



(Mis)Representing the Self in Online Dating

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Abstract

This literature review explores previous research on deception in self-presentation by users of online dating and matchmaker websites. The theory of strategic self-presentation is discussed in its original context and in its possible applications to online dating. An examination of literature specific to online dating reveals the varying degrees of misrepresentation, but suggests that online daters are less likely to use deception than other online communicators. This is primarily attributed to the unique aspiration of online daters to meet their interaction partners face-to-face, often in the hopes of starting intimate relationships. After connecting research on self-presentation, online communication, online dating, and deception online, the reviewed research is critiqued and directions for future research are offered. Further research is required to reduce the misconception that online dating is deception-ridden.

Introduction

Finding romantic partners has always been an important endeavor for the human race. However, as society has developed, so have the methods for doing so. While the most conventional way of meeting partners may still be through mutual friends or school, a different market for meeting people has been around for decades. Personal advertisements started appearing in newspapers in the mid-nineteenth century (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), and with the advent of new technology, Internet personal ads and dating websites have become an increasingly important tool for finding romance (Madden & Lenhard, 2006). In the last decade, Internet use in America has exploded, jumping from 55 million people in 1997 to 210 million in 2007 (Computer Industry Almanac, 2007), with even greater numbers of people projected to be online today. Of those millions of people using the Internet, approximately 16 million have visited an online dating site, 10 million of whom are single and looking for romance, and 3 million of whom have started long-term relationships, including marriage, with these online dating partners (Madden & Lenhard, 2006; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008).

The prevalence of online dating sites has been increasing rapidly in the last decade. One explanation for this growth may be that online dating sites make the most money of any legal paid online content. Revenues grew from \$50 million to \$500 million between 2000 and 2004,

and are expected to reach \$642 million this year (Ellison et al., 2006; Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2007). Furthermore, dating websites have about 40 million unique users per month, including approximately 25% of America's single adult population (Egan, 2003; Ellison et al., 2006). To accommodate the growing demand for online dating, the number of dating websites has increased as well.

Despite the growing number of people using online personal ads, very few studies have been conducted concerning personal advertisements in general, let alone on the relatively new phenomenon of online personal ads (Lynn & Bolig, 1985). Online dating is quickly becoming more commonplace, due in part to people marrying later in life, rising sexual harassment suits which limit the ability to meet romantic partners in the workplace, decreased stigmatization of online dating, and people's increasingly mobile lifestyles that have lessened the social importance of churches and clubs for meeting romantic partners (Egan, 2003). In light of these trends, it would be useful to have more research on the topic of online dating in order to serve the growing population of users.

This article is interested in studying the way prospective online daters represent or misrepresent themselves in online profiles and matchmaker websites. According to a study by Rowatt, Cunningham, and Druen (1998), people use some form of lying in about 20% to 30% of their social interactions. When it comes to initiating or maintaining specifically romantic relationships, the rate of deception goes up significantly, with one study revealing that 85% of college students had lied to their romantic partners (Rowatt et al., 1998). Due to the prevalence of lying in romantic relationships and the widely held stereotype that people lie more online than offline, research into the extent to which people use deception in online dating contexts is highly relevant. Furthermore, the results could be useful for both online dating companies and users in order to improve the industry to everyone's benefit.

Information on the different methods used as well as the extent to which people misrepresent themselves could help motivate online dating companies to improve their identity verification methods in order to better serve their customers. Online daters could also benefit from knowing how effective and safe dating websites actually are. The little research that has been done in this field shows that misrepresentation is actually the exception rather than the rule, contrary to popular belief (Madden & Lenhard, 2006). However, many prospective daters both online and offline use what they consider to be harmless deception in order to portray themselves as attractive partners (Toma et al., 2008).

Furthermore, there is data that suggests that people do misrepresent themselves in personal web pages by presenting ideal versions of themselves rather than realities (Vazire & Gosling, 2004). Many online daters think that other Internet daters use deception when describing their physical appearance, many cite misrepresentation as the biggest drawback of online dating, and many non-online daters continue to stigmatize online dating as deception-ridden (Brym & Lenton, 2001; Gibbs, Heino, & Ellison, 2006; Madden & Lenhard, 2006; Toma et al., 2008). These beliefs provide further evidence for the need of research on the specific domain of self-presentation in online dating. If research could eliminate the myth that misrepresentation in online dating is rampant, public opinion towards online daters would likely change in a positive way. It could also encourage more people to sign up for online dating sites, further expanding the dating pool and thus benefiting both the companies and, more importantly, the prospective daters.

