



Research Report

Dispositional factors predicting use of online dating sites and behaviors related to online dating



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ABSTRACT

Although prior research has examined how individual difference factors are related to relationship initiation and formation over the Internet (e.g., online dating sites, social networking sites), little research has examined how dispositional factors are related to other aspects of online dating. The present research therefore sought to examine the relationship between several dispositional factors, such as Big-Five personality traits, self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, and attachment styles, and the use of online dating sites and online dating behaviors. Rejection sensitivity was the only dispositional variable predictive of use of online dating sites whereby those higher in rejection sensitivity are more likely to use online dating sites than those lower in rejection sensitivity. We also found that those higher in rejection sensitivity, those lower in conscientiousness, and men indicated being more likely to engage in potentially risky behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner face-to-face. Further research is needed to further explore the relationships between these dispositional factors and online dating behaviors.

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1. Introduction

The way in which romantic relationships are formed has changed considerably in the past few decades. One may never have fathomed the idea of using a computer or another machine to acquire a romantic partner 50 years ago. Yet that is how millions of people obtain romantic partners today. In fact, just within the last 15–20 years, online dating has considerably altered the dating environment (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). According to one web site, of the 54 million single people in the U.S., 40 million have tried online dating (StatisticBrain.com, 2012).

Because online dating is a relatively new phenomenon, there is a paucity of empirical research studying online dating. Most prior research has focused on deception in online dating (e.g., Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012; Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Toma & Hancock, 2010, 2012; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Whitty, 2008) as well as how self-presentation, self-disclosure, and personality traits among online daters shape relationship initiation and formation (e.g., Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008). Few published studies have examined whether dispositional factors predict the use of online dating sites. The primary aim of the present research was to therefore examine whether self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, adult attachment style, and the Big-Five personality factors (i.e., extraversion,

agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, neuroticism) are predictive of online dating site use. In addition, we sought to examine whether these same factors would predict potentially risky behaviors associated with meeting a potential dating partner in-person. We investigated how these factors were associated with (1) the length of time people communicated with, or got to know, a person they met through an online dating site before meeting the potential dating partner face-to-face; (2) whether participants said they would prefer to meet the potential dating partner in a public/crowded area or in a private/secluded place; and (3) whether participants would tell anyone else where they were going or what they were doing if they made plans to meet an online dating partner in-person.

1.1. Using online dating sites

Few studies have examined dispositional factors related to engaging in online dating. The only published research on this topic that could be located found that those lower in dating anxiety were significantly more likely to use online dating sites than those higher in dating anxiety (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) and that people who engage in more sexually risky behaviors are more likely to participate in online dating (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007).

Because so little research has examined traits that predict online dating site use, we turn our attention to research examining dispositional predictors of the use of socially-related computer-mediated communication, such as social networking sites, chat rooms, discussion groups, and instant messaging. Because social

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networking sites, other social Internet services, and online dating sites are forms of computer-mediated communication, the same factors that draw individuals to one form of computer-mediated communication may draw individuals to another form of computer-mediated communication. Furthermore, once people are comfortable using one computer-mediated communication tool, such as a social networking site (e.g., Facebook), they may feel more comfortable using online dating sites.

Research examining social networking site usage has found that several self-reported personality traits are good predictors of social networking site use. For example, studies have shown that extraversion, openness to experience, and neuroticism positively predict social networking site use (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). Correa et al. found extraversion to be the strongest predictor of social networking site use. As a result, it could be predicted that those higher in extraversion will be more likely to use online dating sites.

People lower on extraversion (i.e., introverts), however, often report that communicating with others through social networking sites is more appealing than communicating with others through more traditional communication methods (Orr et al., 2009). Introverts also report spending more time using social networking sites than extraverts (Orr et al.). Furthermore, one study (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000) reported a significant negative correlation between extraversion and using social Internet services, such as chat rooms or discussion groups, for women (but not for men). That is, more introverted women were more likely to report using chat rooms and to engage in discussion groups online than more extraverted women. Other studies (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007) found that introverts are drawn to chat rooms and other forms of computer-mediated communication because they feel they can express their “real” selves more adequately online. A competing hypothesis could therefore be made that introverts (i.e., those lower on extraversion) may be more drawn to online dating sites and therefore more likely to use them.

