Social compensation or rich-get-richer? The role of social competence in college students' use of the Internet to find a partner

Meredith E.M. Poley, Shanhong Luo *

Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, NC 28403, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Online dating continues to grow rapidly in popularity every day, yet the role of social competence in online dating behavior remains unclear. This study was designed to expand previous research and conduct a comprehensive investigation on how social competence is associated with college students' online dating behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes. Two hypotheses were tested: The *social compensation hypothesis* (SCH)—socially incompetent individuals would engage in more online dating, and the *rich-get-richer hypothesis* (RGRH)—socially competent individuals would use online dating more than their incompetent counterparts. The results showed that incompetent individuals, despite their ability to see benefits in online dating, did not show a favorable attitude towards online dating. They indicated a more frequent use of and a stronger preference for face-to-face dating compared to online dating, which contradicted the SCH. There were weak associations between competence traits and online dating behavior. Socially competent individuals perceived less benefit and showed less interest in online dating, which disconfirmed the RGRH.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the prevalence of online dating has increase exponentially. In 2006, the total number of dating sites across the world increased by 17% within the last year and the United States had the highest increase at 42.9% (Internet Security Systems, 2006). One of the most popular online dating sites, Match.com, asserts that 20,000 singles join their site every day and they receive 27,671,000 monthly visits (Match.com, 2010; TrafficEstimate.com, 2010). Another highly successful site, eHarmony.com, claims that they currently have over 20 million registered users (eHarmony.com, 2011). It is clear that online dating has become a mainstream mode of searching for and meeting future romantic partners. Unsurprisingly, online dating starts to show a significant impact on our lives. For instance, Katz and Aspden (1997) estimated that at least 2 million new face-to-face meetings had taken place due to initial interactions on the Internet. According to their own estimate, eHarmony is currently responsible for 5% of marriages in US (eHarmony.com, 2011).

Given the rapid growth in online dating and its significant role in relationship development, it is important to know who would consider using online dating services. Answering this question has important theoretical implications because currently there seems to be an apparent controversy regarding who would more likely use online dating service. This controversy is evident in

two competing hypotheses stated in Valkenburg and Peter (2007a): the *social compensation hypothesis* (SCH) and the *rich-get-richer hypothesis* (RGRH). Having a better understanding of the potential online dating users is also practically useful because it would allow the sites to do a better job accommodating their users' needs and helping them find a partner that they would not be able to find otherwise. This article first reviews the propositions and empirical evidence associated with each hypothesis. Then it presents a new study designed to address two major limitations in previous research.

1.1. The social compensation hypothesis

The SCH argues that people high in dating or social anxiety and low in social competence, who typically experience difficulties forming relationships in face-to-face interactions, will use online dating to compensate for deficits they encounter in the offline world. McKenna and colleagues suggested that in face-to-face interactions, the so-called "gating" features such as physical appearance, physiological reactions, and speech characteristics play a critical role in first impressions and create feelings of anxiety for less socially confident people; however, because these features are not usually immediately apparent in online interactions, anxious individuals should have a better opportunity to reveal their "true" self online and develop relationships in a more relaxing manner (see McKenna, 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

To test the these arguments, McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) examined a random sample of 568 Internet newsgroup

members and found that those high in social anxiety and loneliness were more likely to disclose their true self to others on the Internet. The authors also found that when individuals were able to reveal their true self, they were more likely to form close relationships online; moreover, the intimacy of their online relationships developed more quickly compared to their offline relationships. Other studies yielded similar findings on other social (in)competence-related traits. For example, in a college student sample, Sheeks and Birchmeier (2007) reported that shyness was positively associated with true self-expression; however, shyness was not associated with the frequency and type of computer-mediated-communication with others. Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, and Fox (2002) showed that neuroticism and introversion were correlated with opening up online in a small Israeli sample. Zywica and Danowski (2008) found that low self-esteem Facebook users were more likely to reveal themselves to people online than to offline friends.

