Dating deception: Gender, online dating, and exaggerated self-presentation

Rosanna E. Guadagno [a,*], Bradley M. Okdie [b], Sara A. Kruse [a]

[a] Department of Psychology, The University of Alabama, United States
[b] Department of Psychology, Ohio State University at Newark, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examined how differences in expectations about meeting impacted the degree of deceptive self-presentation individuals displayed within the context of dating. Participants filled out personality measures in one of four anticipated meeting conditions: face-to-face, email, no meeting, and a control condition with no pretense of dating. Results indicated that, compared to baseline measures, male participants increased the amount they self-presented when anticipating a future interaction with a prospective date. Specifically, male participants emphasized their positive characteristics more if the potential date was less salient (e.g., email meeting) compared to a more salient condition (e.g., face-to-face meeting) or the control conditions. Implications for self-presentation theory, online social interaction, and online dating research will be discussed.

1. Introduction

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" – William Shakespeare.

"On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog" – Peter Steiner.

In the words of Erving Goffman (1959, p. 9), life is akin to a performance: "When an individual plays a part, he [sic] implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them." Self-presentation describes this process or "performance" wherein individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them (Goffman, 1959; Jones, 1990; Rosenfeld, Edwards, & Thomas, 2005; Schlenker, 1980). As part of the self-presentation process, individuals seek to create specific impressions – to be liked, perceived as competent and perceived to be high in status – among their varying audiences. The context of the situation may influence the salience of certain self-presentational goals. For example, a person at a job interview may be more interested in appearing competent than likable, whereas a person on a date may have the opposite goal. With regard to communication mode, other contextual factors such as the availability of physical appearance and nonverbal cues may influence the ways in individuals self-present (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). For instance, in a text-based context such as an email, an email signature rather than one's clothing, briefcase, or car, may be the best way to con-

vey status. Additionally, the combination of physical distance and relative anonymity inherent in communication via the Internet may facilitate a trend toward more deceptive self-presentation. The present study investigates these issues by examining the use of deceptive self-presentation in dating profiles as a function of the mode of communication in which a person will interact with a potential date.

1.1. Deceptive self-presentation

Self-presentation is usually aimed toward achieving strategic goals (Leary, 1995). People tend to present and sometimes exaggerate or fabricate their characteristics in an attempt to create their desired impression. The present investigation focused on the type of self-presentation that is deceptive in nature. Research indicates that the likelihood of deceptive self-presentation increases as a function of the pressure to engage in self-presentation (Baumeister, 1992; Feldman, Forrest, & Happ, 2002). For instance, interacting with a member of the opposite sex, particularly if they are attractive, increases motivation to self-present. A threat to one's self-image also increases motivation to engage in self-presentation. Moreover, both factors have been shown to increase deceptive self-presentation (Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1999; Tyler & Feldman, 2005).

Similar patterns of deceptive self-presentation have been shown in dating contexts. When presenting themselves to desirable potential dates, men are more likely than women to engage in deceptive self-presentation (Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998). Additionally, the literature indicates that men and women use deceptive self-presentation to enhance different traits. Took and Camire (1991) surveyed male and female college students

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Alabama, P.O. Box 870348, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0348, United States. Tel.: +1 205 348 7803; fax: +1 205 348 8648.

E-mail address: Rosanna@ua.edu (R.E. Guadagno).

and asked them to indicate their willingness to engage in deceptive self-presentation to attract a mate. Men reported being more willing to use deception to appear more dominant, more resourceful, and more kind than they actually were. Conversely, women reported being willing to use deception to present their physical appearance as more favorable than it actually was. Similar findings have been reported in classic research on self-presentation. Specifically, Zanna and Pack (1975) demonstrated that women changed their self-reported sex role attitudes to match the gender role values (either traditional or non-traditional) of a perceiver when they believed the perceiver was a desirable male. Overall, the literature on deceptive self-presentation suggests that both the context of the interaction and gender of the interactants matter.

1.2. Deception online

There are marked differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication (see Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000 for reviews); the majority of these differences fall into four categories: relative anonymity, reduced importance of physical appearance, attenuation of physical distance, and greater control over the time and pace of interactions. Most germane to the present investigation is the relative anonymity inherent in many forms of computer-mediated interactions. The ability to be relatively anonymous in a social interaction online reduces accountability and leads to the depersonalization and deindividuation of the interactants (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002). Therefore, anonymity increases the potential for antisocial behavior such as deception.

