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Who Visits Online Dating Sites? Exploring Some Characteristics of Online Daters

PATTI M. VALKENBURG, Ph.D. and JOCHEN PETER, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Although online dating has become an important strategy in finding a romantic partner, academic research into the antecedents of online dating is still scarce. The aim of this study was to investigate (a) the demographic predictors of online dating and (b) the validity of two opposite hypotheses that explain users' tendency to use the Internet for online dating: the social compensation and the rich-get-richer hypotheses. We presented 367 single Dutch Internet users between 18 and 60 years old with an online questionnaire. We found that online dating was unrelated to income and educational level. Respondents between 30 and 50 years old were the most active online daters. In support of the rich-get-richer hypothesis, people low in dating anxiety were more active online daters than people high in dating anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

THE OPPORTUNITIES to form and maintain relationships on the Internet have multiplied in the past few years. In the past 2 years, the number of dating sites has increased by 17% across the world.¹ About 37% of single American Internet users who are looking for a romantic partner have gone to a dating Web site. The Web has become the fourth most popular strategy in finding a date or a romantic partner, next to "work or school" (38%), "family or friends" (34%), and "nightclubs, bars, cafés, or other social gatherings" (13%).²

The growing popularity of online dating sites is hardly surprising. First, on the Internet, spatial proximity is irrelevant, and meeting similar people is easier than in real-life dating. Second, online dating can occur without help from friends. Dating

sites can be independently and constantly accessed, whereas going out with friends seven days a week is far more difficult to realize. Third, the reduced visual and auditory cues that characterize online communication facilitate self-disclosure. This may apply even more to online dating because, contrary to many other types of computer-mediated communication, online dating participants often anticipate future interaction. The anticipation of future interaction increases the depth of communication and may thereby encourage relationship formation.³

Although online dating is gaining prominence as a strategy to find a romantic partner, academic research into the antecedents of Internet dating is still scarce. This survey study has two aims. The first is to investigate the demographic antecedents of online dating. The second is to investigate the validity of two opposing hypotheses that explain which

personality types particularly turn to the Web for online dating: the social compensation and the rich-get-richer hypotheses. A common conception of online dating is that, in particular, people who are socially inept, and who have difficulty making a relationship work in the offline world, turn to online dating. We empirically test the tenability of this social compensation hypothesis and contrast it with its counterpart, the rich-get-richer hypothesis.

Online dating as social compensation?

In comparison with dating in a face-to-face setting, online dating offers more control over self-presentation along with the possibility to more easily terminate an encounter. In the 1990s, it was often believed that these characteristics of the Internet especially attract shy and anxious people who typically feel nervous and distressed in real-life social interactions.⁴ It is, however, questionable whether these early assumptions still hold for the present generation of Internet users. Several Internet studies conducted in the 1990s found negative correlations between Internet use and social involvement variables, such as introversion and loneliness,⁵ whereas more recent studies often report opposite results.⁶ These discrepancies between earlier and later Internet studies can be explained by many changes in Internet use, such as the growing use of the Internet for social purposes. Likewise, online dating seems to have evolved from a marginal to a mainstream social practice.

Two opposing hypotheses may explain which individuals are likely to use online dating to find potential partners. The social compensation hypothesis, on the one hand, proposes that dating sites will be especially beneficial for individuals high in dating anxiety. The advantages of dating sites, including their easy and continuous accessibility, allow these people to compensate for deficits they often encounter in offline dating. The rich-get-richer hypothesis, on the other hand, predicts that the Internet will primarily benefit individuals who are low in dating anxiety, who already have strong dating skills, and who use the Internet as just another strategy to find a partner. Although some recent studies on general Internet use have provided support for the rich-get-richer hypothesis,⁶ there is no recent research on the specific effects of dating anxiety on online dating to guide the formulation of a research hypothesis. Therefore, we investigated in an exploratory way whether people high (social compensation hypothesis) or low (rich-get-richer hypothesis) in dating anxiety will more often turn to dating sites.

METHOD

Sample and procedure

In May 2005, an online survey was conducted among 367 Dutch adult singles between 18 and 60 years old (50% males and 50% females). Sampling and fieldwork were done by Intomart GfK, a research company in the Netherlands. Respondents were recruited from an online panel managed by Intomart GfK. The mean age of our sample was 38 years ($SD = 12.7$). The formal education and age distribution of our respondents equaled official statistics in the Netherlands. Completing the questionnaire took about 15 to 20 minutes.

Measures

Age, education and income. Women (50%) were coded 1 and men (50%) coded 0. To investigate curvilinear relationships of age and the dependent variable, the age variable was first centered around its mean and subsequently squared. We measured formal education on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (elementary school) to 7 (university degree). Net monthly income was measured on an 8-point scale ranging from 1 (no income) to 8 (3,000 euro or more).

Dating anxiety. We selected the five items with the highest factor loading from the active-intentions-for-dating subscale of the dating anxiety survey by Calvert et al.⁷ The items loaded on a single factor (explained variance 72.9%) and the resulting scale had an alpha of 0.91 ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.36$).

