

HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN ONLINE DATING

Jennifer L. Gibbs
University of California, Santa Barbara

When I began studying online dating in 2003, I had no idea it would turn into an on-going research program with such importance for the field of communication. It all started when two of my friends and fellow graduate students at USC, Nicole Ellison and Rebecca Heino, invited me to collaborate with them on a project on online dating. It made sense as we all had interests in new technologies and how they were changing the way we communicate. Way back then, the World Wide Web was still relatively new and there was little scholarship on online communication, and even less published research on Internet dating (which was a brand-new phenomenon). I also had a personal interest in the topic, as I had met my husband on Match.com back in 1998, when very few people had ever tried online matchmaking. I have heard it said (and I fully agree) that research is “me-search,” and the best research topics tend to be ones that are rooted in your own personal experience and passions. This is so because studying something about which you have particular knowledge and insight generally leads to more informed research, and choosing a topic that excites you provides motivation to drive and sustain your interest in the research.

A lot has changed in the online dating world in the last two decades. Overall, online dating has gone from a once stigmatized to a mainstream practice; indeed, it has become one of the most common ways for romantic partners to meet. And it does seem to work: a study found that out of Americans who married between 2005 and 2012, more than one third had met online (Cacioppo et al., 2013). Further, those who met their partners online reported lower rates of divorce and higher marital satisfaction. Early research was conducted on traditional online dating websites (e.g., Match.com, eHarmony, Yahoo Personals, and OkCupid), which required users to reveal a great deal of personal information up front in their profile (multiple photos, a narrative essay, and data fields ranging from demographic characteristics to one’s political and religious views, smoking and drinking habits, and preference for children). While traditional dating sites still exist, the rise of mobile communication has made mobile

dating applications (e.g., Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr) more popular, which typically only ask for a few pieces of information, such as location, photo, age, and sex, and encourage quicker face-to-face meetings. Nevertheless, these location-aware apps may reveal new types of information about one's physical location (Blackwell et al., 2015); in fact, some apps even match users up based on those who have crossed paths in person.

Early online dating catered to those who face more difficulty meeting potential romantic partners in their everyday lives, including adult professionals in the workforce, older (divorced or widowed) adults, and those from marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ or rural populations. While early research tended to focus mainly on adult, heterosexual users, scholars have shifted their attention to include underrepresented populations such as gay men (Blackwell et al., 2015; Correiro & Tong, 2016) or Muslim American women (Rochadiat et al., 2018), as well as exploring the role of intersectional identities (Marciano & Nimrod, 2021; Miao & Chan, 2021). The rise of dating apps has also made online dating more attractive to younger users, including teens and college students. In turn, the range of motivations for doing online dating has expanded beyond social or relational goals (e.g., looking for a long-term romantic relationship or a short-term sexual hookup) to include personal goals such as entertainment, self-esteem and validation, and combatting loneliness (Youngvorst & Pham, 2022). Finally, online dating has become further normalized in the COVID-19 era, with new criteria influencing decision-making about potential partners such as living situation and vaccination status, and leading to new technological enhancements including in-app voice and video features (Youngvorst & Pham, 2022).

More than just a fad or popular trend, online dating is an interesting topic for communication scholars to study, since it requires individuals to form (or at least initiate) relationships with virtual strangers in a mediated environment in which they have less visual and contextual information and fewer social cues about one another. A number of communication scholars (including myself and my colleagues) have studied questions related to how online daters present themselves, form impressions of others, and establish relationships with potential partners. This chapter reviews our knowledge on this topic, focusing on the following question: how can online daters be more successful in meeting a potential romantic partner?

PRESENTING ONESELF ONLINE

Presenting oneself and assessing others in online dating can be challenging. When you meet someone face-to-face, you have many visual and social cues to provide clues about the person and their relationship to you. The way they are dressed, physical objects they are carrying (such as a book), and the physical location in which you meet may tell you about their background and interests. You can read their body language and facial expressions to gauge their mood and how they feel about you. The other person can also use these cues to learn about you. But what about when you are just looking at a profile online? How should you present

yourself in a way that is accurate yet garners attention? How do you know if someone is lying about their age, appearance, or marital status?

