

The Impact of Rejection Sensitivity on Self-Disclosure Within the Context of Online Dating

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Abstract

Prior research suggests that rejection sensitive individuals may find it easier to express their true selves in an online environment. The purpose of the present study was to examine the extent to which rejection sensitivity (RS) and true self influence self-disclosure within the context of online dating. We collected data from a total of 1,295 individuals who completed an online survey. For those who engaged in online dating, RS was not directly related to self-disclosure in online dating profiles or in communicating with individuals met through online dating sites/apps, but true self was. In addition, there was an indirect relationship between RS and self-disclosure in the context of online dating through true self. These findings suggest that rejection sensitive individuals who feel more comfortable revealing aspects of their “true” selves online may be more likely to engage in self-disclosure within the context of online dating, which could potentially offer some clue as to why rejection sensitive individuals may be somewhat more likely to engage in online dating than less rejection sensitive individuals. That is, rejection sensitive individuals are perhaps more likely to engage in online dating because it may facilitate representation of their “true” selves and may thus increase dating success.

Keywords: rejection sensitivity, true self, self-disclosure, online dating

Introduction

ONLINE DATING IS currently a multibillion dollar industry that has only continued to gain popularity in the United States and in many other places around the world. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center¹ found that 30 percent of their sample of U.S. adults said that they had engaged in online dating. They also found that engagement in online dating varies as a result of age and sexual orientation. For instance, they found that online dating was most popular among 18–29 year olds, with nearly half of the individuals in that age group (48 percent) saying that they had used online dating sites or applications. Another study conducted by the Pew Research Center² found that engagement in online dating tripled among individuals between the ages of 18–24 years from 2013 to 2015.

An exploratory study³ examining dispositional factors as a predictor of engagement in online dating found rejection sensitivity (RS) to be the only factor significantly predicting online dating. RS is a disposition to “anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection”⁴ (p. 1327). The authors of that study speculated that those higher in RS might

feel more comfortable engaging in online dating because they could perhaps better express their “true” selves online. For instance, those higher in neuroticism (which is positively correlated with RS⁵) are more likely to use social services on the Internet (e.g., chat rooms, discussion groups)⁶ and are drawn to online environments because they can adequately express their “true” selves online.⁷ In addition, individuals higher in attachment anxiety (also related to greater RS^{3,8}) may use social media more frequently than those lower in anxious attachment.⁹ In addition, social anxiety (also positively related to RS^{3,10}) is associated with perceptions of greater control over self-presentation and of a decreased risk of negative evaluations from others when communicating with others online versus in-person,¹¹ perhaps leading socially anxious individuals to feel more comfortable communicating with others online than face-to-face. As a result, based on the online disinhibition effect,^{12–14} individuals with greater social anxiety in general and with greater RS specifically may thus feel better able and more comfortable revealing what they feel to be their true selves in online environments¹⁴ and thus may engage in greater self-disclosure within online environments,¹³ such as within online dating sites/apps.

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True self

The true self refers to who a person believes he or she truly is, regardless of outward actions.¹⁵ Disclosing aspects of the true self may be easier during online interactions due to decreased social pressures,¹⁶ as well as perceiving greater control over self-presentation and a decreased risk of negative evaluation.¹¹ People may therefore engage in online dating as a way to express their true selves. McKenna et al.¹⁷ developed the Real Me Scale to assess how much participants were willing to reveal their “true” self to others online versus in-person, which was used in a followup study¹⁷ to attempt to identify the process underlying the relationship between RS and use of online dating sites/apps. The authors found that a desire and preference to share one’s “true” self with others through online mediums mediated the relationship between RS and online dating site/app usage, supporting the notion that RS individuals may engage in online dating as a way to express their true selves to others. In the current study, we used the Real Me Scale to try to replicate past findings and to also examine whether higher true self scores might predict greater self-disclosure in the context of online dating.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is any communication where one discloses personal information to another individual.¹⁸ Because self-disclosure is frequently reciprocated, it often strengthens the bond between potential romantic partners.^{19,20} Although research pertaining to self-disclosure and online dating is lacking, research has examined self-disclosure in online communications in nondating scenarios. This prior research shows that, consistent with the online disinhibition effect, people are more likely to self-disclose when communicating online than during face-to-face interactions.²¹ In addition, another study found that individuals are more likely to self-disclose when communicating online than during face-to-face interaction and that self-disclosing online might decrease feelings of vulnerability often felt when people self-disclose in face-to-face interactions.²² For those in romantic relationships, communicating with a romantic partner online versus in-person was associated with greater breadth, amount, and depth of self-disclosure.²³

To reveal one’s true self, one must engage in self-disclosure about aspects of the self. Hance et al.¹⁵ therefore examined whether self-disclosure moderated the relationship between true self and online dating site usage, finding that it did not. One possible explanation for these findings may be that they measured general self-disclosure rather than self-disclosure in online environments or in the context of online dating. For this reason, one aim of the present study was to further examine self-disclosure within online dating sites/apps specifically.

