



Research Report

Dispositional factors predicting use of online dating sites and behaviors related to online dating



Ginette C. Blackhart*, Jennifer Fitzpatrick, Jessica Williamson

Department of Psychology, East Tennessee State University, PO Box 70649, Johnson City, TN 37614, United States

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ABSTRACT

Although prior research has examined how individual difference factors are related to relationship initiation and formation over the Internet (e.g., online dating sites, social networking sites), little research has examined how dispositional factors are related to other aspects of online dating. The present research therefore sought to examine the relationship between several dispositional factors, such as Big-Five personality traits, self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, and attachment styles, and the use of online dating sites and online dating behaviors. Rejection sensitivity was the only dispositional variable predictive of use of online dating sites whereby those higher in rejection sensitivity are more likely to use online dating sites than those lower in rejection sensitivity. We also found that those higher in rejection sensitivity, those lower in conscientiousness, and men indicated being more likely to engage in potentially risky behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner face-to-face. Further research is needed to further explore the relationships between these dispositional factors and online dating behaviors.

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1. Introduction

The way in which romantic relationships are formed has changed considerably in the past few decades. One may never have fathomed the idea of using a computer or another machine to acquire a romantic partner 50 years ago. Yet that is how millions of people obtain romantic partners today. In fact, just within the last 15–20 years, online dating has considerably altered the dating environment (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). According to one web site, of the 54 million single people in the U.S., 40 million have tried online dating (StatisticBrain.com, 2012).

Because online dating is a relatively new phenomenon, there is a paucity of empirical research studying online dating. Most prior research has focused on deception in online dating (e.g., Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012; Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Toma & Hancock, 2010, 2012; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Whitty, 2008) as well as how self-presentation, self-disclosure, and personality traits among online daters shape relationship initiation and formation (e.g., Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008). Few published studies have examined whether dispositional factors predict the use of online dating sites. The primary aim of the present research was to therefore examine whether self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, adult attachment style, and the Big-Five personality factors (i.e., extraversion,

agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, neuroticism) are predictive of online dating site use. In addition, we sought to examine whether these same factors would predict potentially risky behaviors associated with meeting a potential dating partner in-person. We investigated how these factors were associated with (1) the length of time people communicated with, or got to know, a person they met through an online dating site before meeting the potential dating partner face-to-face; (2) whether participants said they would prefer to meet the potential dating partner in a public/crowded area or in a private/secluded place; and (3) whether participants would tell anyone else where they were going or what they were doing if they made plans to meet an online dating partner in-person.

1.1. Using online dating sites

Few studies have examined dispositional factors related to engaging in online dating. The only published research on this topic that could be located found that those lower in dating anxiety were significantly more likely to use online dating sites than those higher in dating anxiety (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) and that people who engage in more sexually risky behaviors are more likely to participate in online dating (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007).

Because so little research has examined traits that predict online dating site use, we turn our attention to research examining dispositional predictors of the use of socially-related computer-mediated communication, such as social networking sites, chat rooms, discussion groups, and instant messaging. Because social

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 423 439 4613.

E-mail address: blackhar@etsu.edu (G.C. Blackhart).

networking sites, other social Internet services, and online dating sites are forms of computer-mediated communication, the same factors that draw individuals to one form of computer-mediated communication may draw individuals to another form of computer-mediated communication. Furthermore, once people are comfortable using one computer-mediated communication tool, such as a social networking site (e.g., Facebook), they may feel more comfortable using online dating sites.

Research examining social networking site usage has found that several self-reported personality traits are good predictors of social networking site use. For example, studies have shown that extraversion, openness to experience, and neuroticism positively predict social networking site use (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). Correa et al. found extraversion to be the strongest predictor of social networking site use. As a result, it could be predicted that those higher in extraversion will be more likely to use online dating sites.

People lower on extraversion (i.e., introverts), however, often report that communicating with others through social networking sites is more appealing than communicating with others through more traditional communication methods (Orr et al., 2009). Introverts also report spending more time using social networking sites than extraverts (Orr et al.). Furthermore, one study (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000) reported a significant negative correlation between extraversion and using social Internet services, such as chat rooms or discussion groups, for women (but not for men). That is, more introverted women were more likely to report using chat rooms and to engage in discussion groups online than more extraverted women. Other studies (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007) found that introverts are drawn to chat rooms and other forms of computer-mediated communication because they feel they can express their “real” selves more adequately online. A competing hypothesis could therefore be made that introverts (i.e., those lower on extraversion) may be more drawn to online dating sites and therefore more likely to use them.