This literature review will examine research relevant to the proposed research question: How do individuals represent themselves online for dating purposes and how truthful are these self-presentations? There is a fair amount of past research to be found on self-presentation,

impression management, dating, and the Internet, but not a very large database of research on the combination of these topics. This paper will attempt to connect the dots between indirectly related research, as well as to review the research that has been done in the specific area of interest in order to point out strengths and weaknesses to be considered in future research.

Self-Presentation

Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of strategic self-presentation continues the dramaturgical analogy from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Goffman assumes that it is beneficial to try to control how other people perceive us and that one way of doing so is through optimizing the impression we give others of ourselves. Self-presentation theory postulates that people have a tendency to strategically self-present during interpersonal interactions in order to appeal to their audience and conform to their audience's perceived values, a phenomenon also known as impression management (Baumeister, 1982; Rowatt et al., 1998; Schau & Gilly, 2003). While some researchers use a broader meaning for the term strategic self-presentation (see Jones & Pittman, 1982), this paper defines strategic self-presentation as the strategies people use to be seen as attractive and likable, and will be used synonymously with impression management. Goffman's original theory of self-presentation only applied to situations in which people were face-to-face (FtF) because of his belief in the necessity of both expressions "given," (directly spoken information) and expressions "given off" (nonverbal cues for self-presentation) (Goffman, 1959). It could be argued that the nonverbal cues absent in online environments, such as clothing, gestures, and body language, lead to a weakened ability to self-present. However, many studies have shown that there are unique ways that online communication can foster strategic self-presentation. Vaast's 2007 study on self-presentation in online work forums suggests that virtual environments actually allow for an increase in what Goffman calls the "mystification" aspect of self-presentation. The mystification theory is applicable due to the increased distance between online performers and their audiences. Performers are able to keep audiences in awe of themselves because the audience does not have access to the "backstage," or offline lives of the performers. Online performers can easily leave out aspects of their offline selves that they do not want audiences to know, while emphasizing the aspects they choose to present (Vaast, 2007). Thus one could argue that strategic self-presentation is at least as relevant to online communication as it is to Goffman's FtF presentation of self.

Goffman's concept of "region," defined as any place bounded to some degree by barriers to perception, also applies to strategic self-presentation across various mediums (Goffman, 1959). For example, doctors will usually come across as great communicators in the examination room (a "frontstage region," in Goffman's terms), but because patients do not get to see doctors' communication skills at home ("backstage region"), the examination room is a bounded region. Likewise, a web page or online dating profile is highly bounded because creators selectively choose to highlight some information about themselves while omitting other information. Jones and Pittman (1982) would argue that these selective self-disclosures and omissions are matters of emphasis rather than deceit, but not all online daters would agree, as will be discussed later in the benign misrepresentation section of this paper.

There are several technicalities of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) specific to online dating that help one present the best possible version of oneself, such as the ability to edit one's online dating profile and fix potential mistakes after getting feedback from other online daters (Toma et al., 2008). Walther's (2007) experimental study tested how CMC allowed for impression management in ways that differed from FtF interactions, such as the ability to edit

messages and use offline composition because of the often asynchronous nature of online communication. Walther's study is not about self-presenting in an online dating context, but it is highly relevant because it is about impression management in electronic conversation with more desirable targets, such as professors and peers, and less desirable targets, such as younger high school students. Walther found that the anticipated partners' desirability had a significant effect on the participants' "verbiage, personalization, and complexity," and also increased "self-reported mindfulness" along gender and target lines – thus showing that participants worked harder to give a good impression of themselves if their target was more desirable (Walther, 2007, p. 2549 & p. 2551). This might apply to the online dating world as well, but research making this specific correlation has yet to be conducted.

Strategic self-presentation is particularly prevalent when initiating a romantic relationship with someone of interest (Rowatt et al., 1998). Toma et al. (2008) elucidate a reason for the salience of selective self-presentation in the online dating world: there are millions of profiles to compare between, so daters must manage their presentation to appear attractive and compare favorably with others. Thus it is unsurprising that many online daters present their 'best' selves rather than providing completely truthful self-representations, since the pressure to appear above average is so incredibly high. The online daters interviewed by Whitty (2008) stressed the importance of creating an attractive profile and admitted to some misrepresentations in the process of trying to attract dates. However, Whitty's participants also said that these misrepresentations were exaggerations of the truth rather than outright lies, a phenomenon specific to online dating most likely because of the anticipated future FtF interactions.