My colleagues and I have addressed such questions in our research. We have found that online daters navigate a tension between presenting an ideal self and an actual self (Ellison et al., 2006). On one hand, they face pressure to portray themselves in the most positive, attractive light possible in their profile, in order to stand out and be noticed amidst hundreds of other profiles. On the other hand, there are competing pressures to create honest and accurate self-portrayals if one desires a romantic relationship, since the truth will eventually come out on an in-person date. The desire to view oneself as honest may also limit the amount of deception that takes place (Mazar & Ariely, 2006). In research with a national sample of Match.com users, we found that a full 94% of our respondents strongly disagreed they had intentionally misrepresented themselves in their profile or online communication, and 87% felt such misrepresentation was unacceptable. Despite these strong claims of their own honesty, they felt that other online daters routinely misrepresented aspects such as their physical appearance, relationship goals, age, income, and marital status (Gibbs et al., 2006).

Since people are unlikely to admit to something as socially undesirable as lying in an interview or even an anonymous survey, several of my colleagues decided to measure how much online daters lie in their profiles in a more objective way, by bringing them into a lab and comparing their actual age, height, and weight with what they had claimed in their profiles. They found that a majority had indeed misrepresented one or more of these features, but that most lies were minor—such as shaving off five pounds or adding an inch to their height (Toma et al., 2008). Although blatant deception is rare, online daters do tend to exaggerate and embellish the truth (Whitty, 2008). While this certainly happens offline as well, the online dating context offers certain features that allow for increased exaggeration and embellishment. First, users are largely anonymous and the information they have about one another is initially limited to the profile. Without a shared social network (in the form of shared friends and acquaintances) to temper misinformation, online daters are free to exaggerate their virtues in order to maximize their attractiveness (Fiore & Donath, 2004). They are also communicating asynchronously (at least initially), which allows them to engage in “selective self-presentation” (Walther & Burgoon, 1992) by consciously controlling and editing their profiles to emphasize the positive and mask their negative attributes. This is not unique to online dating; we do this in other contexts such as job interviews and writing a resume. Research has found that an online dating profile is similar to a “resume” in which one tries to sell oneself to potential romantic partners rather than employers (Heino et al., 2010).

Through qualitative interviews with online dating participants, we were able to explore this issue in more depth. We found that honesty online is complicated and that misrepresentation occurs in both intentional and unintentional ways (Ellison et al., 2006). First, online daters often portray an idealized or potential future version of the self, through strategies such as identifying themselves as active in a laundry list of activities (such as hiking,

surfing, and roller blading) in which they rarely participate but which are in line with how they would like to see themselves. They may also describe themselves in euphemistic terms such as “curvy” or “average” rather than admitting they are overweight. Ellison and her colleagues conceive of the profile as a “promise made to an imagined audience that future face-to-face interaction will take place with someone who does not differ fundamentally from the person represented by the profile” (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 56). In this sense, the profile is like a “psychological contract” that one could be held to by potential future dates, and it is not considered deceptive as long as it *could* be true in the future.

Misrepresentation also occurs as an attempt to circumvent technological constraints of the site. For example, online daters often “fudge” demographic information such as their age by subtracting a few years in order to avoid being “filtered out” of searches. Many online dating sites allow users to perform searches on basic demographic criteria such as age, height, weight, and geographic location. Since many users tend to perform searches using natural breakpoints (e.g., 35), it is common practice for those a few years older (36, 37, or 38) to list their age as 35 on their profile in order to appeal to a wider audience. They justify this by saying they tend to look younger or date younger people, and they often regard this as socially acceptable as long as they disclose their real age early on in their correspondence (Ellison et al., 2006). This is confirmed by an analysis of Match.com profiles that found that spikes occurred at certain (more desirable) age points that were much higher than would be expected by chance. For example, there was a disproportionate number of 29-year-old female users, eight times higher than the number of females aged 30–34 (Epstein, 2007).