Also relevant to the present study is the decreased importance of physical appearance inherent in online interactions (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This visual anonymity may also increase the likelihood of deception. Similarly, the decreased emphasis on nonverbal cues relative to face-to-face interactions may also foster greater use of deception as the lack of nonverbal cues produce a feeling of anonymity in interactants (Sproull & Kriesler, 1986). Anonymous online social interaction has been described as limited, depleted, less rich, and impoverished (Hiltz, Turoff, & Johnson, 1989; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kriesler, 1986) due to its absence of nonverbal cues. Finally, the greater control over time and pace of interactions is also relevant as this feature of online communication contributes to the selective self-presentation that often occurs online (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Taken together, the features of online communication reviewed above may all contribute to a greater propensity for individuals to engage in deception in online contexts.

1.3. Deceptive self-presentation in online dating

While there are many ways to find potential dates online, the use of dating websites – websites specifically oriented toward helping people looking for romance – is increasing rapidly and has become a widely used means of finding potential romantic partners (Ellen, 2009, February 12). To participate in most online dating web sites, an individual registers by filling out a profile indicating desired mate preferences, providing demographic information, and sometimes completing personality measures. A photograph provided by the individual may or may not be provided with the profile. Initial contact between online daters usually takes the form of messages exchanged through the dating website, and, if communications continue, telephone or face-to-face contact may follow.

Research examining the behavior of individuals using online dating web sites indicates that some online daters present an unrealistic or deceptive image of themselves (Brym & Lenton, 2001; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2009; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). For instance, Hitsch and

colleagues reported that online daters exaggerated information about themselves and that men and women enhanced different characteristics – men emphasized their status; women emphasized their physical attractiveness (Hitsch et al., 2009; Schmitt, 2002). In another study, men lied about height while women lied about weight (Toma et al., 2008). Furthermore, participants in this study reported being accurate in the photographs they posted and when reporting relationship details. Thus, the literature emerging from online dating research indicates that online daters do engage in deceptive self-presentation but may balance their deception against the constraints set in place by the promise of a future interaction.

1.4. Gender differences in mate selection

Men and women are similar in that they both want mates that are kind, reliable, outgoing and smart (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). However, there are also notable differences in the mate preferences of men and women. Owing to the differences in men and women's parental investment, human mate selection is one of female choice (Darwin, 1871). This is illustrated by the gender difference in the proportion of men vs. women who get approached through their online dating profiles. Specifically, men approach women through online dating sites more than women approach men. For instance, once study of online daters reported that 57% of men vs. 23% of women never got a single email from a prospective date (Hitsch et al., 2009). Moreover, contact from prospective dates varied as a function of the content of participants' profiles in a manner predicted by the evolutionary psychological framework on mate selection (Buss, 1989; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990). In the profiles of actual online daters, Hitsch et al. (2009) reported that for men, income – an indicator of status – was most predictive of getting approached by potential daters through the website, with higher earners getting more emails. For women, physical appearance – an indicator of fertility – garnered the most emails from potential suitors. Both short men and overweight women were the least likely to get emails through the dating site. These data are consistent with the deceptive self-presentational practices of men and women reviewed above (Toma et al., 2008). Men and women who are searching for a mate are aware of what potential mates consider attractive and the evidence indicates that they will alter their profiles to reflect these characteristics.

The research on mate selection also indicates that there may be gender differences in the preferred personality characteristics of a mate. One way in which personality preferences in mate selection have been examined is in terms of the five-factor model, also called the "Big 5" (McCrae & Costa, 1986). This model of personality consists of the following dimensions: neuroticism (emotional stability), extraversion, openness to new experience, conscientious, and agreeableness (kind and helpful). In an experimental setting, Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, and West (1996) demonstrated that female participants preferred to date men who were helpful, particularly when they were both helpful and dominant. Similarly, research on personality and mate preferences indicates that newly married women perceive their husbands as being high in agreeableness. (Botwin et al., 1997). As such, the limited evidence suggests that women may differentiate on personality more so than will men when selecting a mate.

2. The present study

The literature reviewed above provides ample evidence that heterosexual men and women are aware of what members of the opposite sex desire in a mate and may alter their self-presentational