In addition to the research showing that neuroticism positively predicts use of social networking sites (Correa et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008), other research (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000) indicates that people higher in neuroticism are also more likely to use other social services on the Internet, such as chat rooms and discussion groups. As with introverts, people higher in neuroticism report being drawn to these online environments because they can more adequately express their “true” selves online (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002; Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007). Furthermore, Correa et al. (2010) suggested that, because neuroticism is associated with greater feelings of loneliness, people higher in neuroticism may engage in computer-mediated communication as a way to reduce loneliness. In fact, one study (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003) found that lonely women use and are drawn to social computer-mediated communication more than are non-lonely women. As a result, people higher in neuroticism may also be more likely to use online dating sites to meet potential dating partners.

In addition to the Big-Five personality traits, Mehdizadeh (2010) showed that people lower in self-esteem and higher in narcissism have higher frequencies of social networking site activity. Similar to people lower in extraversion and higher in neuroticism, Forest and Wood (2012) suggested that people with lower self-esteem might be more likely to use social networking sites because they may view online environments as safer places to express themselves. Results from these two studies suggest that, in addition to social networking sites, people with lower self-esteem may also be more likely to use online dating sites as lower self-esteem individuals might view online dating sites as a safer place to look for and to try to attract a potential romantic partner.

A dispositional trait related to lower self-esteem (e.g., Watson & Nesdale, 2012; Xiao-ling & Ming-zheng, 2011) and to higher neuroticism (Brookings, Zembor, & Hochstetler, 2003) is rejection sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity is a disposition to “anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection” (Downey & Feldman, 1996, p. 1327). Although research has not explicitly examined the relationship between online dating and rejection sensitivity (or between other forms of computer-mediated communication and rejection sensitivity), people higher in rejection sensitivity may be more likely to engage in online dating because it may be easier to avoid rejection and because rejection cues may be less salient in online environments. Online dating also allows users to engage in more selective self-presentation than do traditional dating environments (e.g., Walther, 1996). Users of online dating sites are able to choose which aspects of themselves they present to others, both in creating their profiles and in communicating with others. Users can therefore present only those aspects of themselves that they want others to see, thus possibly reducing rejection by other users.

Prior research has also not examined the relationship between adult attachment styles and online dating. Individuals with insecure attachment may, however, also be drawn to online dating. For instance, people higher in attachment anxiety, such as those with preoccupied or fearful attachment, may feel more comfortable engaging in self-disclosure in online dating environments than they would in traditional dating environments, which may produce the illusion of greater intimacy with another person. As mentioned above, they are also afforded a greater opportunity to manage their image and communications with others in an online dating environment compared to a traditional dating environment. This may be an important factor as those higher in attachment anxiety may be especially concerned with how others perceive them (e.g., Chen et al., 2012). The physical distance offered by online dating environments may be more comfortable than traditional dating settings, however, for those higher in attachment avoidance (i.e., dismissive and fearful attachment).

1.2. Meeting an online dating partner in-person

Online dating poses several potential risks. For instance, many people are deceptive when posting information to their online dating profiles, lying about their age, physical appearance, job, income, and even relationship status (e.g., Guadagno et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2010; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma et al., 2008). Those who engage in online dating simply do not know who is on the other side of a computer. Meeting a person face-to-face may therefore be considered somewhat risky and several decisions must be made about when and where to meet an online dating partner. We therefore sought to examine factors that may influence these decisions. We were specifically interested in factors that predict potentially risky behaviors when meeting an online dating partner in-person, such as the speed with which someone chooses to meet an online dating partner face-to-face; meeting someone in a private/secluded setting as opposed to meeting someone in a busy public setting; and/or not telling anyone that one is meeting someone or meeting a person alone.

Although no research has examined factors related to decisions regarding meeting an online dating partner in-person, we believe that people who are especially concerned with the impression they make on either their potential dating partner or on important others may determine who is most likely to engage in potentially risky behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner face-to-face. Because rejection sensitive individuals are especially motivated to avoid rejection, they tend to be concerned with how they present themselves to others (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Romero-Canyas, Reddy, Rodriguez, & Downey, 2013; Romero-Canyas

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