The current study

Our primary aim was to examine whether the extent to which an individual feels more comfortable sharing their true self in online environments would predict self-disclosure within the context of online dating and whether this would mediate the relationship between RS and self-disclosure on online dating sites/apps. We examined self-disclosure in the

context of online dating by asking participants who had engaged in online dating the extent to which they shared information about themselves with others on their online dating profile and when communicating with others through online dating sites/apps. We hypothesized that: (a) RS would be positively related to a greater willingness to reveal their true selves in online environments (consistent with Hance et al.¹⁵); (b) a greater willingness to reveal the true self in online environments would be positively related to self-disclosure in the context of online dating; and (c) true self would mediate the relationship between RS and self-disclosure. The secondary aim of this research was to replicate past findings showing that RS and true self predicted greater engagement in online dating.^{3,15}

Methods

Participants

Data were collected from a total of 1,295 individuals through Sona, a cloud-based participant pool management system, from a university in the southeastern United States. All participants received course credit for participation. We intentionally targeted college-aged individuals as those 18–29 engage in online dating more than those in other age groups in the United States. See Table 1 for demographic details of the sample.

Measures and procedure

Participants completed the Rejection Sensitivity Adult Questionnaire²⁴ to assess the anxiety of anticipated rejection; the Real Me Scale¹⁷ to assess how much participants were willing to reveal their “true” self to others online versus in-person; the Online Dating Inventory³ to assess the extent to which participants engaged in online dating; questions created by the researchers (Appendix 1) assessing the extent to which participants self-disclosed in their online dating profile ($n = 441$) and in communicating with others through online dating sites/apps ($n = 399$); and a demographics questionnaire online.

TABLE 1. SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

No. of participants	1,295
% White/Caucasian	85.79%
Gender identity	
% female	73.34%
% male	25.87%
% transgender/gender variant/nonconforming	0.008%
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	88.73%
Gay/lesbian	2.70%
Bisexual or pansexual	7.65%
Other (e.g., asexual, demisexual)	0.92%
Participant age	18–55, $M = 20.16$, $SD = 4.30$
No. who had used online dating sites/apps	679 (52.43%)
No. with online dating profiles	441 (34.05%)
No. who communicated with another through an online dating site/app	399 (30.81%)

M, mean; *SD*, standard deviation.

Results

All analyses were conducted in JASP 11.1. We first examined whether data from the current sample replicated past findings^{3,15} regarding the relationship between RS, the true self, and usage of online dating sites/apps. Inconsistent with past findings, RS was not significantly related to engagement in online dating. True self was, however, positively related to use of online dating sites/apps. Finally, RS was significantly and positively related to the true self. See Table 2 for all zero order correlations, descriptive statistics, and Cronbach's α for each measure.

Regressing online dating onto RS and true self, we found that while RS did not significantly predict online dating ($\beta = -0.006$, $t = -0.22$, $p = 0.827$), true self did significantly predict engagement in online dating ($\beta = 0.24$, $t = 8.87$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, we conducted a bootstrap mediation analysis (5,000 replications) showing an indirect relationship between RS and use of online dating sites/apps through true self ($Z = 4.26$, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.018–0.054).

We also examined whether RS and true self predicted self-disclosure in the context of online dating. RS was not significantly related to self-disclosure within online dating. True self was, however, positively related to self-disclosure through the online dating profile ($\beta = 0.21$, $t = 4.33$, $p < 0.001$) and through communicating with others in online dating sites/apps ($\beta = 0.22$, $t = 4.39$, $p < 0.001$). We also found a significant indirect relationship between RS and self-disclosure in the online dating profile ($Z = 3.23$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI = 0.014–0.059) and in communications with others through online dating sites/apps ($Z = 3.26$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI = 0.011–0.049) through true self.

Discussion

The primary goal of the current research was to examine whether RS and true self predicted self-disclosure in an online dating context. Although we did not find that RS directly predicted self-disclosure through online dating, there was a positive relationship between true self and self-disclosure in the context of online dating, as well as an indirect relationship between RS and self-disclosure in online dating sites/apps through true self. As a result, although RS does not directly predict self-disclosure when engaging in online dating, individuals higher in RS do report feeling more comfortable revealing their true selves in online contexts as

opposed to face-to-face. Those with higher true self scores, in turn, were more likely to self-disclose in the context of online dating. It therefore appears that RS is indirectly related to self-disclosure through online dating sites/apps.

