



The impact of emotionality and self-disclosure on online dating versus traditional dating

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Abstract

Online dating is unique in the pursuit of romance. The bond created between potential partners takes a different path than normal dating relationships. Online dating usually begins with a flurry of e-mail messages, each more intimate than the last. Traditional dating relationships that might take months to develop in the real world, take weeks or even days online. Much has been written about cyber-dating, but little research has been done. This series of four studies examines the online dating process, similarities and differences between online and traditional dating, and the impact of emotionality and self-disclosure on first (e-mail) impressions of a potential partner. Results indicate that the amount of emotionality and self-disclosure affected a person's perception of a potential partner. An e-mail with strong emotional words (e.g., excited, wonderful) led to more positive impressions than an e-mail with fewer strong emotional words (e.g., happy, fine) and resulted in nearly three out of four subjects selecting the e-mailer with strong emotional words for the fictitious dater of the opposite sex. Results for self-disclosure e-mails were complex, but indicate that levels of self-disclosure led to different impressions. Low levels of self-disclosure were generally preferred in choosing for the fictitious dater, although these preferences differed by gender, education, and ethnic background. Results were discussed in terms of theories of computer-mediated communication.

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1. Introduction

Online dating is a major Internet business. It is estimated that there are 836 dating sites as of January 2005, which is a 37% increase in the past year (Hitwise.com, 2005). Jupiter-Research says online dating revenue hit \$473 million in 2004, up from \$396 million in 2003. In 4 years, revenue has gone from \$50 million to \$500 million. In 2003 online dating, revenues accounted for about one-half percent of all online transactions. In January 2005, they accounted for nearly 1% (Hitwise.com, 2005).

Recent estimates have indicated that 40 million Americans visit online dating services monthly and that 25% of singles have tried one (Online Dating Magazine, 2004d). Online dating has become so mainstream that in summer 2005 ABC aired a well-received, five-part documentary on online dating called *Hooking Up*.

A survey by AvantGo (2004) found that 14% of singles were dating, married to, or engaged to someone they met online. Gavin, Duffield, and Scott (2005) also reported that online dating appeared to be successful in that 94% of their subjects reported that their relationship continued after the first date for an average of nearly 8 months. Published success stories are rampant. Match.com (Online Dating Magazine, 2004a), for example, reports that based on surveys of members who have cancelled their subscriptions, over 200,000 of their users have found a partner. An eHarmony Harris Interactive research study (eHarmony, 2006) recently reported that 33,000 members got married in a 12-month period ending August 31, 2005 which works out to 90 marriages per day.

A recent study of 3215 adults by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Madden & Lenhart, 2006) estimated that out of 10 million Internet users who are single and looking for a partner, 74% have used the Internet to help find one. Overall, the Pew study estimated that 11% of Internet-using adults had gone to an online dating site and that one-third of American adults know someone who has used online dating. Further, this study found that 15% of American adults know someone who has either been in a long-term relationship or married someone he or she met online. A study by Burmaster (2005) of 3400 adults in the United Kingdom found that one in three Internet users would opt to go online to meet a potential dating partner and that the Internet is the third most popular means of getting a date following meeting someone through friends and meeting someone at a club or pub. The Nielsen//NetRatings study also found that the majority of online daters are looking for friendship (46%) or a long-term relationship (45%). Finally, a GMI (2006) poll of 17,502 online consumers found that internationally, 23% had gone online to develop a long-term relationship and 10% had used online dating to find a marriage partner. Further, 48% of those in the large sample knew someone who had used online dating and 39% knew someone who had formed a significant relationship through online dating. Clearly, these major studies indicate that online dating has reached mainstream Internet usage.

The Pew study also found that the majority of online adults do not feel that people who use online dating services are desperate. Others, however, have found a stigma attached to online dating (Wildermuth, 2004). Overall, research has shown that online daters are more confident than offline daters (Online Dating Magazine, 2004b), and that online daters are getting married faster with 72% marrying within the first year compared to 36% of offline daters.

Online dating sites are all similarly structured. Participants provide a photograph and answer an array of questions including geographic location, age, weight or body type,

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