Finally, online daters may unintentionally misrepresent themselves due to the limits of their own self-knowledge. We call this the “foggy mirror” effect, in which individuals represent themselves on the basis of an inaccurate self-concept that may not correspond with how others see them (Ellison et al., 2006). That is, they may not be able to accurately describe themselves because there are blind spots in their self-concept, or things about themselves that they do not know. As one of our interviewees put it, “sometimes you will see a person who weighs 900 pounds and—this is just an exaggeration—and they will have on spandex, you will think, ‘God, I wish I had their mirror, because obviously their mirror tells them they look great.’ It’s the same thing with online” (Ellison et al., 2006, p. 13). Thus, users often unintentionally misrepresent themselves out of lack of awareness of themselves and how others may perceive them.

ASSESSING OTHERS AND FORMING RELATIONSHIPS ONLINE

Meeting people through online dating is fraught with uncertainty. There is usually no shared social network, and rather than meeting through a friend or acquaintance, users are interacting with virtual strangers. They thus face privacy risks in disclosing intimate information. Given the relative anonymity and ease of deception online, it is important for

online daters to assess and vet the credibility of potential partners in order to verify their identity claims. This is more difficult since there are fewer traditional identity cues and less immediate feedback (Gibbs et al., 2011), but online environments do allow for a variety of information-seeking strategies, which refer to ways in which we seek information about others (Ramirez et al., 2002). Further, recent research suggests that pictures and textual cues may be processed independently and impact perceived attraction and impression formation in different ways (van der Zanden et al., 2022).

Although less information is available from nonverbal and social context cues, online dating participants do scrutinize the cues that are present and use them to form impressions of others, and as a result, small cues may become exaggerated or take on greater importance. For example, a profile with a typo or misspelling may be rejected based on the assumption that the profile creator is lazy or uneducated (Ellison et al., 2006). As Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal effect predicts, online daters have the tendency to idealize potential partners on the basis of limited cues, and they fill in the gaps by building up a fantasy persona that may be inaccurate and unrealistic. This may explain why the longer communicators wait to meet in person and the more they communicate online, the more likely their first meeting is to end up in rejection (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). While a brief period of online interaction is beneficial, daters may reach a tipping point after which further interaction leads to negative outcomes when they eventually meet in person (Ramirez et al., 2015). This is especially likely to be the case if online daters perceive that potential partners are engaging in deception based on their evaluation of linguistic clues in online messages (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2019).

The process of verifying identity claims online is known as "warranting" (Walther & Parks, 2002). Warranting involves establishing a reliable link between an online persona and a "corporeally-anchored person in the physical world" (Walther et al., 2009, p. 232). Generally, messages generated by others carry more weight than information we report about ourselves (which is easier to manipulate). Support for the warranting principle has been found in several experiments finding that other-generated claims about qualities such as one's attractiveness and extraversion are more compelling than self-generated claims in social network sites (Utz, 2010; Walther et al., 2008, 2009).

For the most part, online dating participants cannot rely on other-generated accounts to warrant their identity claims. A few dating review sites have arisen where daters can rate their dates, but these have not really taken off. To compensate, online daters often engage in tactics such as "showing" rather than "telling" (Ellison et al., 2006); for example, it is more credible to demonstrate one's sense of humor by writing a clever, witty profile than by simply stating "I am hilarious" in an otherwise dull profile (Gibbs et al., 2011). Our research found evidence that online dating participants used a variety of tactics to reduce uncertainty and verify credibility of potential partners, by gathering information from both online and offline sources. The rise of social media platforms has led to new strategies of connecting with potential partners via Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat in order to glean more

naturalistic impressions of them and observe their interactions with others on these sites; this can substitute for the lack of a shared social network.

These tactics—classified as passive, active, interactive, and extractive (Ramirez et al., 2002)—include comparing profiles on multiple websites or saving emails to check for consistency, checking public records such as white pages, and “Googling” people to warrant their online claims. Some of our participants even went as far as to perform home property value searches, drawing on the rich stores of personal information accessible online. The most common strategies, however, were interactive and involved asking direct questions of the other person. Those who used more strategies to reduce uncertainty about others tended to disclose more personal information about themselves, perhaps because such “detective work” reduced their privacy concerns and made them more comfortable revealing intimate information to strangers they met online (Gibbs et al., 2011). Such individuals were also likely to have a higher sense of self-efficacy (or confidence in their own abilities) and more Internet experience.

