

# Online Dating

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Online dating refers to the practise of using dating Web sites for the purpose of finding short- or long-term romantic partners. Dating Web sites operate by requesting users to compose self-descriptive profiles and then connecting them with databases of potential partners. Online dating services vary according to how they connect users with partners. *Self-selection* Web sites (e.g., Match.com) allow users to identify potential partners on their own, using keyword searches for desired partner characteristics. *System-selection* Web sites (e.g., eHarmony.com) use mathematical algorithms to identify suitable potential partners. *Hybrid* Web sites (e.g., OkCupid.com) provide “suggested matches” by utilizing compatibility algorithms, but also allow users to select their own partners.

Online dating is the latest development in a long history of media use for dating and matrimony. Its precursors are the newspaper personal advertisement, used as early as the 1700s, and video dating, which emerged in the 1980s and involved video cassette recordings. Whereas newspaper ads and video dating accounted for a negligible percentage of romantic unions, online dating has gained remarkable prominence, both in terms of attracting users and generating successful relationships. One nationally representative sample of US adults shows that 22 percent of the heterosexual couples who met between 2007 and 2009 did so online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2010), making the Internet the second most likely way to meet a partner, after meeting through friends. Another study shows that among Americans who married between 2005 and 2012, more than one third had met online (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, & VanderWeele, 2013). Importantly, marriages originating online were found to have a lower rate of divorce and higher rate of marital satisfaction than those originating offline, although effect sizes were small (Cacioppo et al., 2013).

Correspondingly, the scholarly literature has been concerned with both the mechanics and outcomes of online dating. A foundational issue addressed by the literature is who uses online dating, in terms of demographic and psychological characteristics. Because the online acquaintance process takes place through the intermediary of personal profiles, another line of research has focused on profile self-presentation, with a particular emphasis on the use of deception. The reverse process of impression formation and mate selection based on online dating profiles has also been examined. Finally, an incipient line of research has assessed the success of online dating, although the factors that explain it are yet to be identified.

## Who uses online dating?

Upon its emergence in the 1990s, online dating was regarded as a crutch for the desperate, appealing to those who were unable to attract mates through conventional face-to-face methods. Although online dating has shed its stigma in the last decade, the question of whether a certain kind of person is more likely to turn to online dating has persisted. The *access hypothesis* postulates that online dating attracts those who have difficulty meeting potential partners face to face because they have limited time (e.g., those with demanding careers or single parents), belong to social networks that include few singles (e.g., those who are older or divorced), or lack established social networks (e.g., those who have recently relocated). Although research has found support for these predictions (Cacioppo et al., 2013), effect sizes are small. The biggest predictors of using online dating are being single and being an Internet user (Sautter, Tippett, & Morgan, 2010), suggesting that online dating has become a mainstream tool for meeting potential partners.

When considering psychological variables that may affect proclivity for online dating, research found no differences between users and non-users in terms of Big Five personality traits and self-esteem. However, those high in sociability and low in dating anxiety were more active in the online dating arena. This supports a *rich-get-richer hypothesis*, according to which individuals who are already skilled interpersonally are more apt to take advantage of this new avenue for meeting romantic partners (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). More research is necessary to investigate whether these individuals also experience better outcomes from online dating.

## Self-presentation and deception in online dating

Online dating profiles typically consist of short-answer questions (e.g., age, height, weight, relational status), long-answer questions (e.g., “about me” section), and photographs. When constructing their profile self-presentation, online daters have been shown to experience a tension between authenticity, or presenting a veridical self, and impression management, or presenting a highly positive self (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Authenticity is a desirable self-presentational strategy because deception, if detected, has negative repercussions on relational development, and because daters may seek partners who like them for who they truly are. Impression management is appealing because it can help daters stand out and gain attention from potential mates. Research shows that online daters resolve this tension by presenting elements of their ideal self—an enhanced yet attainable version of self (Ellison et al., 2006). An explicit study of the prevalence of deception in online dating profiles shows that deception occurs frequently, but it is small in magnitude. Eighty percent of daters lied either about height, weight, or age, but deviations from the truth were small and potentially imperceptible in face-to-face encounters. Daters’ relational status was found to be the most honestly presented element of the profile, whereas their photographs were the most embellished (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008).

