



# The influence of biological and personality traits on gratifications obtained through online dating websites



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## ABSTRACT

Online dating sites (ODSs) have become popular with users trying to find partners. The purpose of this study was to determine the role that biological and personality traits play in the use of online dating websites. A cross sectional survey with 678 participants—including cohorts from college as well as the general population—provided data for this study. The Five Factor Model personality model (FFM), sexual orientation, and biological sex were utilized as antecedents to the uses of and gratifications from online dating sites. Results uncover sex and sexual orientation differences in both personality traits and gratifications sought from online dating sites. Specifically, women and homosexuals were found to be more neurotic, women were more agreeable, and homosexuals were more open to experiences. Homosexual users sought a wider range of gratifications (relationship, sex partner, distraction, and convenient companion) from online dating sites than their heterosexual counterparts. Women were less likely to use ODSs to find sexual partners, but more likely to use ODSs to be social. Those who were neurotic use dating sites to build an identity, as a convenient companion, and as a distraction. People who are open to experiences were found to use dating sites to be social. Disagreeable people use dating sites because of peer pressure and as a status symbol, and conscientious people were found to use dating sites to find a relationship.

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## 1. Introduction

Online dating refers to a form of interpersonal relationship that is initiated in a computer-mediated communication (CMC) context and may transition to a more intimate communication channel, i.e., telephone and face-to-face interaction (Sprecher, 2009). The use of online dating sites (ODSs) has become a popular trend over the last decade (e.g., Gibbs, 2012; Hein, 2004; Smith & Duggan, 2013); this can be seen from the commercial success of dating websites such as eHarmony.com and Match.com, which contributed to over \$2 billion in consumer spending in 2014 (IBISWorld.com, 2014). Online Dating Magazine's (2010) poll of online readers found that eHarmony.com (43%) and Match.com (34%) were the most popular dating websites.

Previous research addressing online dating sought to examine personality traits (Anolli, Villani, & Riva, 2005; Kang & Hoffman, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007), audience uses and gratifications (Lawson & Leck, 2006; Tirado, 2007; Wang & Chang, 2010), or sex differences (Tirado, 2007). Demographic and personality variables

have often been studied as antecedents to media choice and behavior, particularly in the social networking literature (Banczyk, Krämer, & Senokozlieva, 2008; Ross et al., 2009; Tan & Yang, 2013). Few studies have addressed sex differences, sexual orientation, personality types, and uses and gratifications. The purpose of this study is to explore multiple biological and personality factors that motivate the uses and the gratifications sought by online dating website users.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Uses and gratifications of online dating sites

Uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) has been cited extensively in studies of new and expanding technologies, including motives for using the Internet (e.g., Charney & Greenberg, 2002; Papachrissi & Rubin, 2000) and social networking websites (e.g., Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010; Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Qualitative studies in various cultural contexts reveal that ODS use is driven by such motives as companionship, seeking sexual partners, romance, freedom from commitment, and ease of meeting new people (Couch & Liamputtong,

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2008; Lawson & Leck, 2006; Wang & Chang, 2010). Research focused on interpersonal dynamics finds that use of uncertainty reduction strategies is predicted by online dating concerns—including personal security, misrepresentation, and recognition—as well as self-efficacy (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011). Henry-Waring and Barraket's (2008) critical meta-analysis of primarily qualitative research concluded that people's motivation to start online dating was social, not individual in nature. Given the wide-ranging findings surrounding ODS uses, this study proposes an integrative model of motivations governing their use.

Through in-depth interviews and participant observations, Lawson and Leck (2006) found that people used online dating sites for companionship, comfort after a life crisis, control over presentation and environment, freedom from commitment and stereotypic roles, as an adventure, and romantic fantasy. Couch and Liamputtong's (2008) qualitative study found that people used online dating sites to seek a soul mate, seek sexual partners, for fun, relaxation, to ease boredom, or because it seemed like an easy way to meet people. Wang and Chang (2010)'s Cyber Relationship Motives scale identified three overall motivation factors: adventure, escape into a virtual world, and finding romance.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2. Personality traits

Personality has been extensively studied by communication scholars, especially its relationship to interpersonal interaction (e.g., Beatty, McCroskey, & Heisel, 1998) and media choice (Krishnan & Atkin, 2014; Langstedt & Atkin, 2014). In the search for a parsimonious conception of psychological traits, Eysenck (1967) developed the three-factor PEN (Psychoticism–Extraversion–Neuroticism) model. This was ultimately replaced by the NEO-PI-R or the Big-Five model, a broad personality structure encompassing five dimensions – extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