Assessing others online is also complicated by the level of choice available, or what is known as the “paradox of choice.” Having access to a large pool of eligible dating partners is convenient and affords users a great deal of choice, but this choice can also be paralyzing and lead to poor decisions. Online dating models range from “see-and-screen” sites like Match.com that allow users to browse through all user profiles and choose whom to contact to algorithmic sites like eHarmony that match users up based on compatibility algorithms, with others such as OkCupid.com blending the two by using algorithms to cull choices and letting users select from a small number of options (Tong et al., 2016). While algorithms now wield more influence over online decision-making (Courtois & Timmermans, 2021; Tong et al., 2016), and may even shape relationship success (Sharabi, 2021), all three types of models provide a great deal more choice of potential dating partners than most individuals encounter in their offline lives.

Related to the notion of expanded choice, my colleagues and I (Heino et al., 2010) observed a prevalent “market” metaphor in how online dating participants talked about their experience. Our interviewees talked about online dating as “people shopping” and used terms like “sales pipeline,” “catalog,” and “supermarket” to describe the process. They described viewing profiles as resumes and mentally accounting for embellishments of others, as well as trying to sell themselves. Our interviews revealed that the market metaphor encouraged a mentality in which people became more pickier and rejected profiles on the basis of trivial criteria, privileged demographic fields (age, height, and weight) rather than getting a holistic sense of the person, and regarded others as well as themselves as commodities or products to buy and sell, with an emphasis on “relationshopping” (shopping for a mate) rather than “relationshiping” (getting to know someone and developing a relationship). As one male put it, “the downside of it is, I think, that the expectations are very much of a consumer—that sort of instant karma expectation, expecting a connection with less effort” (Heino et al., 2010, p. 440).

ADVICE FOR ONLINE DATERS

Based on what we know about online dating, how can online daters be more successful? The research on misrepresentation in online dating suggests that in order to be successful, online daters should strive to present themselves in a positive and attractive yet still honest and accurate light. As in offline situations such as job interviews and first dates, it is helpful to think carefully about how you present yourself in your profile; first impressions count for a lot and are hard to change. Since people are not always aware of how others perceive them, a good strategy is to ask a friend or family member to read over one's profile and give input. Many online dating sites provide tips and advice, but we found that online daters often engage in their own recursive process of assessing others and then applying the rules to their own self-presentation (Ellison et al., 2006). For example, one may become disillusioned with profiles that only include one or two (unrealistic) photos, and then make an effort to post multiple photos of oneself in a variety of situations to portray oneself more accurately.

Despite the prevalence of at least minor misrepresentation (e.g., fudging one's age or accentuating one's appearance) in online dating, honesty is still the best policy. Gibbs et al. (2006) found that online daters who were more honest and disclosed more personal feelings and information were more likely to consider themselves successful in achieving their goals, and Baker (2005) also found that being open and honest in one's self-disclosures was one of the factors in developing successful long-term relationships. Given that others are often not completely honest in their profiles, however, it is important to find ways to "warrant" others' identity claims by looking for multiple photos, asking questions and checking for consistency, Googling them, or connecting on other social media platforms. Do not wait too long to meet in person, since it is easy to build up a fantasy persona based on limited cues that may not be completely accurate. Explicitly seeking information about potential partners can also help to avoid disappointment on a first date (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017), and openly discussing one's mate preferences on the first date can also lead to further dates (Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019).

Finally, emphasizing "relationshopping" may provide more choice and convenience in selecting potential partners, but online daters should not neglect the "relationshiping" aspect and expect to have an instant connection with little effort. Online dating has real advantages in providing a portal or initial introduction to individuals who may never meet otherwise, but it is just the first step. Finding the right person requires making good choices (and being able to identify which criteria will make one a good partner) initially, but the bulk of relationship development occurs offline, beyond the online dating site itself.

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