Rowatt et al. (1998) suggest that some personality types might be more prone to selective self-presentation than others. Their study found that high self-monitors – those who are especially sensitive to their self-presentation in social contexts and are adaptive when deciding which side of their self best fits the situation at hand – are more likely to engage in strategic self-presentation (Toma et al., 2008). Conversely, low self-monitors pay less attention to the situational appropriateness of their social behavior and seek to maintain consistency in self-presentation across social situations, and are thus less likely to engage in strategic self-presentation (Toma et al., 2008). Rowatt et al. (1998) tested this theory by measuring discrepancies in self-presentation between high and low self-monitors who created profiles of themselves for previously described dates that were seen as more or less desirable. They expected higher impression management to occur when participants presented themselves to their first choice dates and the highest level of impression management to occur for high self-monitors. Both predictions proved true. They found that the most common way for online daters to strategically appear more attractive to a potential date is to provide deceptive cues that they have more in common with their prospective date's ideal partner by exaggerating dispositional and attitudinal congruence (Rowatt et al., 1998). Moreover, Rowatt et al. pointed out that by consistently acting as the type of person one's partner wants, one may actually change into being that sort of person, especially if it involves self-improvement.

As we have seen, strategic self-presentation is a common phenomenon that is highly relevant to the dating world because people want to appear attractive to potential mates. However, strategic self-presentation can include forms of deception, both benign and malicious.

Benign Misrepresentation

There are many different kinds of lying that can and do take place online and offline, but it is important to distinguish between mostly harmless "white lies," and ill-intentioned deceit (Toma et al., 2008). Whitty and Joinson (2009) found that some forms of online deception could even be

therapeutic or liberating. For example, it has been argued that some women may find it liberating to change or neutralize their gender in cyberspace and that individuals who are shy or unattractive may find it therapeutic to play with a variety of possible identities, especially physical identity (Whitty & Joinson, 2009). People who use the Internet in this way likely never intend to meet each other FtF, and thus it is a harmless, safe way to experiment with different identities. In an online dating context, however, such blatant identity change would not be possible because of the inevitable future FtF meeting. Yet there are still ways in which online daters strategically self-present and use misrepresentation.

Many online daters admit to making slight alterations to traits such as age, but explain that this is in reaction to technical constraints of a website's search filters rather than intention to lie (Ellison et al., 2006). These sites often use descriptors such as age, body type, hair, etc. to allow users to conduct searches within the dating site to narrow down which profiles they see, weeding out people who do not fit their desired age range, etc. (Ellison et al., 2006). Many participants in Ellison et al.'s study admitted to making slight alterations to their age so as not to be filtered out in people's searches, but would then admit their actual age quickly upon communication with a potential date, thus classifying it as a socially acceptable misrepresentation. The technical interface of some dating websites practically encourages slight misrepresentation when online daters are provided with closed-ended responses for descriptors. Some participants felt none of the options described them accurately, such as one man who wanted to list his hair type as having a shaved head rather than bald (Ellison et al., 2006). Thus the technical constraints of the websites themselves can strongly influence the accuracy of online daters' profiles. Whitty (2008) also found that participants admitted to small misrepresentations that were exaggerations rather than blatant lies due to the anticipated future FtF interaction, perhaps most clearly explained by "Matthew" in the following part of his interview:

M: I mean the last thing you want is reality shock, when people get there and go 'that is not what he said he was about', so you have got to make the most of what you have got without exaggerating it so much that they never see you again. So, I would say it was probably 90% accurate with a few little embellishments. (p. 1715)

Online daters also frequently point out that misrepresentation is often prompted by the social norms of the environment; if participants felt that everyone was lying, especially about age, they would be at a disadvantage if they did not lie (Ellison et al., 2006). The impact of believing social norms is very clear in the following excerpt from Whitty's (2008) participant:

S: Actually, it's quite funny that there is... a thing for body type and you can pick 'slim, average, athletic, a bit overweight'. Do you know any chick that is going to tell you that they are a bit overweight?

I: I wouldn't know, I guess not?