In addition to the research showing that neuroticism positively predicts use of social networking sites (Correa et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008), other research (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000) indicates that people higher in neuroticism are also more likely to use other social services on the Internet, such as chat rooms and discussion groups. As with introverts, people higher in neuroticism report being drawn to these online environments because they can more adequately express their “true” selves online (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002; Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007). Furthermore, Correa et al. (2010) suggested that, because neuroticism is associated with greater feelings of loneliness, people higher in neuroticism may engage in computer-mediated communication as a way to reduce loneliness. In fact, one study (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003) found that lonely women use and are drawn to social computer-mediated communication more than are non-lonely women. As a result, people higher in neuroticism may also be more likely to use online dating sites to meet potential dating partners.

In addition to the Big-Five personality traits, Mehdizadeh (2010) showed that people lower in self-esteem and higher in narcissism have higher frequencies of social networking site activity. Similar to people lower in extraversion and higher in neuroticism, Forest and Wood (2012) suggested that people with lower self-esteem might be more likely to use social networking sites because they may view online environments as safer places to express themselves. Results from these two studies suggest that, in addition to social networking sites, people with lower self-esteem may also be more likely to use online dating sites as lower self-esteem individuals might view online dating sites as a safer place to look for and to try to attract a potential romantic partner.

A dispositional trait related to lower self-esteem (e.g., Watson & Nesdale, 2012; Xiao-ling & Ming-zheng, 2011) and to higher neuroticism (Brookings, Zembor, & Hochstetler, 2003) is rejection sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity is a disposition to “anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection” (Downey & Feldman, 1996, p. 1327). Although research has not explicitly examined the relationship between online dating and rejection sensitivity (or between other forms of computer-mediated communication and rejection sensitivity), people higher in rejection sensitivity may be more likely to engage in online dating because it may be easier to avoid rejection and because rejection cues may be less salient in online environments. Online dating also allows users to engage in more selective self-presentation than do traditional dating environments (e.g., Walther, 1996). Users of online dating sites are able to choose which aspects of themselves they present to others, both in creating their profiles and in communicating with others. Users can therefore present only those aspects of themselves that they want others to see, thus possibly reducing rejection by other users.

Prior research has also not examined the relationship between adult attachment styles and online dating. Individuals with insecure attachment may, however, also be drawn to online dating. For instance, people higher in attachment anxiety, such as those with preoccupied or fearful attachment, may feel more comfortable engaging in self-disclosure in online dating environments than they would in traditional dating environments, which may produce the illusion of greater intimacy with another person. As mentioned above, they are also afforded a greater opportunity to manage their image and communications with others in an online dating environment compared to a traditional dating environment. This may be an important factor as those higher in attachment anxiety may be especially concerned with how others perceive them (e.g., Chen et al., 2012). The physical distance offered by online dating environments may be more comfortable than traditional dating settings, however, for those higher in attachment avoidance (i.e., dismissive and fearful attachment).

1.2. Meeting an online dating partner in-person

Online dating poses several potential risks. For instance, many people are deceptive when posting information to their online dating profiles, lying about their age, physical appearance, job, income, and even relationship status (e.g., Guadagno et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2010; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma et al., 2008). Those who engage in online dating simply do not know who is on the other side of a computer. Meeting a person face-to-face may therefore be considered somewhat risky and several decisions must be made about when and where to meet an online dating partner. We therefore sought to examine factors that may influence these decisions. We were specifically interested in factors that predict potentially risky behaviors when meeting an online dating partner in-person, such as the speed with which someone chooses to meet an online dating partner face-to-face; meeting someone in a private/secluded setting as opposed to meeting someone in a busy public setting; and/or not telling anyone that one is meeting someone or meeting a person alone.