### 2.2.1. Extraversion

Extraverted individuals tend to be social, talkative, assertive, gregarious, carefree, dominant and venturesome, while those who score low in extraversion tend to be submissive, avoidant of close relationships, and over-controlling of their impulses (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; McCrae & Costa, 1997). Extraverts also tend to seek out sexual stimulation more than introverts because, in general, they are less nervous about sexual conquests and tend to focus on the rewards rather than the possibility of punishment (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). For extraverts, the immediacy and social nature of an interaction helps determine the medium of choice. This could explain why they tend to be frequent users of text messaging and SNSs for social interaction (Ehrenberg, Juckes, White, & Walsh, 2008; Krishnan & Atkin, 2014; Ross et al., 2009). Similarly, Kim, Kwon, and Lee (2009) found that sociable people and those with high self-esteem were more likely to use Internet-based dating services when relationship formation was pertinent to them. This is a stark departure from earlier perceptions of ODS users as being introverted and anti-social. Based on the fact that ODSs are convenient and offer relational choices, we posit that extraversion will be negatively related to using ODSs for a sense of identity (H1a), and positively related to using ODSs to be social (H1b), and to find sexual partners (H1c).

<sup>1</sup> Each factor had at least two sub-factors. The adventure factor included the following sub-factors: anonymity, opportunity to meet new people, easy to communicate, curiosity, and emotional support. The sub-factors for the escape into a virtual world factor were social compensation and away from the real world. Lastly, the sub-factors for finding romance included the pursuit of "love" and "sexual partners."

### 2.2.2. Neuroticism

Individuals who score high in neuroticism are described as being anxious, depressed, tense, irrational, moody, emotional, and having low self-esteem (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). In terms of media use, highly neurotic people were found to be addicted to texting and instant messaging (Ehrenberg et al., 2008). Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, and Fox (2002) contend that neurotic individuals feel freer to express themselves on the Internet than through face-to-face interactions; this was substantiated by findings indicating that neurotics preferred writing on Facebook walls because of the ability to both write carefully-consider responses and to erase posts (Ross et al., 2009).

CMC research has repeatedly shown a link between neuroticism and using the Internet to find companionship (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2010; Langstedt, 2013). This is because the online environment affords neurotics the ability to avoid intimacy, face-to-face confrontation, argumentation, and rejection (Amiel & Sargent, 2004). Even though the use of ODSs is goal-oriented toward relationship initiation, they still offer a less face-threatening medium for rejection. In order to avoid intimacy and interpersonal interaction, neurotics generally find alternative ways of gratifying their sexual needs, including pornography, masturbation and prostitution (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985); however ODSs can reduce their anxiety about finding a sexual partner. Based on the above theoretical dynamics, we can thus posit that neuroticism will be positively related to using ODSs to find a sense of identity (H2a), for convenient companionship (H2b), to pass time (H2c) and to find sexual partners (H2d).

### 2.2.3. Openness to experience

Individuals who rate high on openness are described as rebellious, creative, nonconforming, possessing an unusual thought process and valuing intellectual matters (Butt & Phillips, 2008; McCrae & Costa, 1997). Along with extraversion, openness has often been the source of scrutiny in personality and CMC research. Since openness has been associated with experimenting with new forms of communication (Butt & Phillips, 2008), people who rate high on this trait tend to be innovators in adopting new media tools such as website ownership and online social networking (Correa et al., 2010; Marcus, Machilek, & Schütz, 2006; Ross et al., 2009; Tan & Yang, 2013). Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky (2010) discovered that those who scored high on openness tend to reveal more personal information on Facebook, perhaps as a way to encourage relationship formation, whether it is of an emotional, physical or sexual form. Thus, we posit that openness to experience will be positively related to using ODSs to be social (H3a), to find relationships (H3b), and to meet someone for sex (H3c).

### 2.2.4. Agreeableness

McCrae and Costa (1997) describe those who are agreeable as being sympathetic, considerate, warm, compassionate, and giving. Although it might seem intuitive that agreeable people would be better liked, Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky (2010) found no link between agreeableness and number of friends on SNSs. However, Ehrenberg et al. (2008) suggest that people who are more agreeable tend to prefer FtF communication compared to mediated communication. Conversely, research further suggests that people rated low in agreeableness prefer mediated communication, and are therefore more likely to have a stronger online presence. So, although agreeable people engage less in mediated interactions than disagreeable people, they derive more pleasure from it (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010). Thus, we posit that agreeableness will be negatively related to using ODSs for convenient companionship (H4a) and to be social (H4b), but positively related to using ODSs because of peer pressure and to seek status (H4c).

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