



Effects of race, visual anonymity, and social category salience on online dating outcomes



Saleem Alhabash^{a,b,*}, Kayla Hales^b, Jong-hwan Baek^b, Hyun Jung Oh^a

^a Department of Advertising + Public Relations, Michigan State University, 404 Wilson Road, East Lansing, MI 48824-1212, USA

^b Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media, Michigan State University, 404 Wilson Road, East Lansing, MI 48824-1212, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the two facets of the social identity model of deindividuation (SIDE) within the context of online dating and racial stereotyping; visual anonymity and salience of social categorization cues. Experiment 1 ($N = 23$) employed a 2 (stereotypic attributes) \times 2 (gender) \times 12 (repetition) within-subject design where participants rated individuals as more attractive when their profiles were white-stereotypic compared to black-stereotypic. Experiment 2 ($N = 178$) employed a 2 (gender) \times 2 (race) \times 2 (stereotype congruence) \times 3 (repetition) mixed-factorial design to investigate effects of stereotype congruence on evaluations of attractiveness, attitudes, and dating behavioral intentions (DBI). Heterosexual white participants ($N = 126$) had more favorable evaluations (attractiveness, attitudes, and DBI) of white profile owners with stereotype-congruent profiles than others. Findings are discussed in relation to models of computer-mediated communication and racial bias.

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0. Introduction

Interracial dating, marriage, and online dating in the United States are on the rise (Madden & Lenhart, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Despite the growth in interracial marriage (6.7–15% between 1980 and 2012) and acceptance of this phenomenon (33–63% between 1980 and 2012), the majority of marriages and relationships remain between individuals of the same race (Taylor et al., 2012). The number of people who visited or used an online dating website doubled from 20 million in 2007 to 40 million in 2012, and revenue increased from \$900 million to \$1.9 billion between 2007 and 2012 (Marino, 2012). With this exponential growth in online dating, where more than one in 10 American adults and nearly four in 10 single Americans seeking a partner reported using online dating sites and mobile applications (Smith & Duggan, 2013), there is a need to explore the role race plays in evaluating potential romantic partners on online dating websites and the viewers' intentions to initiate these relationships. More importantly, there is a need to study the process of social categorization within the context of interracial dating where technological

affordances permit selective self-presentation; resulting in incomplete information about potential non-platonic partners.

Studying interracial relationship initiation in online dating websites is an area of theoretical relevance. In computer-mediated communication (CMC), users compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues, otherwise present in face-to-face communication, by augmenting available cues (e.g., profile picture, profile information, biography) to form impressions about people with whom they are communicating (Walther, 1996, 2011). The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE; Lea & Spears, 1991, 1992; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Spears & Lea, 1994) emphasizes the importance of visual anonymity and salience of social categorization cues in guiding both impression formation and communication outcomes.

The current study investigates SIDE's premises within the context of online dating and racial stereotyping. In two experiments, the salience of race-based social categorization is crossed with visual anonymity; when online-dating profile owners are visually anonymous (Experiment 1), and when they are visually identifiable (Experiment 2). The second experiment further tests the effect of social categorization congruency in relation to profile owners' race.

1. Literature review

1.1. Online dating: defined

Online dating refers to “using dating sites to find a romantic partner” (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012, p. 7). It

* Corresponding author at: Department of Advertising + Public Relations, Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media, Michigan State University, 404 Wilson Road, Communication Arts & Sciences Building, Room 313, East Lansing, MI 48824-1212, USA. Tel.: +1 (517) 432 2178; fax: +1 (517) 432 2589.

E-mail address: sa@msu.edu (S. Alhabash).

is the process by which relationship seekers (a) create profiles with information they want to share, (b) post these profiles online to make themselves accessible, (c) browse profiles of other users, and (d) initiate an interaction with other users to elicit a response (Finkel et al., 2012).

With the increased mobility individuals face, traditional dating has become more difficult (Finkel et al., 2012). Online-dating websites assist by affording users the opportunity to maximize on the “time, effort, and emotional energy” associated with traditional dating (Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn, & Hearst, 2008, p. 1). Users of online-dating websites navigate through larger dating pools, while making their dating lives simpler and less stressful. Users can also exaggerate their positive characteristics and attributes to be evaluated more favorably by their potential partners (Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010). Most online dating websites (e.g., Match.com, eHarmony.com) provide the opportunity to interact and communicate with a potential partner based on compatibility-based matching (Finkel et al., 2012). As such, online dating websites are becoming ‘marketplaces’ where users evaluate themselves and others, look for a perfect match through filtering systems, and employ various rules to select the best partner from a large ‘inventory’ (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010).