S: That is right, so I just say average. (p. 1715)

It is also apparent in the following testimonial from Ellison et al.'s (2006) participant:

I'm such an honest guy, why should I have to lie about my age? On the other hand, if I put X number of years, that is unattractive to certain people. They're never going to search that group and they're never going to have the opportunity to meet me, because they have a number in their mind just like I do... Everybody lies about their age or a lot of people

do... So I have to cheat too in order to be on the same page as everybody else that cheats. If I don't cheat that makes me seem twice as old. So if I say I am 44, people think that I am 48. It blows. (p. 427)

This suggests online daters are stuck in a self-perpetuating cycle of deception caused by misinformed normative pressures. As previously mentioned, Gibbs et al. (2006) found that 86% of online dating participants thought that others misrepresented their physical appearance, but in reality just over 25% of online dating participants reported misrepresenting some aspect of their identity, most commonly age (14%), marital status (10%), and appearance (10%). It is possible that those 10% who do misrepresent their appearance believe that most online daters are doing the same, so they erroneously believe that they would put themselves at a disadvantage if they did not stretch the truth about themselves. If online daters knew the truth about how infrequently people were actually misrepresenting themselves, they might be able to eliminate this type of lying altogether, thus improving the online dating scene.

Another type of benign and sometimes unintentional misrepresentation is the creation of online profiles that include slight disparities from what one might exude in everyday social contexts, which consequently has an impact on the kinds of relationships formed in cyberspace. Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) and McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) have theorized two aspects of the self that they believe are important to the development of online relationships. There is the "true self," which is defined as the traits or characteristics that individuals possess and would like to but are not usually able to express, and the "actual self," which includes the traits or characteristics that individuals possess and express to others in everyday social settings. McKenna et al.'s (2002) research using online newsgroups found that when people convey their "true self" online they develop strong Internet relationships and bring these relationships into their real lives. McKenna et al. also found that subjects who were more socially anxious and lonely were somewhat more likely to think that they could express their "true selves" with others better online than offline, showing that the Internet is a useful tool for people who are shy, socially anxious, or lack the social skills to form and maintain relationships. Conversely, Whitty (2008) found that in an online context specific to dating, expressing one's "true self" was actually disadvantageous. The participants tried to maintain a balance between presenting their "actual self" and appearing attractive in their profiles so as not to disappoint their dates when they met FtF. They also stated that they were highly attracted to profiles of people who were genuine and wanted their prospective dates' profiles to express their "actual selves," or the characteristics that they typically express in everyday offline social settings.

Despite the fact that online daters are looking for complete honesty, many people post "ideal selves" in their profiles for various reasons (Ellison et al., 2006; Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005). The "ideal self" is different from the "true self" in that it is slightly more centered around wishful thinking rather than qualities one already possesses but cannot display. There are several examples of the "ideal selves" seen in online dating profiles. Yurchisin et al. (2005) propose that Internet dating allows an increased sense of anonymity that may allow individuals to post aspects of themselves on their dating profiles that reflect their "ideal selves" rather than their "actual selves." Ellison et al. (2006) also posit that online daters compromise on their conflicting desires for positive and accurate self-presentation by creating profiles that describe a potential future version of the self. Describing an "ideal self" can have positive practical implications if it becomes a motivator to change for the better. This was seen in the example of an overweight woman who misrepresented her weight and then used a face-to-face meeting as motivation to lose weight in order to be consistent with her profile's ideal self

(Ellison et al., 2006). Ellison et al. point out that this participant did not see presenting goal-oriented future selves as deception per se.

Despite the possibility that online daters might perceive these little white lies as harmless, their prospective dates are often left feeling disappointed by their frequently shorter, fatter, balder, or generally less-attractive-than-pictured date (Egan, 2003). This can be especially surprising when one's profile has a picture on it that does not look like them FtF, such as women posting glamour photographs, people of both genders posting photographs from as many as ten years ago, or in one reported case, a man posting a picture of his much more attractive brother, with whom he shared some vague resemblance (Whitty & Joinson, 2009).

