the interaction of role congruence/incongruence and physical beauty as examined in this study is especially relevant for understanding factors that affect romantic attraction online.

Establishing a stable romantic relationship is a highly salient goal for college students as they make the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Online dating is more popular now than ever and is becoming a mainstream phenomenon for young adults. Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, and VanderWeele (2013) reported in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences that more than one-third of marriages in

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¹ This research was completed as part of a Master's thesis degree requirement.

America now begin on-line. Gender roles are relatively unexplored in recent research on dating, even though they are thought to impact other important life decisions like career choices (Diekmann, Clark, Johnston, Brown, & Steinberg, 2011; Park, Young, Troisi, & Pinkus, 2011), and nonconformity to gender roles has been hypothesized to result in negative evaluations (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). In addition, there is a clear gap in the literature when it comes to gender roles in online dating.

1.1. Online dating

According to a 2013 Pew Research Center study, 11% of American adults have tried dating online (Smith and Duggan, 2013). An important issue for research on the topic of online dating is how it compares to traditional face-to-face approaches with respect to relationship quality. Considerable evidence exists indicating that relationships that begin online have an equal or better chance of longevity than those that begin in person. Approximately 1 in 3 online daters who were looking for a serious relationship report that they have been successful (Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008). McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) drew several important conclusions from a multi-study investigation of online dating. First, almost three quarters (71%) of romantic relationships that started online were reported as being closer and stronger compared to relationships that began face-to-face and were more likely to still be together two years later. The stability of relationships that began online was comparable to relationships that began face-to-face. Second, intimacy developed at a faster rate than in a face-to-face setting. Third, the quality of the interactions online was more predictive of liking compared to face-to-face interactions in which liking was determined by more superficial factors (e.g., physical attractiveness). McKenna et al. propose that people who met online may like each other more than they would have if they had met in person probably because they got to know each other better through their online interactions. These findings support the validity of examining the impact of gender roles on romantic attraction in an online setting.

1.2. Gender roles

Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) identifies different socially accepted roles for women (e.g., domestic chores, raising children) and men (e.g., supporting the family financially). These complementary gender role expectancies span across time and generations and impact the social behavior of each gender (Eagly, 1987, 1997; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Social role theory proposes that the different social roles of men and women are the foundation for the differences in what men and women seek in a long term partner (Eagly, Eastwick, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2009). Eastwick et al. (2006) state, “within the conventional family system based on a male provider and a female homemaker, women can maximize their outcomes by seeking a mate who is likely to be successful in the wage earning role—in short, a good provider. In turn, men can maximize their outcomes by seeking a mate who is likely to be successful in the domestic role—in short, a good homemaker and child caretaker who will allow men to devote their attention to work outside the home” (p. 604). Consistent with this proposition, in a nine nation research study, those participants who had a traditional gender ideology (attitudes and beliefs based on their culture) strongly preferred more gender stereotyped partners (e.g., female homemakers and male breadwinners; Eastwick et al., 2006). These findings were replicated in a U.S. sample by Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly (2002). They reported that the degree to which an individual adhered to gender roles in their mate preferences was related to their personal endorsement of

traditional gender roles, and this relation was stronger for men than women. A sign that gender roles might be changing, a study of mate preferences from 1939 to 1996 found that men's preference for a good housekeeper and cook decreased over time, while preference for a wife with better financial opportunities increased over the same time period. At the same time, women's preference for an ambitious and industrious man decreased as well (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001). The authors attribute the change in mate preferences to women's increased participation in the workforce, a change in women's social roles. In general, however, adherence to gender roles affects a person's social attractiveness, and both men and women are considered more socially attractive when they adhere to stereotypical gender roles (Shaffer & Johnson, 1980).

These predictions from social role theory are in line with the major principles of romantic attraction, complementarity (Antill, 1983; D'Agostino & Day, 1991) and similarity (Byrne, 1971). The *complementarity hypothesis* (Antill, 1983; D'Agostino & Day, 1991) proposes that people may be attracted because of opposing needs that are met in a relationship or possibly for role-fulfillment (Antill, 1983; Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008), which supports the pairing of caregivers with breadwinners and matching along other gender stereotyped characteristics, such as dominance and submissiveness (Eagly et al., 2000; Orlofsky, 1982). The Henry, Helm, and Cruz (2013) review of a list of eighteen traits that college students look for in a partner from 1939 to 2011 provides further evidence for the complementarity hypothesis for gender roles. Throughout the years, men valued physical attractiveness, health, and domestic skills in women. In a complementary fashion, women over the years placed the highest value on the man's breadwinning abilities (Henry et al., 2013). The importance of complementarity is underscored in a more recent study (Eagly et al., 2009) that asked college-aged men and women to envision a future marriage and family in which they would be either a homemaker or a provider. Findings indicated that preference was given for a spouse with a complementary role, that is, homemakers preferred a provider spouse and vice versa.

Evidence that holding complementary gender roles is a factor in evaluating a potential mate in on online dating websites is limited. Hitsch, Hortaçsu, and Ariely (2010) examined the dating profile characteristics associated with men's and women's decisions to make contact with another person. Men showed little preference for a potential partner's occupation; however, women's preferences were strongly influenced by a potential partner's occupation, preferring men with higher status occupations. Similarly, although both men and women preferred partners with higher incomes over those with lower incomes, this preference is more striking in women than men. This partially supports Social Role Theory's prediction that men are socially expected to be the breadwinners.

The *similarity hypothesis* indicates that people are attracted to others who share many characteristics and interests in common with them (Byrne, 1971), such as, social/cultural background, personality, interests/activities, religious background, political orientation and socioeconomic status (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Lydon, Jamieson, & Zanna, 1988). The degree to which partners in a romantic relationship similarly endorse traditional gender roles (e.g., believe that men should be the primary breadwinner and women should be the primary child care provider) should affect their attraction and the longevity of the relationship. It is also important to note that some online dating websites match their members according to similarities shared between the two individuals (eHarmony.com, Match.com, OkCupid.com), and married couples who met online through eHarmony.com had similar personalities and interests before they met (Gonzaga, Carter, & Buckwalter, 2010).

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