Visit of dating sites. We asked respondents on a 6-point scale how often they visited dating sites on the Internet (ranging from 1, never, to 6, very often; $M = 1.95$; $SD = 1.30$). By means of an open question, we asked respondents how often they had posted a personal online profile. The responses ranged from 0 to 10 ($M = 1.03$, $SD = 1.99$).

RESULTS

Of all 367 respondents, 43.0% ($n = 157$) indicated that they had visited a dating site. Of all respondents, 33.2% ($n = 122$) had posted an online profile on a dating site (9.0% one profile; 6.5% two profiles; 7.4% three profiles; 4.6% four profiles; and 5.8% five to 10 profiles). To investigate how age, gender, educational level, and income (first goal) and dating anxiety (second goal) would predict online dating, we conducted two hierarchical

TABLE 1. PREDICTORS OF ONLINE DATING

N = 367	<i>Frequency visit dating site</i>	<i>Frequency of posting a profile</i>
	β	β
Age (centered)	-0.00	-0.08
Age square (centered)	-0.29***	-0.20***
Female	-0.14**	-0.09
Education	-0.03	-0.06
Income	-0.00	-0.07
Dating anxiety	-0.10*	-0.09
R ² model 1	0.11***	0.07***
R ² model 2	0.12***	0.08***
R ² change	0.01***	0.01

Note: The results refer to the second, full model of the hierarchical regression analysis.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (*t* test, two-tailed).

regression analyses, one for the frequency with which respondents visit dating sites and one for the frequency with which they had posted a personal profile. In step one for the hierarchical regression analyses, we estimated the relative influence of age, age square, gender, educational level, and income (first goal). In step two, we estimated the added contribution of dating anxiety in order to investigate the validity of the social compensation and the rich-get-richer hypothesis. The results are presented in Table 1.

Because the coefficients of the demographics estimated in the first step did not deviate much from those estimated in the second step, in Table 1 we report only the betas estimated in the second step. As the Table shows, men visited dating sites significantly more often than women did. Further analyses of the nonlinear age effect (the squared age) indicated that respondents between 30 and 40 years ($M = 2.44, SD = 1.47$) and between 40 and 50 years ($M = 2.04, SD = 1.34$) were more active online daters than younger ($M = 1.81, SD = 1.19$) and older respondents ($M = 1.54, SD = 1.05$), $F(3, 363) = 7.29, p < 0.001$. This pattern could also be observed when the frequency of posting a profile was the dependent variable.

As the R² change values in Table 1 show, the addition of dating anxiety in the second step significantly improved the explained variance of the model for the frequency with which dating sites were visited. The R² change for the frequency with which respondents posted a profile was just below significance when dating anxiety was added ($p = 0.059$). The dating anxiety coefficient predicting the

frequency with which a profile was posted was in the same direction but was also just below significance ($p = 0.059$).

DISCUSSION

Our results showed that nearly half of single Internet users (43%) reported having visited a dating site to get a date or to find a romantic partner. Online dating was not related to income and educational level. Although males reported visiting online dating sites more often than females, there were no significant differences between the genders in the frequency of posting online profiles. The nonlinear age effects on online dating indicated that people around 40 years of age are the most active online daters. A plausible explanation for this nonlinear age effect is that it is relatively difficult for people of this age group to find a romantic partner via more traditional strategies. Singles in this age group are relatively often divorced and often have to combine children with a busy career. Divorcees are more than three times as likely to use a dating site than the average Internet user. Although divorcees make up 8% of the adult Internet audience, they represent 27% of the users of dating sites.⁸

Online dating seems to be an activity particularly of individuals who are low in dating anxiety. These individuals seem to use the Internet as just another venue to find a partner. Our results concur with a recent series of related studies on the relations between social personality variables and Internet use. These studies all disconfirm the hypothesis that

people use the Internet to compensate for deficits they encounter in the offline world.⁶ By now, the Internet is so widely used that the online population increasingly resembles the offline population. As a result, patterns that occur in the offline world also increasingly emerge in online life. For example, the extraverted make more friends online than the introverted; the nonlonely communicate more frequently on the Internet than the lonely; and those low in dating anxiety are more likely to turn to online dating than those high in dating anxiety.

Our study has several implications for future theory and research. First, it suggests that theories on the antecedents of social interaction on the Internet that were developed in the 1990s may have to be adjusted for the current generation of Internet users. These early theories assume, for example, that personality variables, such as social anxiety and loneliness, determine the frequency and nature of social interaction on the Internet.⁴ Although these theories may have been valid a decade ago, our study places some doubt on whether they are still applicable to the present generation of Internet users.

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Address reprint requests to:

*Dr. Patti M. Valkenburg
Amsterdam School of Communications Research
(ASCoR)
University of Amsterdam
Kloveniersburgwal 48
1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

E-mail: p.m.valkenburg@uva.nl