Malicious Deceit

Despite the many types of unintentional and harmless lies, there are still some people who misrepresent themselves with malicious intent. It has been shown that if someone is anonymous online, the likelihood of deception increases (Egan, 2003). The most common example of this deceit is Internet infidelity, when married people pretend to be single online in order to engage in extramarital relationships, either emotional (sharing intimate secrets or falling in love) or sexual (cyber-flirting or cybersex) (Whitty & Joinson, 2009). There are even websites set up specifically to meet people online for extramarital affairs (Meet2cheat.com and Philanderers.com) and to talk about personal experiences with infidelity (chatcheater.com). One example of a personal experience with Internet infidelity was presented by Whitty and Joinson (2009):

For many months my wife's use of her laptop has been increasing. She spends more than a 150 hours a month online. I know she has been chat cheating and it led to at least 2 physical contacts out of the country. She was foolish enough to save some of her memorable chat sessions on disks and I found them. I have been devastated. We have 2 children 11 & 14 and our entire lives have suffered from this. I confronted her and we have just begun counseling. She still goes online whenever she can so I think I need monitoring software. (85)

There are also a few extreme examples of deceit in both a dating and non-dating virtual environment that make people wary of trusting others online. One famous case of identity deception was that of Alex and Joan (Whitty & Joinson, 2009), in which a man named Alex created an online persona, 'Joan,' and started close online relationships with women on a discussion board, some of whom Alex had sexual histories with. 'Joan' would use the excuse that she was disabled to avoid any FtF meetings with her confidants, but eventually 'her' identity was revealed and caused outrage in the online community. There have been other cases of creating fake personae in which someone claims to have a serious illness within a support community but is later revealed to be an imposter, a situation which can be very emotionally upsetting for community members (Whitty & Joinson, 2009). Lies about personal attributes can also be disturbing, especially if an Internet user forms an attachment to a supposed online relationship. However, there are even more harmful forms of deceit that can hurt Internet daters financially and emotionally – a much more tangible outcome than hurt feelings alone.

The "Nigerian email" scam (also known as the "419" scam), which has led to a vast distrust of the Internet, is an example of Internet fraud that causes financial damage to its victims (Whitty & Joinson, 2009). Victims are sent an email supposedly from a Nigerian royal who claims to have a large amount of money that is trapped or frozen for any number of reasons. The recipients of the email are offered financial rewards (often around six million dollars) in exchange for simply helping them out of an embarrassing or legal problem, and gradually the scammers begin

introducing problems with the transactions and eventually ask for money in order to make the process take place faster. Sadly, people have been conned by this scam and invest their own money in it only to have the scammers disappear once the victim stops sending money or makes threats. While the Nigerian scam has been widely publicized, there is a similar “romance scam,” which connects more directly with this research and is perhaps currently more dangerous because it involves less suspicious monetary sums, the motivation is for love, and is not as well known as the Nigerian scam. Where the Nigerian scam uses its victims’ greed to lure them in, the romance scam uses desperate victims’ need for love (Whitty & Joinson, 2009). The scammers join online dating sites and create strong emotional ties to their victims by (fake) self-disclosure, saying “I love you,” sending gifts bought with stolen credit cards, etc. Often the scam is played out by a group of people posing as one individual so that they can jointly decide how best to make their victim fall in love with them. This “falling in love” period can last from four months to over a year, leaving victims feeling attached and hopeful of long-term happiness with their loves. Eventually this leads to a proposal to the target, at which point the scammers say that they are living abroad and do not have the sufficient funds to reach their loves. From this point, the scam can take several forms, but each involves the victim giving up money to the scammers (Whitty & Joinson, 2009).

One might look at the given examples of misrepresentation and deception on the Internet and wonder if there is something inherent to online communication that would encourage more or less lying than other communication mediums. Many psychology researchers have postulated conflicting theories on which type of media predicts more lying, namely the social distance theory and the media richness theory (Whitty & Joinson, 2009). The social distance theory suggests that because lying generally makes people uncomfortable, they will be more inclined to lie when there is more social distance between themselves and the person to whom they are lying. Thus because of decreased nonverbal cues that give away deceit (i.e. voice, body, and language) and asynchronous interaction (giving the liar more control and time to think about what they say), the social distance theory postulates that people lie most in email, followed by Instant Messenger (IM), followed by phone, and lastly FtF. Conversely, the media richness theory suggests that because lying is equivocal, one would lie more in rich media because of the combination of multiple cue systems, immediate feedback, natural language, and message personalization (Whitty & Joinson, 2009). Thus it predicts the opposite outcome from social distance theory: lying most often FtF, followed by phone, IM, and email. While no studies found unquestionable support for the media richness theory, Whitty and Carville’s 2008 study on self-serving lies and “other”-oriented lies found support for social distance theory. They found that when people were telling self-serving lies, which made the liar feel uncomfortable and apprehensive, they preferred telling a lie via email, followed by phone, and lastly FtF. Participants in Whitty and Carville’s study stated that they would tell other-oriented lies (i.e. white lies to make someone feel better) to someone close to them in any medium because this had good intentions. However, when talking to someone they did not know well, participants were more likely to tell other-oriented lies FtF than via email, which also supports social distance theory. In this case, the large social distance enabled by the Internet allows individuals to say unpleasant and sometimes-hurtful truths via email, whereas the lack of distance in FtF increases other-oriented lies (Whitty & Joinson, 2009).

