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Who is dating and gaming online? Categorizing, profiling, and predicting online daters and gamers



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ABSTRACT

This analysis of U.S.-based survey data from the Pew Research Center profiles and categorizes online daters and gamers to determine the factors predicting whether an individual has experience of online dating or gaming. The profiles of online daters and gamers show sociodemographic differences by user type (both daters and gamers, daters only, gamers only, and neither daters nor gamers). Attitudinal differences are also identified across those user types and sociodemographic categories. The binary logistic regression analysis found that positive and negative attitudes about online dating and gaming exert a significant influence on whether an individual has experience with either.

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1. Introduction

The main reasons people use the Internet are information, communication, entertainment, work, school, relationships, market, sexuality, and self-expression. Online dating and online gaming have helped individuals fulfill their personal desires and needs in terms of communication, entertainment, relationships, sexuality, and self-expression, making online dating and gaming growing areas of personal Internet use. Only two percent of American singles visited some form of online dating service before 2000, but one-quarter of U.S. singles used such services in 2002 (Sautter, Tippett, & Morgan, 2010, p. 556). According to the Pew Research Center (2016), p. 15 percent of the whole U.S. adult population had used an online dating site as of 2015. Remarkably, usage among people in their late teens and early twenties jumped threefold, and that among people in their late fifties and early sixties doubled between 2013 and 2015. In the 1990s, when few people dated online, many believed that online dating would attract shy and anxious people who typically feel nervous and distressed in real-life social interactions (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). In two decades, online dating, with its prevalent usage across the population, has evolved from a marginal to a mainstream, socially acceptable

practice (Rindfuss, Choe, Bumpass, & Tsuya, 2004; Sautter et al., 2010, p. 559; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007, p. 850). On the other hand, online gaming has gained support from fans and enthusiasts since its beginnings, but attitudes toward online games remain complex, mixed, and often uncertain among the general public. Nearly half of U.S. adults have ever played a video game, but only one in 10 adults consider themselves gamers (Duggan, 2015).

Given those findings, one may wonder whether online dating and online gaming, two major areas of personal Internet use, share a significant categorical overlap. Regarding the inquiry, this study addresses the following two questions: Who uses online dating services and online gaming services? In light of that inquiry, Internet users can be categorized into four segments: both online daters and gamers, online daters only, online gamers only, and neither online daters nor gamers. The study determines the sociodemographic conditions in which online daters and gamers have similarities and disparities. The second research question is, what factors determine whether individuals use online dating and/or online gaming? Many previous studies, shedding light on the motivations and consequences of online dating and gaming, have examined the determining effects of positive influences, but they have overlooked the potential leverage of negative perceptions. This study takes a balanced approach to both positive and negative attitudes about online dating and gaming. The two research questions are addressed by categorizing and profiling online daters and

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online gamers and then predicting who will be both, either, or neither. The U.S.-based random-sampled survey data (*Gaming, Jobs, and Broadband*) collected in 2015 by the Pew Research Center is employed for the analysis.

The remainder of this paper is structured into five sections. Section 2 discusses the theoretical and empirical background of online dating and online gaming. Section 3 describes the data, measures, and methods. Section 4 reports the results of the analysis. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the results and the limitations of this study. Section 6 presents the concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical and empirical background

2.1. Online dating

Sautter et al. (2010) defined online dating as “the use of websites that provide a database of potential partners—typically in close geographical proximity—that one can browse and contact” (p. 555). In accordance with this definition, online dating offers distinct advantages: easy and continuous accessibility to the database, opportunities to meet potential partners, and a nonthreatening way to initiate contact (Wiederhold, 2015). Online dating enables “more control over self-presentation along with the possibility to more easily terminate an encounter” (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007, p. 850). These advantages create positive attitudes toward online dating. In regard to its potential, seminal studies have established two opposing hypotheses (Kraut et al., 1998, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007, p. 850). Whereas the social compensation hypothesis posits that online dating allows individuals with high dating anxiety to compensate for deficits they encounter offline, the rich-get-richer hypothesis postulates that online dating primarily benefits individuals low in dating anxiety who already have strong dating skills and who use the Internet as a strategy to find a partner. These two competing arguments echo the larger mobilization (the Internet mobilizes new participation, thereby creating a new pattern of participation) vs. reinforcement (the Internet reinforces existing participation, thereby repeating and resembling an offline pattern) contrast (Park & Perry, 2008). Online dating seems to be an activity particularly enjoyed by individuals with low dating anxiety.