Although no research has examined factors related to decisions regarding meeting an online dating partner in-person, we believe that people who are especially concerned with the impression they make on either their potential dating partner or on important others may determine who is most likely to engage in potentially risky behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner face-to-face. Because rejection sensitive individuals are especially motivated to avoid rejection, they tend to be concerned with how they present themselves to others (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Romero-Canyas, Reddy, Rodriguez, & Downey, 2013; Romero-Canyas

et al., 2010). In addition, as mentioned above, those higher in attachment anxiety may also be especially concerned with avoiding rejection and with the impressions they make on others (Chen et al., 2012). As a result, we predict that individuals higher in rejection sensitivity and higher in preoccupied and fearful attachment may be more likely to engage in riskier behavior related to meeting a potential dating partner face-to-face. Because men may have fewer concerns than women about their personal safety when meeting a potential dating partner for the first time, we also predicted that men may be more likely to engage in riskier behaviors related to meeting online dating partners as described above than women.

1.3. The current research

The current study was conducted to examine how several dispositional factors are related to the use of online dating sites and to online dating behaviors. Our first hypothesis was that people higher (or lower) in extraversion, higher in neuroticism, lower in self-esteem, higher in rejection sensitivity, and who report insecure attachment would be more likely to use online dating sites. Our second hypothesis was that men and people higher in rejection sensitivity, preoccupied attachment, and fearful attachment would engage in potentially riskier behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner in-person. As little published research has examined whether dispositional traits predict the use of online dating sites or of behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner in-person, the current research will contribute to the literature by determining whether these dispositional traits predict online dating site use and behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner face-to-face.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data were collected online from participants 18 years of age or older who were either single or who had been in a relationship for less than one year. The sample consisted of 725 volunteers 18–71 years of age ($M_{Age} = 22.31$, $SD = 6.75$; 73.9% female; 91.6% heterosexual; 86.6% White/Caucasian).

2.2. Materials and procedure

All participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989) and the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey & Feldman, 1996). The Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) were used to assess adult attachment style (each scale was scored separately and then combined to create composite attachment scores; Ognibene & Collins, 1998). The Big Five Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991) was used to measure the personality traits extraversion, neuroticism, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. A demographics questionnaire was also included, which assessed age, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual preference.

Participants also completed the Online Dating Inventory (ODI), a measure created by the researchers to assess use of online dating sites and behaviors related to online dating (see Appendix). To measure online dating site use, participants answered questions about their likelihood to use online dating sites, whether they had ever used online dating sites, how often they used online dating sites, and how much time they spent on online dating sites. Higher scores are indicative of more online dating site use (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). We also included items designed to assess

potentially risky behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner in-person. For example, questions asked about the likelihood that participants would meet someone they met online in-person, whether they would meet that person in a busy/public place or a private/secluded place, and whether they would tell another person they were meeting someone they had met online. Because the internal consistency among these items was not acceptable, we examined how the measured dispositional variables were related with individual behaviors.

Prior to analyses, all continuous variables were centered at the mean to control for multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). Zero-order correlations were first calculated to assess significant relationships among the variables. Variables significantly correlated with online dating site use and with items assessing potentially risky behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner face-to-face were entered into multiple regression analyses.

3. Results

Zero-order correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) can be found in Table 1. Our first hypothesis was that people higher (or lower) in extraversion, higher in neuroticism, lower in self-esteem, higher in rejection sensitivity, and who report insecure attachment would be more likely to use online dating sites. To test this hypothesis, extraversion, neuroticism, self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, attachment, other variables significantly correlated with online dating site use (agreeableness), and gender were entered into a multiple regression equation as predictors of online dating site use. The overall regression analysis was significant, $F(9,715) = 5.09$, $p < .01$. Rejection sensitivity ($\beta = .14$, $t = 3.05$, $p < .01$) was the only significant predictor of online dating site use, partially supporting our first hypothesis. Participants higher in rejection sensitivity reported greater use of online dating sites than those lower in rejection sensitivity.

Our second hypothesis was that men and people higher in rejection sensitivity, preoccupied attachment, and fearful attachment would engage in potentially riskier behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner in-person. To test our second hypothesis, we conducted three multiple regression analyses to examine whether these factors predicted how quickly one would be willing to meet an online dating partner in-person, where the person would prefer to meet the online dating partner, and whether the individual would inform anyone if he or she made plans to meet an online dating partner. Other factors significantly correlated with these items were also entered into the multiple regression analyses.