The results of the current study expand on past findings^{3,15} showing that RS predicts greater use of online dating sites/apps. Not only do RS individuals tend to feel more comfortable revealing their true selves in online environments, they may also disclose more about themselves in such environments, which are consistent with the online disinhibition effect.^{12–14} As a result, online dating sites/apps may be a draw for RS individuals, where they feel more comfortable engaging in self-disclosure. This has potentially important implications as past research shows that RS is negatively related to self-disclosure²⁵ and obstructs self-disclosure during relationship formation.²⁶ As noted previously, however, self-disclosure is an important component in developing close relationships with others.^{19,20} If RS individuals do feel more comfortable revealing information about themselves in the context of online dating, this could potentially increase dating success for those higher in RS. Future research will need to examine whether this might be true.

Limitations and future directions

There are three major limitations of the current research. First, our sample consisted solely of college students, most of whom were between 18 and 24 years. Although this is the fastest growing group of online dating site/app users, and individuals of ages 18–29 are currently more likely to engage in online dating than adults in other age groups, results from this sample may not be representative of adults in other age ranges. In fact, of the 1,295 participants in the current sample, only 55 individuals were between the ages of 30–55 years (it should be noted that when data for these participants were removed, all results remained unchanged). In addition, the sample consisted of mostly White, female heterosexual participants, further biasing our sample. Future research should examine these questions in more varied samples of adults, particularly trying to gather data from adults ages 25 and older, from more non-White participants, from more individuals who identify as male or as another gender, and from more nonheterosexual participants. Sexual orientation may be of particular importance as sexual orientation influences online dating site/app use,¹ and data from the current study supported those past results, showing that nonheterosexual individuals were significantly more likely to engage in online dating. As a result,

TABLE 2. ZERO-ORDER CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS (p VALUES IN PARENTHESES), DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, AND CRONBACH'S ALPHAS FOR ALL MEASURES

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Rejection sensitivity	—				
2. True self	0.13 (<0.001)	—			
3. Online dating inventory	0.03 (0.344)	0.24 (<0.001)	—		
4. Self-disclosure—profile	0.06 (0.217)	0.21 (<0.001)	0.30 (<0.001)	—	
5. Self-disclosure—communication	0.10 (0.054)	0.23 (<0.001)	0.32 (<0.001)	0.27 (<0.001)	—
Cronbach's α	0.83	0.81	0.91	0.84	0.89
M	11.61	5.55	4.43	15.25	15.06
SD	6.10	3.59	6.39	7.38	5.66

Note: Self-disclosure—profile is self-disclosure on the participant's online dating profile; self-disclosure—communication is self-disclosure in communications through online dating sites/apps.

future research should oversample for nonheterosexual participants in order to gain an understanding of the relationships between RS, true self, and self-disclosure within the context of online dating in nonheterosexual participants.

Second, although the average RS score within our sample is slightly higher than an average RS score,²⁷ the majority of participants in our sample had an RS score between 1 and 20. As a result, it is possible that there were not enough participants within our sample high in RS to adequately detect the relationship between RS and self-disclosure in the context of online dating. Future research should thus oversample individuals higher in RS.

Third, all data collected were based on self-report from cross-sectional online surveys and do not enable us to make any causal conclusions based on our results. Despite these limitations, the current study may offer some indication as to why RS individuals may be more drawn to engage in online dating, paving the way for additional research to further explore these relationships and to potentially determine the mechanisms explaining these results.

Conclusion

People higher in RS tend to be more likely to engage in online dating, presumably because they feel more comfortable revealing their true selves in online environments. Those who feel more comfortable revealing their true selves in online environments, in turn, tend to engage in more self-disclosure within the context of online dating. As a result, RS individuals may be drawn to online dating as they are better able to express themselves and feel more comfortable revealing information about themselves in such environments as opposed to more traditional dating scenes. Does this increase dating success for RS individuals? Perhaps; only future research will tell.

Data Availability

Study materials and data sets are available on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/cyxse/>.

Author Disclosure Statement

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APPENDIX

Appendix A1.

Below are the questions created and used by the researchers to assess self-reported self-disclosure in the context of online dating. All questions were answered on the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slight disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree

Self-disclosure in online dating profile questions:

Have you ever posted a profile on an online dating site or app? Yes No

(If participant answers “Yes,” they are asked to answer the following questions:)

- (1) I have a comprehensive online dating profile.
- (2) I have a detailed online dating profile.
- (3) My online dating profile tells a lot about me.
- (4) It would be easy to find out my preferences for music, movies, and/or books from my online dating profile.

- (5) It would be easy to find out the things that I enjoy doing the most or am the most passionate about from my online dating profile.

Self-disclosure in communicating with others through online dating sites/apps questions:

Have you ever communicated with anyone through an online dating site or app?

Yes No

(If participant answers “Yes,” they are asked to answer the following questions:)

In general, when thinking about your communications with others through online dating sites/apps, to what extent have you shared your...

- (1) Personal feelings?
- (2) The things you are worried about?
- (3) Secrets/extremely personal information?
- (4) Past romantic relationships?
- (5) Feelings about sex?
- (6) Family?
- (7) Moments in your life you are ashamed of or embarrassed about?
- (8) Moments in your life you feel guilty about?