Positive attitudes toward online dating arise from perceptions of its advantages. Based on those perceived advantages, the primary reasons for joining an online dating site include starting a long-term relationship, making new friends, and curiosity (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010b). On the contrary, negative attitudes involve concerns about safety and deception and stereotypes about online dating site users (Sautter et al., 2010). According to Madden and Lenhart (2006), more than half of the respondents to their survey believed that online dating users lie about whether they are married, and two-thirds reported that online dating is dangerous because it makes personal information public. In addition, almost one-third agreed that online dating users are desperate. Those negative attitudes are based on earlier but still existing prejudice toward online dating: that it is the atypical, unconventional domain of the “nerdy, desperate, and shy, or sex-crazed” (Anderson, 2005, p. 523) and the bored, lonely, socially anxious, weird, nuts, and insane (Wildermuth, 2004). Stigma against online dating is a deterrent for some people, and online daters might be reluctant to let others know they are dating online (Sautter et al., 2010, p. 558). This effect implies that many individuals have negative attitudes about online dating.

Much research has examined the influence of sociodemographic variables on whether individuals use online dating. Age is considered pivotal to the online dating experience, showing a curvilinear relationship. The study of Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found that

individuals around 40 years of age use online dating sites most actively. Age is not a control variable but rather a critical determinant of online dating, which now occurs across the lifespan (Menkin, Robles, Wiley, & Gonzaga, 2015). Age can exert two different influences on online dating. According to the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992, 1995; Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), a time perspective affects goal setting and selection. As individuals get older, their sense that their lives are finite grows, and they become increasingly focused on their present goals and less focused on future-oriented goals. The application of socioemotional selectivity theory to online dating suggests that older adults might be more motivated to invest in online dating activity, more involved in the pursuit of romantic (especially marital and sexual) partners, and more serious in their pursuits than their younger counterparts (Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, & Deveau, 2009, p. 660). A wholly opposite storyline also draws attention from researchers. Older adults might attach more stigma to online dating because their earlier dating experiences might lead them to see online dating as the atypical and unconventional domain of individuals lacking social skills (Anderson, 2005; Wildermuth, 2004). In addition, younger adults are more likely to benefit from the advantages of new technologies in general (Stephure et al., 2009, p. 660). Overall, competing findings might cancel out the positive and negative influences of age on online dating.

An accumulation of empirical studies has also included gender, income, marital status, and ethnicity as typical demographic antecedents, revealing that online dating site users are typically single, with more education and a higher income than the overall population (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010a, 2010b; Menkin et al., 2015; Sautter et al., 2010). There is a fundamental salient difference in motivation between men and women in general. Female users of online dating place heavier emphasis on interpersonal communication over sexual attraction compared to males (Menkin et al., 2015). Sautter et al. (2010) paid great attention to the ever-increasing single population as a demographic change, which plays a central role in the online dating population. Political inclination (conservative or liberal) could also influence whether one dates online (Hitsch et al., 2010b). Previous studies (Alford, Hatemi, Hibbing, Martin, & Eaves, 2011; Huber & Malhotra, 2016) found political homophily in online dating, showing that social relationships, including online dating, are more politically similar than would be expected by chance.

2.2. Online gaming

Academics have accrued empirical research on motivators, predictors, and influences in online gaming. Studies related to online gaming motivation have identified various motivators and user categories. Some scholars based their observations on the theory of reasoned action, which suggests that behavioral intention is a function of an individual's subjective norms and attitudes (the degree to which the individual likes or dislikes an object) toward a behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977; Franzi, 2003; Madden, Ellen, & Ajzen, 1992; Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988). Subjective norms are an individual's judgment about whether others important to them (e.g., friends, coworkers, and schoolmates) will approve a particular behavior. While compliance with subjective norms occurs in accordance with the expectations of others to strengthen existing relationships and avoid hostility, non-compliance attaches stigma to any individual who misbehaves (i.e., violates the subjective norms). In a similar way, cognitive psychology categorizes motivation as intrinsic (curiosity, exploration, belonging, autonomy, competence, and goals coming from within oneself) or extrinsic

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