Rejection sensitivity, preoccupied attachment, self-esteem, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and gender were examined as predictors for responses to the question "If you have ever met a romantic partner through the use of an online dating site, how long did you communicate online before meeting in-person?" Fearful attachment was not entered into the equation as it was not significantly correlated with this item. Although the overall regression was significant, $F(6,718) = 4.62$, $p < .001$, none of the individual variables significantly predicted responses to this question. Rejection sensitivity ($\beta = -.08$, $t = -1.74$, $p = .08$) and self-esteem ($\beta = .08$, $t = 1.60$, $p = .09$) approached significance.

Preoccupied attachment, fearful attachment, and rejection sensitivity were not significantly correlated with the item asking whether participants would meet someone in-person that they met online in a busy public place, in a secluded public place, or in a private place. As a result, these variables were not entered as predictors into the regression equation. Agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion were, however, significantly correlated with answers to this question and were entered into a regression

Table 1
Zero order correlations and descriptive statistics.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. ODI use	–														
2. ODI #10	–.48*	–													
3. ODI #12	.08	–.04	–												
4. ODI #14	–.01	–.10*	.21*												
5. Self-esteem	–.15*	.14*	–.09	–.13*	–										
6. Rejection sensitivity	.22*	–.14*	.10*	.19*	–.46*	–									
7. Secure	–.12*	.09	–.09	–.13*	.40*	–.40*	–								
8. Preoccupied	.15*	–.11*	.04	.06	–.27*	.32*	–.18*	–							
9. Fearful	.14*	–.07	–.01	.09	–.32*	.32*	–.67*	.15*	–						
10. Dismissive	–.01	.03	.03	.06	.06	.03	–.22*	–.39*	.28*	–					
11. Extraversion	–.10*	.00	–.10*	–.10*	.34*	–.35*	.29*	–.08	–.14*	–.01	–				
12. Agreeableness	–.14*	.10*	–.10*	–.15*	.34*	–.28*	.34*	–.09	–.30*	–.14*	.22*	–			
13. Conscientiousness	–.09	.11*	–.13*	–.10*	.36*	–.23*	.19*	–.18*	–.08	.06	.22*	.47*	–		
14. Neuroticism	.10*	–.04	.07	.02	–.49*	.38*	–.37*	.28*	.33*	–.04	–.32	–.38*	–.35*	–	
15. Openness	.09	.03	.01	–.08	.16*	–.10*	.06	–.05	–.03	.15*	.19*	.15*	.13*	–.11*	–
M	1.70	6.04	1.24	0.41	30.94	8.75	0	0	0	0	27.38	34.94	33.55	23.46	36.49
SD	2.58	2.00	0.59	0.74	5.66	4.08	1.79	1.77	1.81	1.78	6.44	5.84	5.63	6.61	6.08

Note: ODI = online dating inventory. See the Appendix for items used in the use subscale and for items 10, 12, and 14.

* $p < .05$.

equation along with gender as predictors for this item. The overall regression was significant, $F(4, 720) = 4.84$, $p < .01$. Conscientiousness was the only significant predictor ($\beta = -.10$, $t = -2.30$, $p < .05$). Results indicated that those higher on conscientiousness were more likely to meet in a public rather than a private place compared to those lower on conscientiousness.

Rejection sensitivity, self-esteem, agreeableness, and gender were entered into a regression equation as predictors of responses to the question, “If you made plans to meet a potential romantic partner face-to-face that you had met online, would you tell anyone?” Again, preoccupied attachment and fearful attachment were not entered as predictor variables as they were not significantly correlated with this item. The overall regression was significant, $F(4, 720) = 24.08$, $p < .001$. Rejection sensitivity ($\beta = .14$, $t = 3.50$, $p < .01$) and gender ($\beta = .27$, $t = 7.63$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of responses to this question. Those higher in rejection sensitivity and men were more likely to indicate that they would be less likely to tell anyone about their plans to meet an online dating partner face-to-face.