Online daters partake in misrepresentation for various reasons: either to strategically attract dates, to present an “ideal” self that they hope to become in the future, to circumvent the technical aspects of sites such as search filters, to compensate for a lack of closed-ended options that suited them, or to deceive others into meeting them. Despite the many motivations to

misrepresent themselves, there also exist reasons why online daters want to be honest in their self-presentation.

Deterrents to Deception

There are several forces working against deception in online dating contexts that do not exist in other forms of CMC or in FtF interactions. Firstly, the fact that online profiles are often archived means that the evidence of lying is saved somewhere in cyber space (Toma et al., 2008). Secondly, what Toma et al. (2008) define as “warranting,” (or the threat of someone making a connection between the offline self and a potentially false self-presentation online), would curb deception because friends or family members could stumble upon a profile, recognize the user, and identify the deceptions – especially if there is a picture attached. Thus, it makes sense that online daters who tell their friends or family that they have an online dating profile have been shown to use less deception (Toma et al., 2008). Furthermore, several participants in one of Whitty’s studies (2008) commented on being skeptical of profiles filled with clichés (i.e. loving long walks on the beach), suggesting that people may be discouraged from lying in obvious ways that could repel prospective dates.

Anticipated future interaction and the potential development of intimate relationships with people met through online dating sites further reduces the extent to which one uses deception in an online profile. The majority of online daters say they attempt to be honest in their CMC and online dating profiles because of potential future FtF interactions and intimate relationships, the traceable record of the profile, and the possibility of friends or family members reading profiles and noticing discrepancies. Thus it would be worthwhile to conduct further research to prove that deception in online dating is the exception rather than the rule (Madden & Lenhard, 2006).

Gaps and Limitations of Reviewed Research

There are several problems with previous research on deception that need to be addressed. The biggest limitation to research on deception is that it relies heavily on self-reported data, in other words, asking potential liars to tell the truth about lying (Toma et al., 2008; Ellison et al., 2006). In an attempt to overcome this limitation, Vazire and Gosling’s 2004 study used both self-report and reports from two informants who knew the participant well to determine the accuracy of information on personal web pages. This study is a step in the right direction towards increasing the validity of deception measurement by using methods other than self-report alone. However, Vazire and Gosling’s study was specific to personal web pages, which differ from the online dating context due to future FtF meeting, as previously discussed. The expected FtF meeting decreases the visual anonymity that is so crucial to many online self-disclosure studies, including Vazire and Gosling’s study of personal web pages. This decreased anonymity creates the expectation that online daters would be more motivated to have honest self-disclosures than other cyberspace interaction partners who do not plan to meet in person. Thus more research is needed using informant-based verification specifically focusing on online dating profiles.

Toma et al. (2008) conducted research that measured self-misrepresentation using means other than self-report: they used a cross-validation technique that compared observed data of certain characteristics (height, weight, and age) with the participants’ views of their own accuracy to determine if lies were intentional. This study found that while 81% of the participants knowingly lied on one or more of these characteristics, the degree of these lies was usually small. However, there are inherent weaknesses in these choices of characteristics. For instance, height, weight, and age are among the most noticeable traits when meeting FtF, so we should expect that people seeking romantic partners online would be discouraged from using a high degree of

deception for these traits in anticipation of future FtF interaction. Furthermore, generalizing this perceived honesty in Toma et al.'s study to the participants' entire self-presentation may be inaccurate. As noted by Rowatt et al. (1998), people were more willing to lie about traits that were harder to verify, such as their personality and interests, in order to make themselves appear more interesting to prospective suitors. Thus, although Toma et al. found generally small amounts of deception in their study, research is still needed on the amounts of deception in less verifiable characteristics using accounts other than self-report data.