The theoretical framework of *selective self-presentation* (Walther, 1996) has been advanced to explicate these patterns of self-presentation in online dating profiles. According to this theory, online communicators have at their disposal an arsenal of technological affordances that enable them to exercise more control over their statements than do face-to-face communicators. Specifically, asynchronicity allows them to take all the time they need for profile construction, editability allows them to revise and refine claims until they are optimal, and the reallocation of cognitive resources allows them to dedicate all their attention and thought to profile construction. Armed with these capabilities, online daters can construct strategic self-presentations that draw upon their actual and ideal selves and utilize the optimal amount of deception, as described earlier.

## **Mate selection in online dating**

A small body of research has begun to investigate how online daters form impressions of others based on profiles, and how they choose whom to date. Findings show that, when analyzing others' profiles, online daters pay attention to both explicit claims, particularly photographs, and unintentional behavioral residue, such as grammatical ability (Ellison et al., 2009). Another study found that participants think of online dating as a virtual market, where numerous potential mates are available, and desired ones can be found simply by entering partner specifications into search boxes. For this reason, the process of mate selection has been conceptualized as *relationshopping* (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010). Online daters' shopping mentality has been speculated to negatively affect commitment and satisfaction with dates, although future research is necessary to test this claim.

Mate selection through online dating has also been explained through an *evolutionary theory* lens, with hardwired preferences (e.g., physical attractiveness, social status) manifesting themselves in this novel arena in similar ways as in face-to-face dating. For instance, men were shown to be more likely to initiate contact and to have a disproportional interest in women's physical attractiveness, whereas women had an interest in men with high social status (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010).

## **Success of online dating**

One recent study found small but statistically significant differences in marital outcomes between couples who had met offline and online: Online couples were less likely to get divorced within a 7-year period, and among those who had stayed together, online couples reported greater marital satisfaction (Cacioppo et al., 2013). The effects emerged even when controlling for variables known to affect marriage outcomes, such as length of relationship, age, ethnicity, education, household income, and employment status. However, it is yet unknown what aspects of the online dating process cause superior outcomes for online couples.

Theories of intimate relationships purport that romantic success is contingent on (a) individual characteristics of the partners (i.e., personalities, personal histories, attitudes, beliefs, values); (b) the unique communication patterns developed between

partners; and (c) external circumstances, such as chronic and acute stress, experienced during the course of the relationship. Since online dating does not track partners over time, nor does it capture their dyadic communication patterns, it can only operate at the level of individual characteristics of the partners (see Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012).

System-selection Web sites make explicit claims that they deliver better partners by using proprietary algorithms to determine compatibility of personalities, values, beliefs, and preferences. This compatibility appears to be operationalized as *homophily*, or similarity between individuals, although it is possible that it also contains elements of complementarity. These claims have not yet been empirically tested. The face-to-face literature does not support the notion that homophily of personality traits leads to successful unions. Additionally, the entire class of individual-level variables has been shown to have only a small effect on romantic outcomes. It is then possible that the success of online dating cannot be accounted for by matching algorithms after all, and is the result of other, yet to be investigated, features. For instance, one possibility, applicable to both self- and system-selection Web sites, is that the increased availability of potential partners enables individuals to make better choices for romantic partners, eventually leading to more successful unions.

Since matching algorithms are proprietary to dating companies and have not yet been subjected to scientific inquiry in the academic community, it is also possible that these algorithms are indeed successful, as they tap into yet-to-be theorized processes of romantic compatibility. Future research is necessary to investigate this possibility.

SEE ALSO: Deceptive Message Production; Evolutionary Psychology; Facework; Identity Management; Models of Relationship Development; Physical/Social Attraction; Relationship Initiation Goals and Plans; Self-Disclosure

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## Further reading

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