4. Discussion

The current study examined the relationship between several dispositional factors and the use of online dating sites. It also investigated whether these same dispositional factors predicted potentially risky behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner in-person. Our first hypothesis – that people higher (or lower) in extraversion, higher in neuroticism, lower in self-esteem, higher in rejection sensitivity, and those reporting more insecure attachment would be more likely to use online dating sites – was partially supported. Rejection sensitivity was the only significant predictor of the use of online dating sites, with results indicating that people higher in rejection sensitivity are more likely to use online dating sites than those lower in rejection sensitivity. These results are somewhat consistent with research showing that people higher in neuroticism (which is positively correlated with rejection sensitivity) are more likely to use social services on the Internet (e.g., chat rooms and discussion groups; [Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000](#)) and that they are drawn to these online environments because they can adequately express their “real” selves online ([Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002](#)). It should be noted, however, that neuroticism was not a predictor of the use of online dating sites in the current study. Because rejection sensitivity is related to

greater loneliness (e.g., [Watson & Nesdale, 2012](#)), rejection sensitive people may also be more likely to use online dating sites as a way to assuage their loneliness ([Correa et al., 2010](#)).

In addition, people more sensitive to rejection may feel more comfortable trying to meet potential romantic partners in an online environment because it might be easier to avoid potential rejection in online dating environments than it is in other more traditional dating environments. For instance, online dating platforms offer users with opportunities for selective self-presentation (e.g., [Walther, 1996](#)). That is, users are able to present only those aspects of themselves that they want others to see, thus possibly reducing rejection by other users. They can also more easily manage their communication behaviors when communicating with potential dating partners online ([Walther, 1996](#)). Furthermore, rejection from others on online dating sites may also be less salient than face-to-face rejection from a potential romantic partner.

Results show that people higher in rejection sensitivity also indicated that if they made plans to meet a potential romantic partner they had met online, they would be less likely to tell others about their plans. People sensitive to rejection may worry that others, such as family members and friends, might reject them after finding out that they have been engaging in online dating or that they are making plans to meet an online dating partner in-person. This fear of rejection may therefore keep them from telling others about their plans if they were to meet a potential dating partner originally met online. Men also indicated being less likely to tell anyone about their plans than women. This is possibly because men are less likely than women to worry about being physically harmed when meeting someone face-to-face that they met online.

We also found that those higher in conscientiousness were less likely to meet someone in-person in a secluded or private place than those lower in conscientiousness. This is consistent with conscientiousness being indicative of exercising vigilance, care, and caution. As a result, our second hypothesis that men and people higher in rejection sensitivity, preoccupied attachment, and fearful attachment would be more likely to engage in potentially risky behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner in-person was also only partially supported. Although gender was predictive of engagement in one potentially risky behavior, neither preoccupied attachment nor fearful attachment were predictive of any of these behaviors. Results indicate, however, that rejection sensitivity, gender, and conscientiousness are predictive of actions one might take when deciding to meet an online dating partner in-person.

Limitations of the current study are that all data were collected via self-report measures, were cross-sectional, and were collected online. We are therefore unable to make causal interpretations and cannot be certain that participants accurately reported their behaviors related to online dating. In addition, some of the questions on the Online Dating Inventory assessed intentions rather than actual behaviors related to online dating. This could be problematic as, according to the theory of planned behavior, intentions only guide behaviors but do not determine behaviors (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). An additional limitation is that our overall sample is quite heterogeneous. A majority of participants were female, Caucasian, heterosexual, and relatively young. This makes it difficult to generalize our findings to other populations. Despite these limitations, however, this research has contributed to the body of research on online dating as few studies have investigated dispositional factors related to online dating. It showed that rejection sensitivity is predictive of engaging in online dating. It also suggests that those higher in rejection sensitivity, those lower in conscientiousness, and men may be more likely to engage in potentially risky behaviors related to meeting an online dating partner in-person. Because this is one of the first studies to examine how dispositional factors relate to online dating site use and behavior related to online dating, it is suggested that future research further explore how dispositional factors relate to online dating behaviors. Future research should explore why people higher in rejection sensitivity are more likely to engage in online dating as well as why they are less likely to tell others when they are meeting an online dating partner in-person.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.01.022>.

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