Self Presentation and its Perception in Online Dating Websites

Avner Caspi

Open University of Israel

Online dating sites open a new opportunity to gain insight into self presentation strategies and impression formation effects (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006). Although mediated matchmaking is not a new phenomenon, the number of users that login, search and find romantic or sexual partner online has outreached the number of users of earlier mediated matchmaking tools. Madden and Lenhart (2006) reported that 11% of Internet users – 16 million Americans – have used an online dating website. The umber of visitors in these websites may be even greater (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006).

A major concern of the virtual dater is self presentation. The strategies utilized are especially important during the initial stage of the relationship, since the information provided is crucial for decisions as to pursue the relationship or not (Derlega, Winstead, Wong & Greenspan, 1987). Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) pointed to the tension between one's pressures for positive self presentation, a process that might have a pinch of deception, and the need to present authentic self. We examined this tension in the current study.

Two conflicting hypotheses were tested. On the one hand, online dating users may present themselves more positively than they actually perceive themselves. Such a strategy may help them attract more potential partners. Hitsch, Hortacsu and Ariely (2006) found that most users of online dating sites reported they appear "very good" or at least "above the average". Moreover, when comparing the reported height and weight of the users to a respective standard population, Hitsch, Hortacsu and Ariely found that women's reported weight is 6-20 lb lower than the average population weight, depending on the age of the user, and all users' reported being 1.5 inches taller than the average population height. On the other hand, users may present themselves in a way that matches closely their actual characteristics, a strategy that decreases future discrepancies between what they actually are and what others may expect they would be. This latter strategy is in accord with the finding that the majority of online dating users seek long-term relationships (Hitsch, Hortacsu, & Ariely, 2006).

We used the Big Five Personality traits as a measurement tool. It has been generally agreed that personality is composed of five traits (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism; Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1990, 1997). A few studies tested the differences between self-reports and other-perceptions of the five personality traits when communication was mediated by computers. Hancock and Dunham (2001) found that people tend to exaggerate the traits of the other (for example, to perceive the communicator as more extroverted or more open relative to his/her self reported measure of the same traits). Markey and Wells (2002) found that in all five personality traits, self reports are significantly higher than other rating. Rouse and Haas (2003) found no systematic correlations. These studies differ in communication type (synchronous or asynchronous), in measurement tool (different versions of Big Five Inventory), and in the selected dependent measures (correlation, difference, or both). None was done in an online dating context.

Method

A web-based 44-item Big Five Personality questionnaire (John, Donahue & Kentle, 1991) was used in this survey. Reliability of the Hebrew version was reported by Caspi, Chajut, Saporta & Beyth-Marom (2006). The questionnaire was distributed randomly among 400 users of a large Israeli online dating site. 56 participants returned the questionnaire. 30 users (20 women and 10 men, all above 18 years old) gave correct usernames that allowed access to their profiles. These 30 served as the research sample. This group did not differ from the excluded participants in any personality trait (all p's > 0.16 in independent samples t-tests). Length of self-description ranged from 63 to 614 characters (median 185.5).

To measure impression formation, personality ratings for the 30 users was done by 38 students who read only the open section in the user's profile. Each profile was read by 6-7 raters. Raters read five profiles and rated them on the five personality traits. To reduce overload, the raters read short general descriptions of each personality trait and marked on a five-point scale the matching between the users' self-description and each of the five traits. Additionally, the raters were asked whether the rated profile was generally positive or negative.

Results and Discussion

Correlations and differences between raters and users are presented in Table 1. The null correlations (apart from the significant positive correlation for Openness) mean that there is no agreement between raters and users. Since there were some significant differences between users' self-reports and raters' judgments, a possible explanation would be that the medium causes raters to regress their evaluation to the middle of the scale. Such behavior signifies that the raters may not have enough information to rate users' personality (see Hancock & Dunham, 2001). However, the standard deviations of the average rates ranged from 0.6 (for conscientiousness) to 0.84 (for extroversion). These deviations disconfirmed this possible explanation. Analyzing the data separately for short versus long descriptions did not change the results, also ruling out this possible explanation.

Table 1.

Correlations and differences between raters and users. Differences values represent a difference on a 5-point scale. Positive difference means that users' self-report was higher than raters' evaluation.

	Raters-Users correlation	General perceived positivity-Users correlation	Raters-Users difference
Openness	.41*	.43*	0.68**
Extroversion	.04	-.18	0.17
Conscientiousness	.14	.05	0.72**
Neuroticism	.11	-.22	-0.17
Agreeableness	-.07	-.01	0.58**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$

Figure 1 presents the distribution of general impression (negative – positive). Clearly, users generated a positive impression (mean impression was 0.76, SD: 0.23, skewness: -.95). It is noted that there were no statistically significant correlations between "perceived positivity" and users' self-reported personality traits (see Table 1).
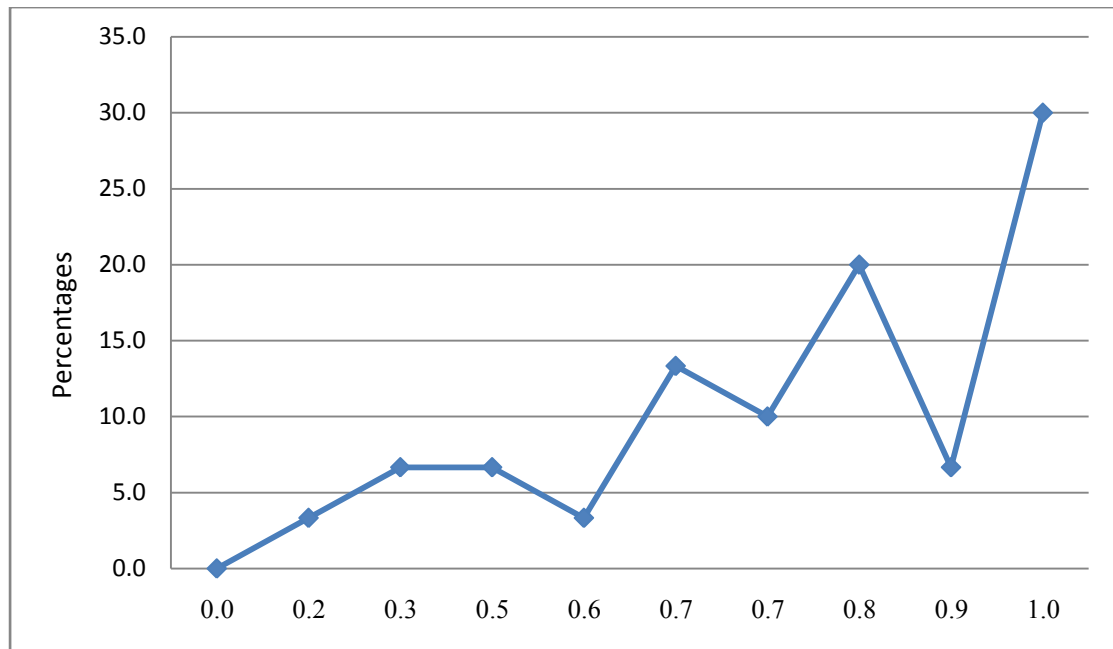
Figure 1. Distribution of average general impression. "0" means negative impression and "1" means positive impression.

Conclusions

Two alternative strategies of online dating users were tested: A positive self description versus a more accurate one. Evidence for positive description was found but, at the same time, we found that raters gave relatively low scores on three personality traits relative to self-reports. We suggest that the medium, which provides little information, is responsible for these effects.

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