Another limitation in the past research on misrepresentation in online dating is the sampling method, which creates a self-selection bias in the results. People who volunteer to participate in a study of online dating might have stronger opinions about it than the average user, which might encourage them to sign up for the study. In addition, those who volunteer for a study might be more honest in their practices (Ellison et al., 2006) and thus more willing to talk about them openly, whereas those who are more dishonest might refrain from speaking to researchers about their habits online to avoid embarrassment or repercussions for lying.

There may be ways to improve the reliability of online dating websites to make people feel safer. Ellison et al. (2006) mention that companies that do background checks of online daters, such as True.com, are becoming more prevalent. This has potential to help decrease the moderate amount of deception seen in online dating profiles. Ellison et al. also propose the idea of adding testimonials or user rating systems much like e-commerce websites (e.g. ebay.com) in order to increase trust in people's profiles. While this has potential to act as a mediating factor to discourage using deception, it would need to be carried out carefully in order to avoid any hurtful testimonials from unsuccessful dates, untruthful testimonials from jealous rejected ex-suitors, etc.

As shown, deception research in general is limited because the most commonly used method is self-report. More research is especially needed on deception in online dating because it is not a widely studied phenomenon and studies so far have relied upon voluntary samples.

Directions for Future Research

Many steps can be taken to improve and expand upon the research on misrepresentation in online dating, though the research might never be fully satisfying due to ethical constraints limiting the most obvious ways to get realistic results. In a world without Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), researchers might dream of using methods such as joining a dating site themselves and going on dates with people to see how they match up to their online profiles. However, due to the highly sensitive nature of dealing with romance-related emotions, any research ideas of this nature must be discarded. According to all IRBs, using deception in research is only acceptable if the benefits strongly outweigh the costs, and in this case the costs in terms of emotional damage could be quite high. Furthermore, it would be necessary to get consent from all subjects to use their data, which may cause biases and inconsistencies in the results. Whitty and Joinson (2009) give a thought-provoking example of a study conducted by Lamb (1998) that crossed the ethical guidelines of psychology research in order to test for the existence of pedophiles in online chat rooms. In this study, Lamb participated in online chat rooms that were geared towards adults seeking young men. Lamb created several online aliases, all of which were teenage bisexual males. He found that in about half of his interactions in public chat rooms he was invited into a private chat room where he and his unwitting participant engaged mostly in sexual conversations. While his research methods were clearly not ethical by IRB standards because the participants were deceived and never told that they could withdraw data obtained from them, Lamb's goals were well intentioned. Furthermore, his potential findings could be important to parents of children at

risk of interacting with online predators, thus bringing the question of whether the benefits outweigh the costs up for debate.

There are, however, ways to overcome the discussed issues of self-report data and self-selection biases that have not yet been explored. To avoid the self-report paradox of asking liars to tell the truth about lying, future research could extend Toma et al.'s (2008) research method of cross-validation of observable characteristics (height, weight, and age) to less easily verifiable categories such as education, income, interests, and personality by interviewing informants who know the participants well and verifying facts with school and income records. In order to get rid of self-selection biases, researchers could try creating their own dating website that requires all members to answer short surveys about their experiences with online dating. However, there would still be some bias based on choosing to join the website. This bias could be reduced by getting an already well-established dating website to require all current members to fill out a monthly survey in order to continue using the site. While this might not eliminate bias completely if a large number of the website's users leave the site due to the new restrictions, it would be worth seeing if many more users who might not have volunteered for a research study specifically would fill out the short monthly survey in order to keep using a site in which they were already invested.

Conclusion

If you are interested in joining the ever-growing online dating scene to meet prospective romantic partners, it would certainly benefit you to know how people represent themselves online for dating purposes and how truthful these self-presentations are. Unfortunately, there has not been much research conducted on the topic, so most people are left to make their own judgments. What has been shown is that many people, both online and offline, use some sort of strategic self-presentation in order to appear more attractive to their audience, especially if that audience is a potential date. Also, it may be that some people's personalities are prone to impression management, specifically high self-monitors. Furthermore, people often engage in unintentional misrepresentation of varying kinds that are not meant to be harmful or deceitful. However, there are also several factors that motivate online daters to present themselves honestly, such as archiving and warranting of online dating profiles and anticipated future face-to-face interaction.

Deception research has been extremely limited because of its reliance on the self-report method and voluntary samples. It remains to be seen how results would be different if there were a way to sample randomly and to remove the limitations of self-report data by including informants. This study proposes that future research be conducted that utilizes alternate methods to determine the extent to which online daters deceitfully or inaccurately self-present.

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