While there is replicable evidence indicating that people high on anxiety and lacking social skills are more likely to disclose their true self in online interactions, we see less consistent support for the hypothesis that anxious individuals would more likely form relationships online. For instance, Amichai-Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2003) found that only women's neuroticism and loneliness were positively correlated with their use of the Internet for social purposes in an Israeli sample. However, in Desjarlais and Willoughby's (2010) Canadian adolescent sample, social anxiety interacted with computer use to impact boys' friendship quality but did not impact the girls'; specifically, greater computer use appeared to be able to help boys high in social anxiety to maintain better-quality friendships. Ward and Tracey (2004) compared individuals who had developed relationships online to those who never did in a college sample. Their results indicated that those involved in online relationships were more shy than those not involved. However, shyness was negatively associated with initiating relationships online and did not predict the number of online friends or the satisfaction of online relationships. Finally, several studies have indicated that social anxiety, dating anxiety, introversion, and shyness show little association with online relationship interactions which are usually defined by the frequency and length of using the Internet for interpersonal connections (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005; Scealy, Phillips, & Stevenson, 2002; Stevens & Morris, 2007).

1.2. The "rich-get-richer" hypothesis

In contrast to the SCH, the RGRH suggests that people low in social anxiety and high in social competence will be more likely to use online dating. Since these people already have strong social and dating skills, they should be equally good at using the Internet as an alternative means of finding a partner and more successful than their less competent couterparts (Kraut et al., 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a). To date only one study provided direct support for the RGRH: Valkenburg and Peter (2007a) examined dating anxiety and online dating behaviors in a sample of Dutch Internet users. Their results showed that people who were low in dating anxiety used the Internet to date more often than those in high dating anxiety. Other studies showed less direct support for the RGRH. For instance, Kraut et al. (2002) found that Internet use was associated with better well-being outcomes for extroverts and worse outcomes for introverts. Peter and colleagues (2005) reported that in their adolescent sample, introversion was negatively associated with greater online self-disclosure; however, it did not predict the frequency of online chatting or online friendship formation. Zywica and Danowski (2008) found that self-esteem and extraversion were positively associated with self-rated online (Facebook) and offline popularity. Finally, Lee (2009) showed that

adolescents who had strong social relationships in their earlier age were more likely to use online communication, which in turn predicted more cohesive friendships.

1.3. Current study

Overall, the findings of previous research have been mixed with regard to the validity of the two hypotheses. We argue that the two seemingly contradictory hypotheses are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They can both be true depending on how we construe and test the role of social competence in online dating. The SCH focuses on the group of socially inept individuals who are high on anxiety or related variables. According to the SCH, they should be motivated to do more online dating to compensate for their deficits in face-to-face dating. The best way to test the SCH is to compare these individuals' online dating behavior to their own face-to-face dating behavior, which requires repeated t-tests. The SCH is supported if they engage in and prefer more online dating compared to face-to-face dating. The RGRH suggests that socially competent individuals should display better skills and more success in both online and face-to-face dating relative to their less competent counterparts. This hypothesis can be easily tested through correlations. The RGRH is supported if social competence variables are positively associated with actual and preferred use of online dating as well as the use of face-to-face dating.

Another reason for the inconsistent findings is the measurement of the two key variables: social competence and online relationship behaviors. Previous studies examined a number of related constructs of social incompetence such as social anxiety, dating anxiety, shyness, loneliness, introversion, and neuroticism. However, no study has clarified the role of these traits in online dating behaviors. With regard to online relationship behaviors, previous studies have covered a variety of online relationships ranging from acquaintances and friendships to intimate relationships. Only two studies specifically examined online dating behavior and they yielded mixed results: whereas Valkenburg and Peter (2007a) found that dating anxiety negatively predicted online dating website visits, Stevens and Morris (2007) did not find any strong link between anxiety and online dating practice. Moreover, no study has investigated individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and preferences of online and face-to-face dating. To address these limitations, the current study included several measures related to anxiety including neuroticism, dating anxiety, and attachment anxiety, as well as a number of social competence indicators such as extraversion, agreeableness, social skills, and self-esteem. For dating behaviors, we measured participants' actual and preferred frequency and length of online and face-to-face dating. We also assessed their perceptions and attitudes of online and face-to-face dating.

1.4. Hypotheses

To summarize, the goal of the current study was to conduct a comprehensive investigation to test evidence for the SCH and the RGRH in the online dating domain. Specifically, we developed the following hypotheses:

If the SCH was true, participants high in dating anxiety, attachment anxiety, and neuroticism would show a stronger preference and more frequent actual use of online dating compared to face-to-face dating (H1a). Participants low in social competence, extraversion, agreeableness, and self-esteem would also show a stronger preference and more frequent use of online dating relative to face-to-face dating (H1b).

If the RGRH was true, participants' social competence, extraversion, agreeableness, and self-esteem would have positive correlations with preferred and actual use of both face-to-face and