Online dating is analogous to other forms of CMC, in that individuals are using computers to communicate with one another, but with the distinctive goal of seeking a non-platonic partner. Dating websites present a unique environment to investigate how race and stereotyping might inhibit or promote the initiation of interracial relationships online. The next section applies the SIDE model to explain how information shared through CMC channels is processed and how that affects impressions and evaluations of communication partners.

1.2. SIDE model and interracial communication

The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE; Lea & Spears, 1992; Postmes & Baym, 2005; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995) is built on the assumptions of social identity theory and posits that categorization of ingroup and outgroup members affects personal and group identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). There are two factors that affect how individuals respond in a CMC context. The first factor, Walther (2011) argues, deals with the effect of visual anonymity. SIDE theorists argue that in cases where communication partners are communicating without seeing one another, they will lose “awareness with regard to one’s own (and others’) individuality” (Walther, 2011, p. 450). The second factor is related to the salience of social-category cues. When certain social-category cues are revealed to users while visual anonymity persists, the users augment those cues. As such, users categorize themselves and their communication partners as ingroup and outgroup members. This categorization affects impressions made about one another as well as “perceptions of similarity and attraction” related to communication partners (Walther, 2011, p. 450).

In the context of online dating, Lea and Spears (1995) argue that CMC is helpful when seeking romantic partners as the process entails more than evaluations of physical attractiveness. In other words, there is a greater potential for evaluating *who* the person is rather than only how he or she looks. While not related to online dating, Wang, Walther, and Hancock (2009) show that participants rated confederates instructed to act likeably as more attractive than those instructed to act dislikably, with no differences between ingroup and outgroup members. Both participants and confederates were visually anonymous, which suggests that in cases of visual anonymity the dynamics of CMC interaction and likability of communication partners supersede ingroup or outgroup categorization.

Cognitively, humans are in a constant state of environmental appraisal. Part of this appraisal deals with evaluating individuals we see and with whom we interact. Automatic and controlled processes of social categorization are constantly at play with the inclination of using as little cognitive effort as possible (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998; Devine, 1989; Devine & Elliot, 1995; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001; Plant & Devine, 1998). This understanding coupled with arguments of CMC models and theories (e.g., the hyperpersonal model of CMC and social information processing theory), which address the way humans exaggerate what cues are available to form impressions of communication partners (Walther, 2011), elevates the importance of social categorization. This is of considerable significance when communicating with outgroup members who differ ethnically and racially from us; one’s racial and ethnic background are hard to mask, even online.

Past research has shown that there are ethno-racial differences in identity presentation via CMC (Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009; Knadler, 2001; Kretchmer & Carveth, 2001; McKee, 2002). In the United States, compared to white individuals, black individuals distinctively express their identities online using religious, spiritual, and racial justice themes, and even more so than they do in face-to-face communication (Grasmuck et al., 2009; Knadler, 2001). This suggests that, even with visual anonymity, cues reflecting one’s ethnic and racial backgrounds are present online.

1.3. Racial stereotypes: between automaticity and control

Stereotypes are generally defined as cognitive and affective structures through which we make sense of other individuals (Brewer, 2007). Evaluations of social group members are understood through the framework of automatic and unconscious activation of stereotypes, as well as the mechanisms of cognitive control by which individuals withholds stereotypic thinking and expression (Brewer, 2007; Hilton & von Hippel, 1996; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001).

Stereotypes, then, are activated in automatically with minimal effort and awareness. Whether individuals express stereotypes depends on control mechanisms that are influenced by internal and external motivations (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998; Devine, 1989; Devine & Elliot, 1995; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001; Plant & Devine, 1998). For example, a person who has egalitarian values inhibits the expression of stereotypes due to internal motivations, whereas inhibiting stereotype expression because of desires to sound politically correct illustrates external motivations to withhold prejudice. Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, and Williams (1995) reported that white and black participants showed implicit ingroup favoritism and outgroup bias, but no differences were found with regards to explicit stereotype.

This paper reports results from two experiments related to interracial-dating online. In Experiment 1, we expose participants to profiles that reflect either white or black stereotypes in writing; no pictures or names were provided. Thus, we manipulate the salience or race-based social categorization with visual anonymity. In Experiment 2, participants are exposed to white- or black-stereotypic profiles that are paired with black or white pictures and names. As such, Experiment 2 manipulates salience of social categorization cues with visual identification, and varies the congruence of social categorization and visual identification.

2. Experiment 1: Social categorization and visual anonymity

Experiment 1 investigates the effects of stereotypic attributes presented in online-dating profiles that lack visual and name identifiers on the evaluations of profile owners. Past research argues

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