Exploring Online Dating in Line with the “Social Compensation” and “Rich-Get-Richer” Hypotheses

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ABSTRACT

Computer-mediated communication offers a range of potentially appealing features, including selective self-presentation, social presence control, and simultaneous as well as asynchronous interaction tools. The study examines the influence of personality (introversion and extraversion) and personal variables (social anxiety and public self-consciousness) on online dating preferences from two competing perspectives: the “social compensation” (SC) hypothesis and the “rich-get-richer” (RGR) hypothesis. Survey results (N = 162) revealed that the SC and RGR hypotheses do not hold true within the context of online dating. The findings suggest a stronger role of social influence (e.g., peers) in the decision to online date. The SC and RGR hypotheses may be limited in terms of the extent to which these frameworks adequately explain this online behavior. This may also be due to the increasing popularity of online dating sites, which may make personality and personal traits less informative of whether individuals will opt to use such services.

KEYWORDS
Individual Differences, Online Dating, Rich-Get-Richer Hypothesis, Social Compensation, Social Media Use

INTRODUCTION

Given the rapid growth in the use of online dating services, it is important to understand why individuals consider online dating. Prior research assessing this appears to have focused primarily on the stigma attached to online dating, which in turn may deter individuals (Cali, Coleman, & Campbell, 2013). Concerns include fear of misrepresentation and encountering socially maladjusted individuals (Cali et al., 2013). Face-to-face interaction has previously been deemed the most ‘culturally appropriate’ method for meeting partners, and many non-users hold the belief that it is impossible to get to know someone without physical encounter (Miller, 2011; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Alternatively, in 2013, around 11% of American adults surveyed reported that they had accessed online dating websites and apps; and 59% of the respondents surveyed agreed that online dating is a good way to meet people (Smith & Duggan, 2013). This development may be due to a change in terms of the acceptability of online dating and the popularity of such sites across all age and professional groups. Match.com alone received an estimated 18.4 million visits in January 2015 (Traffic Estimate, 2015). In addition, a survey of 19,131 married respondents further revealed that just over a third had met their spouse online (Cacioppo et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, while the popularity of these sites is increasing, knowledge about personality and personal variables as predictors of online dating is limited. Most information originates from dating websites that have an inherent interest in justifying the use of their matching and selection tools. This
evidence is limited due to the self-selection bias: Such websites only capture the results from those who have taken the step to register on an online dating site. They do not capture the preferences of individuals who are not registered. In addition, many sites cater to specific mature audiences which may exclude students who may have less overall dating experience; research suggests that older and usually non-student populations are more likely to use online dating (see Sautter, Tippett, & Morgan, 2010; Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, & Deveau, 2009) in comparison to student populations. This is important as different variables such as age, sexual orientation, sex, location and employment status have all been shown to influence dating preference (see also Gudelunus, 2012; Sautter et al., 2010; Smith & Duggan, 2013). This means the generalizability of these reports may be limited and we have no means to assess how useful personal variables and personality traits may be as predictors of online dating. Our study is attempting to meet this knowledge gap.

In addition, we aim to establish and test the importance of existing hypothetical frameworks and assumptions in online settings. These hypotheses have been tested predominantly in traditional rather than computer-mediated settings. We refer specifically to the “social compensation” hypothesis (SC hypothesis; Joinson, 2003; Kraut et al., 2002) and “rich-get-richer” hypothesis (RGR hypothesis, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; see also Kraut et al., 2002). In both cases, there is little consistent evidence that supports the SC hypothesis (Aretz et al., 2010; Green, & Gleason, 2002; Lawson & Leck, 2006; McKenna, Scharlott & Christ, 1995; Stevens & Morris, 2007) or RGR hypothesis in online dating (Poley & Luo, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). We hope that the present research will provide some answers to the applicability of these two hypothetical frameworks in online dating given the lack of support so far. The next section provides an overview of contextual issues that arise in online dating.

This is followed by a discussion of personal and personality variables and the competing hypotheses.

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON ONLINE DATING: COMPENSATORY BEHAVIOR OR EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE

The use of dating websites could be examined from two directions. First, the characteristics of online dating sites may appeal to those who find it difficult to find partners using traditional dating methods due to their personal circumstances (such as location, family commitments or working hours). The SC hypothesis (Joinson, 2003; Kraut et al., 2002) posits that some individuals are more likely to use online dating as a means to compensate for deficits experienced in traditional dating (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). This suggests that online dating may represent a compensatory strategy (Valkenburg & Peter., 2007). This may be particularly relevant for socially anxious and shy individuals who feel less competent in social situations (Aretz, Demuth, Schmidt, & Vierlein, 2010; Joinson, 2003).

Online dating typically removes the gating features expressed in face-to-face dating, such as physical appearance (McKenna et al., 2002). The absence of these features may encourage more socially anxious individuals to take the initiative in online settings. There is some evidence that supports this (see also Aretz et al., 2010; Lawson & Leck, 2006; McKenna et al., 2002; Scharlott & Christ, 1995). However, social anxiety may also manifest itself within computer-mediated communication (Weidman & Levinson, 2015). Further evidence suggests that introverts experience more benefits than extraverts as a result of instant messaging interactions, due to an increase in perceived ease of expression (Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013). In addition, Marriott and Buchanan (2014) found individuals low in extraversion prefer to express their true selves online, rather than within face-to-face interactions. Relatedly, public self-consciousness has also been found to be predictive of social compensatory friending behavior on Facebook (Lee, Moore, Park, & Park, 2012), similar to social anxiety (Weidman et al., 2012).

The picture is not clear-cut, however. The link between social competence or anxiety and social compensatory behaviors is not always obtained. Stevens and Morris (2007), for example, found social anxiety had little bearing on the likelihood of employing the internet to form and maintain relationships. Moreover, other research found social anxiety and lack of social skills to be associated
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Cyber-Bullying, Personality and Coping among Pre-Adolescents
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